Review

EJPT

European Journal of Political Theory
1–18

DOI: 10.1177/14748851211050618
journals.sagepub.com/home/ept


Spotlight: Pragmatism in contemporary political theory

Matthew Festenstein
University of York, UK

Abstract

This article surveys recent work in pragmatism and political theory. In doing so, it shows both how recent work on pragmatism has secured the view that at its core is a set of arguments about the character of democracy – although the character of those arguments is open to debate and reimagination – and how pragmatist arguments have been reinterpreted and deployed to address contemporary concerns and approaches. This charts a terrain of live disagreements rather than settled opinion.

Keywords

Pragmatism, political theory, democracy, political epistemology, Richard Rorty, John Dewey

Introduction

A dominant view for much of the twentieth century, expounded by such diverse voices as Lewis Mumford, Louis Hartz, Bernard Crick, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Christopher Lasch, John Diggins, and Sheldon Wolin, was that pragmatism is a philosophy for liberal technocrats, an account of how to think flexibly about the achievement of socially endorsed parochial goals but with few resources to think critically about those goals. For others, including Bertrand Russell and William Elliott, its apparent laxity about objectivity made it susceptible to capture by darker forces, such as fascism (a point some fascists were happy to accept). The frame for contemporary readings in political theory is very different and largely organised around the idea that pragmatism

Corresponding author:
Matthew Festenstein, University of York, York, YO10 5DD, UK.
Email: Matthew.festenstein@york.ac.uk

has a normative contribution to make to our understanding of the character and justification of democracy but that it is debatable exactly what that is.[1] And this remains the dominant frame for current work, in part reflecting the massive efflorescence of normative democratic theory over the period, including deliberative and epistemic arguments that have affinities with pragmatism.

Any account of pragmatism needs to acknowledge its internal strife, porous boundaries, contentious historiography, as well as a complex relation with politics, even if it's not possible to do all these themes justice in this space.[2] 'Pragmatism' has been a contested and vague philosophical term since its inception. A year after William James published *Pragmatism* (as a 'new name for an old way of thinking' (James, 1979 [1907])) and a decade after James gave the term its public philosophical debut, Arthur O. Lovejoy gleefully distinguished thirteen pragmatisms, 'a baker's dozen of contentions which are separate not merely in the sense of being discriminable, but in the sense of being logically independent, so that you may without inconsistency accept any one and reject all the others, or refute one and leave the philosophical standing of the others unimpugned' (Lovejoy, 1908: 5). More have proliferated since then and the questions of what pragmatists agree on and what distinguishes all and only pragmatists remain quite open. Sometimes the doctrine is viewed very capaciously, as for instance when in a recent guide to political epistemology, the philosopher Simon Blackburn refers to 'the long succession of pragmatists, from Hobbes through Berkeley, Hume, to Peirce, Dewey, Ramsey, and Wittgenstein' (Blackburn, 2021: 65). To add to this list, Heidegger, Rawls, Habermas, and Deleuze, to take a mixed bag, have also had significant strands of their work dubbed pragmatist

Further, as Eric MacGilvray writes, '[p]ragmatism was only ever meant to provide a theory of meaning and justification, and not a substantive theory of the good. It is this theory of meaning and justification that the founding pragmatists (and their critics) were talking about *when they were talking about pragmatism*, and so we must be careful to define pragmatism in these terms rather than to associate it with the moral and ethical commitments of any particular time, place, or thinker' (MacGilvray, 2004: 11). When it comes to political theory, this can be tricky methodological advice to follow, however, sound it is as philosophical point. In part this is because the connections between pragmatism as theory of meaning or justification – themselves quite different theories – and other aspects of a pragmatist's philosophy (e.g. James's and Dewey's radical empiricism and conceptions of experience) are often contestable, so it isn't clear what falls on which side of the line. And in part, it is because in interpreting and evaluating the heterogeneous field of politics pragmatists draw on diverse philosophical resources.

