

JOHN DEWEY AND THE CONTEMPORARY “DELIBERATIVE TURN” IN POLITICAL THEORY

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In recent years Political Theory and Socio-Political Philosophy has experienced what has been called a “deliberative turn.” Many of the members of this movement have proclaimed John Dewey as a predecessor, an influence, or as a founding father of deliberative democracy.¹ This may seem as good news, but I will argue against these proclamations, and instead use Dewey to suggest some serious limitations of deliberative democracy to deal with the challenges we face in the 21st century in our counterfeit democracy.

There are, of course, affinities and similarities between Dewey and deliberative democracy. Dewey would find the recent deliberative turn in political theory a step in the right direction. The problems that Dewey encountered overlap with our present situation. Democracy was and is in crisis. Democracy in America continues to be in need of revitalization or rehabilitation. The same sort of liberalism that Dewey criticized continues to be under attack as being even the enemy of democracy. As Robert Talisse says, “. . . a question central to current political theory is: can a society based upon liberal principles generate and sustain the conditions necessary for effective democracy?”² Contemporary societies that call themselves democratic suffer from the evils that critics of democracy (since Plato) are quick to point out—among them, the homogenization of culture and the unwise decisions of a bewildered, fragmented, easy-to-manipulate, and apathetic public. To this problematic situation the response of Dewey and deliberative democracy is similar. Communal deliberation and judgment can be more than the aggregation of private preferences, or the competition among fixed preferences and standpoints. Recent political theorists have argued, as Dewey did, for the power of dialogue to transform the preferences and views of participants. However, in examining the recent deliberative turn in political theory, a Deweyan must be critical of the notion of “deliberation” that is often assumed. Deliberative democracy does not have a robust-enough view of deliberation to deal adequately with the problems of our counterfeit or superficial democracy. In this paper, I will be concerned with one particular problem with their view of deliberation:

Deliberation is understood under a “rational” and “epistemic” model of discourse: an exchange of propositions, reasons and arguments governed by rules and reasoning that often excludes emotional and imaginative elements.

Dewey would be sympathetic with the recent feminist thinkers who have criticized the narrow view of deliberation that is assumed by many in deliberative democracy. Iris Young, for example, argues against the restriction of deliberation to argument and rational speech.³ This is not surprising since many of the thinkers of the deliberative movement have been strongly influenced by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Rawls and Habermas, in spite of their differences, claim that their deliberative ideal amounts to a conception of “public reason.” Rawls and Habermas are not traditional rationalists, but it has been questioned whether their more flexible form of rationalism is flexible enough to accommodate or to include all there is to deliberation and to democracy.

There is, as it were, a “rationalistic Kantian residuum” in many of the deliberativists and that residuum shows up at different places in their views. For instance, it is clear that, in spite of their differences, Seyla Benhabib, Joshua Cohen, John Drysek, and James Bohman agree that the reason to be more democratic is to be more rational.⁴ This traditional subordination of the moral and the political to the abstract end of rationality or reason is not in Dewey and should be questioned. Contrary to the assumptions of modern philosophy, there is no more obvious good reason to be rational than there is to be moral. However, the rationalistic assumptions of many deliberativists are most evident in their restricted views of public deliberation.

Deliberativists have taken as their task the investigation of the norms or rules of public reason. What seems narrow about this approach, from Dewey’s perspective, is the attempt to capture the spirit of democracy in terms of rules and the fact that those rules are usually about what type of reasons or ways of argumentation are relevant. As Iris Young has pointed out, most deliberativists tend to exclude rhetoric, storytelling, greetings, and any other means that are not the sort of considerations traditionally associated in philosophy with rational speech. This exclusion is problematic because it is a bias towards the mode of speech of certain groups (e.g., academic philosophers) and because it would leave out much that is essential to good deliberation or communication. Dewey would agree, and it is worthwhile for us today to consider how much richer is his account of deliberation than any proposed so far by deliberativists.