Probably the most fruitful approach to thinking about definitional issues follows Bernstein (1992) in taking pragmatism to consist in conflict bound by a set of unifying concerns and points of disagreement, in part about what pragmatism is. Most contemporary thinking about pragmatism emerges from a kind of pincer movement. From one direction, the protagonists of this conflict, and of 'America's homegrown philosophy' (Misak, 2013: ix), are ostensively defined – Charles Sanders Peirce, James, John Dewey, G. H. Mead, et al., – with arguments made for inclusion or exclusion. From the other side, some

more general commitments can be identified, which pragmatists tend to adhere to, and these can be used as principles of selection. Four commitments, in particular, are salient, although these are fleshed out in different ways by different authors. These include (i) fallibilism: that is, the idea that all opinions are in principle open to criticism and revision; (ii) anti-scepticism: doubt shouldn't be all-embracing – we need a reason to doubt not just to believe; and (iii) a belief that 'practice is primary in philosophy' (Putnam, 1994: 152): we should focus on the consequences of beliefs and their role in actual practices to understand or justify them. (iv) Finally, there isn't a difference in cognitive standing between beliefs about facts and values: both play an indispensable role in our practices. For pragmatists, the significance of this cluster of commitments for politics flows from the sense that these can't themselves coherently be detached from practice. As Dewey puts it:

> If the pragmatic ideal of truth has itself any pragmatic worth, it is because it stands for carrying the experimental notion of truth that reigns among the sciences, technically viewed, over into political and moral practices, humanly viewed. (Dewey, 1978 [1911]: 31).

Some pragmatists vehemently reject this last point: for example, Rorty (1991), at least sometimes, and Posner (2003) suggest that pragmatism has no particular political valence. Quite a lot of recent pragmatist political theory can be understood as an attempt to rebut Rorty's and Posner's position on this.

In surveying recent work, I'll particularly bring out both how recent work on pragmatism has secured the view that at its core is a set of arguments about the character of democracy – although the character of those arguments is open to debate and reimagination – and how pragmatist arguments have been reinterpreted and deployed to address contemporary concerns and approaches. To do so, however, is to chart a terrain of live disagreements rather than settled opinions.

Pragmatism in the conversation of contemporary political theory

Richard Rorty remains for many the most high-profile recent self-described pragmatist and popular gateway into a broader engagement with this tradition. His influence has also persisted through a series of posthumous works and some influential commentaries since his death in 2007, although it is safe to say it has faded since the era when ritual denunciation of his views was a requirement across a wide range of disciplines. His own conception of pragmatism is notoriously idiosyncratic and went through various presentations. In later work, Rorty settled on a conception of pragmatism as what he calls anti-authoritarianism, a fulfilment of an Enlightenment proposal that norms should be thought of not as issuing from divine commands but from the social agreement. Objectivity isn't best viewed as consisting in responsiveness to the way the world is but as a project of securing solidarity with other human beings. This proposal itself isn't offered as a requirement of rationality or especially perspicuous representation of what we should do but as an intervention in what Rorty calls 'cultural politics', an inspirational redescription of how we think about rationality and human nature that we should

try out in the hope of greater freedom and self-fulfilment (Rorty, 2007). Rorty blends this with scepticism about the contribution of theory to the reality of political engagement and action. Politics shouldn't rest on principles such as the recognition of a common human nature but on a commitment to widening the circle of those to whom we feel loyalty, building solidarity with the weak and excluded. Where we haven't achieved this sense of solidarity, compelling illustration of suffering is far more effective than philosophical reflection in creating it.

Even among those sympathetic to pragmatism, few have readily endorsed this vision, since they tend to believe that on its own terms it lacks the inspirational content it claims (e.g. Talisse, 2014) and that the account of norms as in terms of answerability to fellow particular human beings fails to capture the need for a concept of moral or political objectivity to answer to something beyond the contingent agreement of some particular community. At the level of political argument, it seems to affirm a hierarchy between those who offer solidarity and those who need it (e.g. Phillips, 2015). Does this leave only a kind of scepticism about philosophical foundationalism as Rorty's legacy? Clayton Chin in a recent study discerns a 'deeper positive project in Rorty' (Chin, 2018: 203). This is the project of cultural politics, understood as a process of trying to provide more fruitful, humane and useful descriptions, and it is this cultural politics that offers a conception of public dialogue that supports social criticism across radically diverse societies. On Chin's account, ordinary rational argument is only possible in normalised situations where established standards are in place. The pluralistic societies that preoccupy contemporary political theory aren't like this, however: their diverse vocabularies, in Chin's Rortyan terms, lack a common framework of principles in relation to which political disagreements can be adjudicated. Instead, they call for a form of contestation in political theory for those moments which Nancy Fraser (following Thomas Kuhn and Rorty) calls abnormal, where established assumptions about the character and scope of political argument are up for grabs (Fraser, 2017) – that is, for Rortyan cultural politics. In the absence of shared theoretical criteria, a cultural-political argument consists of comparative interpretative interventions, a matter of offering new descriptions and seeing what we make of alternative ways of doing things.

The political significance of this for Chin is that he holds that it provides a 'method for the critical reconciliation of diverse ways of speaking', effectively engaging 'those with whom we share no normative horizon. [Rorty] offers it as a metavocabulary of intervocabulary normative exchange in the absence of agreed-upon criteria and without reference to an external source of authority. By expanding the logical spaces we inhabit to include new groups and languages, Rorty places an important agonistic constraint that opens up existing standards and consensuses' (Chin, 2018: 208). In this way, Rorty provides '*a general governing ethos for the cultural-political realm* that allows the pursuit of common social change among cultural-political diversity: commonality among nonhierarchical difference' (Chin, 2018: 209, emphasis in original). This is an ethos of inclusive tolerance. Perhaps most importantly, this directly tries to address the uncomfortable sense that Rorty's sentimentalist solidarity speaks *de haut en bas* – that it envisages justice in the form of a comfortable group extending its patronage to a more or less dimly perceived

group of suffering outsiders – by replacing it with a model of political engagement as dialogue.

Yet it is a conception of political dialogue that seems confronted by a dilemma that Rorty himself addresses pretty directly. For while 'we' may agree among ourselves that there is an absence of external authority and that difference should be approached without a picture of hierarchy, not everyone agrees with 'us'. For the non-'us', the meta-narrative of political argument as cultural politics may be just another alien imposition. On the face of it, this is an ethos of inclusive tolerance that doesn't extend to those who think (for example) that human rights require a specific religious justification. As a solution to the problem of reconciling diverse ways of speaking, this is transformative, demanding that we speak and act differently when it comes to politics, so it doesn't seem to be a solution that preserves the diversity of these different ways of speaking. Rorty himself is notoriously unfazed by this worry: his conception of political argument is what he calls 'ethnocentric' and the argument for adopting it (if you need one) is that it's worth trying out in order to broaden 'our' sense of community. The idea that we can improve by being more receptive to the views of others has a quite different emphasis from an ethos of nonhierarchical difference.

Colin Koopman in his 'transitional pragmatism' (2009, 2013) responds by endorsing the side of Rorty's philosophy for which values are emphatically local, an expression of a particular political community. Pragmatism is the philosophical expression of 'an inborn American commitment to meliorism' with America understood as 'a hope, a project, a generous past and a fragile future' (Koopman, 2009: 45, 48). Without ontological grounds or final foundations, cultural criticism in this pragmatist mode focuses on social hope for a future horizon that can 'renew American hope' and 'counter prevailing tendencies in the United States' (2009: 48–49). This picks up on the patriotic, indeed exceptionalist, framing of Rorty in various texts, notably *Achieving Our Country* (Rorty, 1998a). 'At the very heart of the pragmatist spirit', Koopman writes, 'is a meliorist sensibility that consists in training our efforts and energies toward progressive improvement' (Koopman, 2013: 244–5).

For Koopman, to be clear, this is what pragmatism offers political theory, but it is not all that political theory requires. It's a notable feature of their recuperations of Rorty that both Chin and Koopman put their philosophy in conversation with continental traditions. (I will return to one element of this, the relationship to Frankfurt School critical theory, shortly.) While for Chin, this principally works to provide a critical foil for the constructive account of cultural politics, Koopman turns to continental philosophy in order to provide additional resources for his project. The pragmatist focus on problem-solving needs to be complemented by a Foucault-inspired 'genealogical practice of problematization', he argues, which aims 'to excavate the materials with which we have contingently constructed ourselves so that we might take up these materials and reconstruct them in a way that improves our situations. Genealogy, understood as a project of problematization and not a project of subversion, invites the reconstructive reformism characteristic of the pragmatist attitude' (Koopman, 2013: 247; cf. Rabinow, 2011). In trying to outline at least a functional complementarity between a Dewey-inspired melioristic pragmatism and a Foucault-inspired genealogy,

The difficulty of this project is illustrated in Koopman's own most extensive application of it. Genealogy rather than pragmatism unsurprisingly dominates *How We Became Our Data*, a book that seeks to provide a genealogical analysis of the informational self through a detailed and illuminating account of what he takes to be its three distinct historical vectors in the United States: birth certificates and 'documentary identity', personality metrics and 'psychological identity', and real estate appraisal and 'racial identity' (Koopman, 2019). Pragmatism is only a bit-part player in this narrative, however. In one respect, it takes on the role Koopman assigns it in his wider theory: while Dewey and Jürgen Habermas emphasise the importance of communication and the free flow of information in democracy, they fail to problematise it, converging 'in their failure to confront the possibility that information itself can be a form of political impedance' (Koopman, 2019: 190). It isn't entirely clear if Koopman's view here is that pragmatists just happen not to have thrown a spotlight on the politics of information or if this neglect is somehow baked into their theories (cf. Koopman, 2019: 191–2). On the face of it, it seems possible for a pragmatist to call into question the forms of subjectivity produced by informational power – for this to be the subject of democratic scrutiny, where it's a problem. To the extent that Koopman's position is that this isn't an available option for pragmatism and that the doctrine in this instance possesses nothing valuable to contribute to supplement the genealogy of informational selfhood, though, then the case of informational power seems to be a case study in the failure to conjoin genealogy and pragmatism, Foucauldian problematisation and melioristic reconstruction. We should resist generalising from a single case, but it nevertheless seems to suggest that implementing the official doctrine of philosophical pluralism is not straightforward.