For Dewey, the emotional (qualitative) and imaginative are integral aspects of any deliberation; moreover, they are key to its own regulation. Deliberation may require reasoning and examination of propositions, but it is also an imaginative process, and, more importantly, it is ultimately the qualitative aspect that provides the guidance needed in reaching judgment. “The universe of experience surrounds and regulates the universe of discourse but never appears within the latter” (LW 12:74).⁵ Deliberation is not a mental process. It is something we do that requires the learning and operation of certain embodied habits. Some of these habits go beyond the intellectual capacities associated traditionally with reason or logic. The ability or disposition to evaluate the logical implications of our beliefs and the habit of not making inferences that are not warranted by the evidence may be important, but so are habits of imagination and emotional sensitivity.⁶ It is important to have individuals willing to take the standpoint of others, and with the underlying habits that are required for a meaningful and educative interaction.

One may argue that what all this amounts to is that Dewey simply had a wider and fuller view of “public reason,” and that, therefore, he was as committed to “reason” as anyone else in deliberative democracy. Perhaps, but I would argue that such a move would fail to capture what is at the heart of Dewey’s philosophical vision and what is worth bringing forth in the context of present debates. I am not even sure that substituting the term “intelligence” for “reason” is sufficient.

The “rationalistic residuum” in recent deliberativists is also present in their assumptions about the self, i.e., the participants in public deliberation. They, like Dewey, want to move beyond the modern atomistic and self-interested view of the self, but they assume

the alternative is to ask deliberators to put aside their particular affective ties and preferences in order to adopt the universal standpoint of public "reason." The resulting dichotomy between "personal interest" and "public concern" (or the private/public) reminds us of the dichotomies of egoism/altruism and emotion/reason that Dewey undermined in his ethics. Once one abandons the atomistic view of individuals and other dichotomies, there is no mystery about how one can be "interested" and also become an other-regarding democratic citizen. In Dewey's ethics, the "wider self" is the one that through deliberation learns about and expands the self. "Personal preferences" can be transformed into "public interest." Such a transformation requires more, not less, cultivation of the emotional and imaginative capacities of a self. In ethics and in politics, however, the rationalist tendency is to consider the affections (and anything that is associated with private and personal interest) as obstacles to proper public deliberation. For Dewey the alternative to the view of public deliberation as an aggregation of fixed personal preferences is the view of public dialogue as a process that is initiated by experiencing shared problems, and where certain imaginative and effective capacities, such as the sympathy needed to take the standpoint of the other, are operative (and cooperative) in reaching judgment. The character of any communal inquiry depends on its participants and the quality of their interaction but it is also true that in the process the participants are transformed. Proper public deliberation requires selves with "public concern," but this type of self can only be fostered by deliberation. There is no objectionable circular argument here. The result is simply the consequence of a view that denies the notion of a self that is antecedent to its interactions.

From Dewey's standpoint the root of the deficiencies of deliberative democracy is the tendency to presuppose a knowledge-language view of deliberation and judgment which comes from the perennial mistake in philosophy to reduce experience to knowledge. This mistake is a philosophical mistake with practical consequences. It has failed to equip philosophers with the resources to engage in the sort of criticism that we need in order to deal with the present threats or obstacles that distort democratic deliberation. For instance, I do not think that enough has been said, at least among philosophers, about the challenge presented by the new forms of emotional persuasion. In particular, there is no confrontation with the media in which dialogue in public life is had. We live in a world in which images and other non-cognitive and non-verbal means preclude or guide inquiry. The mass production and consumption of images that please and deceive have taken center stage in public discourse. This non-propositional "stuff" is easily dismissed by rationalist deliberationists as simply irrational, psychological, and beyond the realm of logic. This is the same sort of magical safeguard that Dewey criticized in philosophy: just label something as "unreal" or "irrational" and somehow it will go away. A Deweyan view of public deliberation is not as prone to this mistake because it holds that what is emotional, qualitative, imaginative, non-cognitive, or non-verbal is an important aspect of any genuine process of deliberation. Its solution is not to pretend to repress what cannot be repressed. I am skeptical that the solution to our problematic situation lies in a return to a print-centered culture where propositions and their logical relationships are the means to truth and knowledge and are the main vehicles of public deliberation.