Another route out from Rorty's view of objectivity as solidarity draws on his student Robert Brandom's semantic inferentialism, an imposing theory of 'the implicit structure characteristic of discursive practice as such' (Brandom, 1994: 374).[3] Norms arise within practices of giving and asking for reasons, and in accepting reasons and making claims participants bind themselves to standards that go beyond their subjective interpretation of their commitments. What it is for us to think of ourselves and others as normative beings is as capable of undertaking commitments, ascribing them to others and accepting responsibility for them. From the perspective of a participant in claim-making, we are held responsible for our stances and these can be evaluated by others, and in engaging in discursive practice we distinguish between the commitments that we happen to accept and those that it is appropriate to accept. The focus on the explanatory role of pragmatics and emphasise on the commitments, entitlements and responsibilities rooted in social practice are themes shared with, and enthusiastically endorsed by, Rorty (e.g. Rorty, 1998b: 122–137), although for this kind of Brandomian approach doesn't adopt the insouciant 'cultural politics' line that enjoins us to try this way of looking at the world since you may like it: Brandom's is emphatically a systematic theoretical project, rather than an ethnocentric move in a game of cultural politics (Bernstein, 2010: 212).

As this has been developed for recent political theory by Thomas Fossen (2011, 2013, 2019) this moves beyond Rorty (and toward the Peirceans such as Misak and Talisse, whom I'll discuss shortly) to embrace the idea that we incur non-discretionary commitments through our practices of believing, claiming, asserting and declaring things. Fossen

zeroes in on the topic of political legitimacy. Judging that a public authority is legitimate or illegitimate is a matter of 'taking a stance' in a linguistic practice, attributing various commitments and entitlements to oneself and other participants: it is only 'from an engaged standpoint, in virtue of subjects taking stances from different perspectives' that 'there such a thing as political legitimacy at all' (Fossen, 2013: 442). In this case, to take a claim to authority to be legitimate is to accept practical commitments to obey while to reject it is to accept practical commitments to treat it as a coercive imposition. These commitments evolve and the content of these commitments in any given case isn't pre-given by individual fiat or communal consensus but is itself the challengeable product of a process of social contestation. For Fossen, this contrasts with what he calls normativism, which is the idea that there are standards external to social practices that we can use to judge them: so that judging legitimacy is a matter of applying such an external moral standard to society to check whether or not it meets it.

Critics respond that Fossen's critique of normativism, as the very idea of a moral set of principles external to social practices by which to judge political legitimacy, is either incoherent or empty (Erman and Möller, 2014, 2015, 2018). It is incoherent if it seeks to rule out building a political theory on the foundation of moral principles merely on the basis of the commitment argument. Identifying a social practice as a practice in this sense doesn't alter the options available to participants within it, this objection runs: the articulation of moral principles remains a permissible move in practices of justification, until those practices of justification themselves rule them out, and may be a required move if that is the place that it has in those practices. Of course, one can seek to change these practices in a counter-normativist direction but this revisionary project is an activity within practice, which, like other moves in the justificatory game, must take its chances in the agon of social contestation. If the commitment argument does not in itself have the resources to establish how the practice of political theorising should change, then it seems empty, as it isn't clear what difference adopting such an approach makes, from a normative perspective. The 'claim that legitimacy 'cannot be determined with certainty, definitively or from a disengaged standpoint' fails to prohibit or to suggest any type of normative theory of legitimacy'. Accordingly, Fossen's line of argument 'is not telling us [sc. normativists] to do anything differently from what we already do' (Erman and Möller, 2014: 15). There is nothing that follows from recognizing the pragmatist framework as such that renders appeal to such principles within practices of justification impermissible.

There is an elaborate and sometimes intemperate dialectic at play here (cf. Prinz, 2020) and I will focus on only a couple of points. One issue is about where the burden of proof in effect lies. The negative component of Fossen's Brandomian argument is on establishing that the appeal to theoretical principles in the relevant sense isn't a required move in legitimacy claims. The Brandomian's point here is that inferences about political legitimacy don't need to be squeezed into a Procrustean bed of derivation from higher principles in order to be valid. A critic of this position can argue that claims for political legitimacy are one of those domains where reasoning should have this structure (which Brandom says includes mathematics and fundamental physics but not practical reasoning) but they shouldn't assume the pragmatic relevance of these principles and this

structure. The specific case for bringing together these ideas from Brandom and arguments about political legitimacy is the realist one, that the relevance of this kind of theoretical principle to the turbulence and dynamism of actual political argument seems particularly challengeable (cf. Bagg, 2016; Festenstein, 2016). As a pragmatist argument, it isn't sceptical, however, and seeks to provide an account of how there are nevertheless genuinely normative judgments to be made and contested about legitimacy in particular political contexts, in the absence of legitimating higher order theoretical principles. (This distinguishes Fossen's pragmatist position from those forms of realism that retain the normativist theoretical structure but seek to replace principles identified as moral with those tagged as purely political.) This suggests a particularist approach to political theorising but not a vacuous one – or at least it is an approach that only appears vacuous on the assumption that political theory must have the architecture that this brand of pragmatist rejects.

Sharing the Brandomian idea that our social practices generate non-discretionary commitments, there is a group of arguments that revive a resonant theme expressed by Dewey and other earlier pragmatists, to the effect that democracy consists in an inquiring community – 'the democratic community replicates the community of broadly conceived scientific inquiry', in James Kloppenberg's words. In democratic and scientific communities alike, 'free and creative' participants 'set their own goals, determine their own tests, and evaluate their results in a spirit of constructive cooperation' (Kloppenberg, 1998: 90). In doing so it contributes to, and puts pragmatism in conversation with, a broader current of epistemic justificatory arguments in recent normative democratic theory (e.g. Landemore, 2021; Schwartzberg, 2015) as well as the wider literature on political epistemology and the epistemic character and powers of democracy. One of the peculiarities of this revival is that it involves a considerable amount of reconstructive labour: while there is a general vision of the harmony of democracy and scientific inquiry in Dewey's texts, the specific arguments for this are not so clearly on display in his texts (Westbrook, 2005: 179).

Recent work (notably foreshadowed in Putnam, 1992) has tried to reconstruct and develop the Deweyan experimentalist argument. In outline, the view is that norms and standards, including political norms, are the product of historical learning processes. They are tools developed experimentally to solve problems and subject to revision when they fail to foster cooperation and communicatively mediated collective action. From this epistemological point of view, democracy is made up of free and open experimental learning processes and is judged by their ability to develop and sustain such processes (e.g. Anderson, 2006; Festenstein, 2019; Capps, 2020; Knight and Johnson, 2011; Raber, 2020). In this way, Dewey and pragmatism more widely has been one resource for the efflorescence of political epistemology (e.g. Hannon and de Ridder, 2021). For Anderson (2006); Bohman (2006) and Medina (2013), it's an important distinguishing feature of Dewey's experimentalist account of the epistemic powers of democracy that it gives a central role to dissent and contestation. Resting on 'an account of the multiple epistemic roles of dissent at different points in democratic decision-making' (Anderson, 2006: 9), this emphasises a view of deliberation as imagination (cf. Fesmire, 2003) and provides a

rationale for valuing communication among a diversity of social perspectives. For Medina, this supports what he punningly calls an epistemology of resistance:

> Different ways of imagining can sensitize or desensitize people to human experiences; they can make people feel close or distant to others; and they can create or sever social bonds, affective ties, and relations of empathy or antipathy, solidarity or lack of solidarity. Stigmatizing ways of imagining play a crucial role in causing expressive and epistemic harms […] But resistant ways of imagining can contest exclusion and stigmatizations, and they can help us become sensitive to the suffering of excluded and stigmatized subjects (Medina, 2013: 26).

Resistance as a necessary friction to test out the truth of our beliefs requires social resistance to stereotypes, mutual ignorance and insensitivity as expressions of social power. This leads Medina into thinking about different forms of activism that may promote resistant and transformative types of social imagination. He views himself as following Jane Addams and Dewey, 'the perfect exemplar of nonideal normative theorizing of social practices' (Medina, 2013: 8).[4]

Dewey can be interpreted as offering a more than purely epistemic conception of democracy, and the focus on political epistemology has been paralleled by an interest in reviving his formative or perfectionist arguments to support the social-critical perspective (e.g. Kitcher and Alexander, 2020; Levine, 2020; Pappas, 2008; Renault, 2017). From this perspective, democracy is justified by virtue of its fostering free communication and open interaction versus repressing and narrowing. Focused on what Dewey thinks of as 'the kind of self that is formed through action' (Dewey and Tufts, 1985 [1932]: 302), this line of argument sees democracy not as a decision-making procedure but in effect as the 'idea of community life itself' (Dewey, 1984 [1927]: 328), which is uniquely able to allow the full and equal participation of all. In this vein, Medearis (2015) and Jackson (2018) argue that Dewey has the resources to justify participatory forms of democracy that address the perceived alienation and domination of neoliberalism. Important recent interpretations have argued that Dewey is a theorist of popular contention – of class struggle, strike action, social movements, industrial democracy, civil disobedience, and coercive political action (e.g. Jackson, 2018; Livingston, 2017; Medearis, 2015; Stears, 2010). As with the experimentalist argument, the formative argument extends beyond what is seen as a narrowly political conception of democracy to regard it is an ideal that should shape other social habitats, including, particularly in recent arguments, the workplace (e.g. Frega, 2019; Jackson, 2018; Renault, 2017). In this way too, Deweyan pragmatist arguments have provided resources for current thinking in democratic theory.

Both experimentalist and formative arguments have been adopted and developed by theorists keen to integrate them within the Frankfurt School and cognate traditions of critical theory. While the elective affinities between pragmatism and critical theory – at least in its post-Habermasian form – has been well-recognised (e.g. Aboulafia et al., 2002; Bernstein, 1986; Bernstein, 2010; Festenstein, 2001; Honneth, 1998a) – recent critical theory (e.g. Festl, 2020; Frega, 2019; Gregoratto, 2017; Renault, 2017; Särkelä, 2017; Serrano Zamora, 2021; Serrano Zamora and Santarelli, 2020; Testa, 2017) has incorporated these

arguments into its immanent criticisms of the social pathologies (both terms Dewey himself uses, as it happens) of contemporary capitalism, in effect reading Dewey through a critical theory lens. At the philosophical core of this tradition, Axel Honneth (Honneth, 1998a, 1998b, 2014) has particularly drawn on the formative argument to develop his account of social freedom and democracy while Rahel Jaeggi's influential account of the critique of forms of life draws on a Deweyan account of forms of life and their criticism as experimental problem-solving (Jaeggi, 2018: 318).[5] Outside this tradition, philosophers such as Elizabeth Anderson and David Rondel draw on Dewey's social philosophy to inform current problem-focused explorations of structural injustice (Anderson, 2011; Dieleman et al., 2017; Rondel, 2018)

Both in Dewey's own work and recensions, these two arguments and the relationship between them are highly contentious. We can ask whether experimentalism avoids, on the one hand, appeal to *a priori* standards for the success of social inquiry or, on the other, appeal to the local ethnocentric convention. The proceduralist answer, that experimentalism can dodge these pitfalls through the claim that standards are justified by reference to whether they are produced by and sustain free and open inquiry, may be suspected of either smuggling in a substantive conception of freedom and openness or of being too indeterminate to provide a clear answer. The formative argument puts some flesh on the idea of what freedom and openness consist in but at the price of resting on a conception of the democratic self that may seem itself morally controversial for pluralistic societies. There is a lot more that could be said here, and much of the most recent current work grapples in different ways with these issues (including rejecting the terms in which I've frame them). Space allows me only to alight on one important way in which theorists have cut through this tissue of concerns, through a version of experimentalism that aspires be both epistemologically compelling and provide determinate moral content.

The justification of democracy elaborated by Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse draws on an understanding of Peirce's conception of truth and the practice of inquiry (Misak, 2000, 2008, 2016, 2019; Misak and Talisse, 2014, 2021; Talisse, 2007; Talisse, 2009; Talisse, 2014; Talisse, 2021). This is Peircean in that it takes its starting point in a conceptual analysis of truth based on Peirce's famous idea that truth is 'the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate' (Peirce, 1986 [1878]: 273). (It is not based on Peirce's own reactionary and racist politics.) We can see how this approach sits at the other end of the justificatory spectrum from Rorty. For the Rortyan, truth isn't the end of inquiry, democracy is prior to philosophy, and these views should be understood as interventions in cultural politics that aim to gesture toward a better way of life, while for Misak and Talisse, truth is the goal of inquiry, the justification of democratic values falls out of the bare commitment to hold beliefs, and these views are epistemological insights into the character of belief. At the same time, they share a commitment to the primacy of practice, however different they are in the interpretation of that practice, and in the rejection of practice-transcendent foundations for political values.

One striking feature of Misak's original presentation of this idea over two decades ago is her choice of Carl Schmitt as a foil, not least in its prescience, given the increased attention that has come to be lavished on Schmitt among political philosophers. For Schmitt, in

Misak's view, 'there is no truth or rational adjudication in post-Enlightenment ethics and politics' (Misak, 2000: 10) and politics is merely the self-assertion of different groups. So, for Misak, 'If there is no objective right and wrong in moral matters, then what prevents one from adopting Schmitt's line rather than the line of tolerance?' (Misak, 2000: 11) To say that Schmitt is wrong, the first step that's needed is to establish that moral and political claims can be true or false. Here, pragmatism helps out, since it provides a conception of truth that equally accommodates scientific and moral truth. As Misak spells this out in her interpretation of Peirce, we should view truth in epistemic terms and think of a true belief as 'one that would withstand doubt, were we to inquire as far as we fruitfully could on the matter. A true belief is such that no matter how much further we were to investigate and debate, that belief would not be overturned by recalcitrant experience and argument' (Misak, 2000: 49). In holding a belief, I take it to be true and to be formed on the basis of adequate evidence. A belief should 'resign', as Misak puts it, if I discover that the evidence speaks overwhelmingly against it. The aspiration to truth and to responsiveness to evidence, argument and experience, then, are norms governing our cognitive lives, simply in virtue of our having beliefs at all.

The political lesson they draw is that 'the requirements of genuine belief show that we must, broadly speaking, be democratic inquirers' (Misak, 2000: 106). A true belief is one that is responsive to, and best fits with, all reasons, arguments and experience. If we want true beliefs, we should test epistemic claims against as wide a range of different experiences as possible, rendering beliefs responsive to reasons and evidence, and anyone genuinely committed to having true beliefs is committed to exercising the epistemic virtues this requires. Since we need access to evidence, arguments, other forms of information, and processes of reason-exchange, it follows that we need to live in a social and political order that protects and promotes this openness for all: just 'as the physicist who refuses to take seriously the results from, say, Finnish labs is betraying that his beliefs are not aimed at truth, the citizen who refuses to take seriously the experience of a minority is betraying that his beliefs are not aimed at truth' (Misak, 2019: 1066). In this way, the commitment to arriving at and sustaining true beliefs entails that we should support a democratic ethos and institutions and is meant to have a critical force: in Talisse's words, 'each person has compelling epistemological reasons – simply in virtue of the fact that he or she holds beliefs – to embrace social and political norms best secured within a democratic order' (Talisse, 2009: 37). The alternative is to admit that we are only specious believers.

The response to Schmitt is at two levels. If we allow for moral cognitivism, then we can argue (for example) that all human beings should be treated with equal concern and respect, in support of 'the line of tolerance': the Schmittian can resist this claim, of course, but not by assuming that as a moral belief it is immune to argument and evidence – merely an assertion of group identity or personal preference, for example. Our first-level moral beliefs can be justified as cognitive claims within this pragmatist framework but aren't of course justified by it. It is the second level of response, though, that pulls the rug out from under Schmitt, though. At the second level, as someone who seeks to acquire and retain true beliefs, though, Schmitt is a liberal democrat *malgré lui*, since he is committed to the conditions of openness and tolerance that furnish the procedural conditions for truth: he can reject these conditions only at the price of admitting epistemic

speciousness. Any actual Schmittian may be unembarrassed by this epistemic inconsistency, of course, but it shouldn't be a requirement on this account that it actually persuades the Schmittian, only that it should be clear to us that she should be persuaded.

The idea that we can only make sense of the idea of our having a true belief, or being an authentic believer, if we commit ourselves to democratic values, provides an ingenious but questionable path out from the dilemmas confronted by the experimentalist argument and is the subject of copious scrutiny (e.g. Bacon, 2010; Erman and Möller, 2019; Festenstein, 2004 2007, 2017; Lever and Chin, 2019; MacGilvray, 2014; Rydenfelt, 2019). Where the account is most persuasive is in its attempt to provide microfoundations for an experimentalist argument that sometimes tends to handwaving. Yet this foundational account is challengeable: even if in principle I think that my beliefs, to be true, should be able, in some sense, to stand up to all challenges, it doesn't follow that I can or should treat all opposing arguments as being equally legitimate or set things up so I must engage with or encourage challenges from any and every quarter. There is, in other words, a gap between the view of the constitutive norms of belief and how these are cashed out in methodological terms in particular epistemic contexts. This leads us to wonder what experimentalist arguments justify by way of a conception of democracy. For instance, the conditions that it puts on civic inclusion don't obviously fit with a world of bounded democratic states (consider Misak's Finnish labs): this, however, may just indicate what a radical view the pragmatist conception points to (Festenstein, 2021). Further, however, it isn't an argument that the people should rule or an argument for political equality in ruling, so much as an argument about the deliberative characteristics that should condition how we are ruled. So it still seems to need an additional first-level argument to support the idea that what is justified is a democracy, in a recognizable if revisionary sense; and this may take us back to the formative argument that the Deweyan provides.

There is a final point to make about how we look back at the pragmatist tradition. One theme in this article has been how the interpretation and use of pragmatism in political theory has properly been shaped by the discipline's shifting concerns and self-understanding. So it unsurprising that pragmatism has a place in the multifaceted project of deparochializing its perspectives and concerns (Williams, 2020). One example is Livingston's *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (2016), the most developed attempt to work through the themes of empire and anti-imperialism in James's philosophy (although not the first text to emphasise the importance of anti-imperialism for James) and brings pragmatism in conversation with the still burgeoning field of empire studies.[6] For Livingston, James should be understood as a sensitive critical analyst of imperial will to power, not its mouthpiece, particularly through a reading of what he calls James's anti-imperialist *Nachlass*, the speeches, notes and correspondence that sprang from James's furious reaction to the occupation of the Philippines. On this interpretation, behind both philosophical monism and imperialism lies a shared craving for authority in an uncertain world that can be shaped through human agency. This craving pulls the modern self into fantasies of sovereign mastery or powerless resignation in the face of a world without fixed foundations. James's pragmatism works to 'unsettle the closure of abstraction, dogmatism, and self-certainty and to resignify

uncertainty, risk, and chance as occasions for creative freedom' (Livingston, 2016: 13). At the same time, throughout he seeks to show that James's is a distinctively American anti-imperialism, entangled in the ideology and patterns of anxiety that it criticizes: so 'idioms of pioneer freedom, frontier mastery, individualism and democratic faith that give James's anti-imperialism its critical purchase also threatens to co-opt his political thought into a distinctively uncritical faith in the liberal nationalism he challenges' (Livingston, 2016: 52). Given Livingston's subject, there is an inevitable focus on the metropolitan psyche and ideological formations, rather than on the colonial impacts or political economy of U.S. intervention. Potential growth points for a more intercultural perspective on pragmatism that may engage political theorists include the impact (in both directions) of Dewey's engagement with China and the relationship of his thought to that of his Columbia student, B. R. Ambedkar (Kumar, 2015; Stroud, 2017).

Conclusion

I have tried to sketch how recent work on pragmatism has secured the view that at its core is a set of arguments about the character and justification of democracy and how pragmatist arguments have been reinterpreted and deployed to address contemporary concerns and approaches in political theory. At the same time, it is deeply divided over how to interpret its core commitments and where its most important contribution lies, and more detail than this article allows would only enhance these differences. The depth and spiritedness of these disagreements are as good a sign of the current vitality of this tradition as any.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Matthew Festenstein https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2139-6174

Notes

1. Festenstein, 1997 in effect attempts to mark and map this changed understanding for political theory, reflecting a wider current of thinking: see Westbrook, 2005 for a panoramic view of the context for this shift, important contributors to which include Putnam, Bernstein, Rorty, West, Misak, Joas, Knight and Johnson, Ryan, Westbrook, and others, as well as Bernstein, 1992, 2010; Kloppenberg, 1998.
2. See Kuklick, 2017 for a useful guide to recent historiographical debates.

3. For more on Brandom's relationship to pragmatism, see Brandom, 2009, 2011; Bernstein, 2010; Bacon, 2012; Levine, 2019, and for another use of Brandom see Thaler, 2016. Rogers (2008) interprets Dewey's conception of inquiry though the lens of Brandom's social account of normativity.
4. See also Medina, 2017; Taylor, 2017. For more detail on forms of these claims in Dewey's texts, see Festenstein (2019), and on Addams (2002 [1902]), see Medina (2013: 19-20).
5. It's also worth noting that Honneth's work on reification (Honneth, 2012) draws on a different element of Dewey's philosophy, his conception of experience. See Owen (2007) and Kitcher (2020) on the Deweyan strand in Honneth's critical theory.
6. One of the field's foremost proponents, Duncan Bell (2018, 2020) makes a case for H. G. Wells as a pragmatist, whose pragmatism underpins some of his social speculation. It is also worth noting Scott Pratt's earlier and highly original interpretation of pragmatism as a response to settler colonialism (Pratt, 2002).

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