Both the feminists and Dewey are, however, open to the charge that their views open the doors too wide. If one explicitly includes in democratic deliberation the non-propositional

and emotional factors, then how can we avoid all of the obvious dangers and evils that come with that inclusion? Iris Young, for example, makes a good case for the value of including rhetoric and storytelling in public deliberation.⁷ Rhetoric and storytelling are emotional and imaginative methods of persuasion that can enhance understanding, trust, and solidarity across radical differences in beliefs among people from different cultures. However, even if we agree with the inclusion of rhetoric and storytelling, how can we reconcile the need to include these methods of persuasion with the obvious dangers that come from allowing these methods? The dangerous aspects of rhetoric and emotional persuasion are more significant today than during Dewey's time. The problem with public discourse in America is that emotional reasons and rhetoric are used to keep a low quality of collective intelligence. The people are swayed by irrelevancy, amusement, and fear. They are seduced by images, propaganda, and demagoguery instead of by the force of the better argument. Politicians are today competing with television channels for the viewers' attention. Presidential debates are heavily scripted exchanges where people watch them because they are emotionally aroused by conflict in television and not because they are expecting the debaters or themselves to change their minds.⁸

Emotional unity or solidarity may at first seem like innocent things, but what about the nationalism and ethnocentrism evoked by emotional unity that can cause fragmentation and divisions within civil society and the globe? We need not assume or adopt a "stiff" rationalism to be concerned about the consequences of some forms of rhetoric. Are we stuck in between "opening the doors" wide open, thereby inviting the problems that I just described, and the restrictions of many deliberative theories to certain types of reasons? The restrictions imposed by many deliberative theories are worrisome. The view that collective judgment and decisions must be based on only "rational" and "public" reasons or considerations has been considered by thinkers like Michael Sandel as a part of the legacy of a repressive liberalism. He argues that this repression under the banner of neutrality that lead to the very excesses it seeks to exclude.⁹ Restricting democratic deliberation to argumentation or to "rational-public" reasons leads to a formalistic-procedural view of democratic interaction that undermines or brackets the things that in actual communities bring unity and make dialogue more than a task of drudgery.

Is there any alternative solution? One way between the two extremes of allowing all emotional rhetoric and the restrictive rationalism of deliberative democracy is to allow emotional-based rhetoric, but to work out some reliable rules, criteria, or standards by which we can distinguish between adequate and inadequate rhetorical-emotional reasons: the inadequate ones could, then, be restricted. For example, one may argue that if rhetoric and images are simply aimed to please or entertain, then they should be excluded from public discourse. One would have to go beyond these vague generalities and build into the rules the specific conditions and exceptions. Notice that the imposition of rules with specific conditions and exceptions is the same sort of rule-guided solution that is favored by ethical theory. This possible solution is, however, subject to the same type of objections raised by Dewey against rules in his ethics.¹⁰ Rules do not replace context-sensitive judgments. Some principles (as general rules of thumb) may help the public discussion, but in the end what reasons are or are not proper cannot be determined in advance of the particular communicative situation. We need to rely on judgment in deciding when, for example, storytelling is or is not appropriate for a particular

democratic public deliberation. Judgment should not follow some set criteria even if it is informed by previously similar situations and our funded experience. Good judgment is informed by the past but sensitive to the present context. Dewey thinks such judgments are possible, in part, because we already make such judgments in the deliberations of smaller groups and in our closest relationships. In many of these dialogues, the participants do not need rules or criteria to have an immediate qualitative sense of what is or is not relevant to the discussion. Notice what is being claimed. It takes a certain type of emotional-qualitative sensitivity to the context to determine when some particular emotional reasons are out place in a particular public discourse or situation. There will be plenty of disagreement about this issue, and there may be situations where there is just no good way to adjudicate between competing claims, but this is not a good reason to prefer the prefabricated rules of prohibition of some philosophers.

Does Dewey, however, provides any practical advice about how to avoid the dangers of a society where public discourse is susceptible to the distortions of emotional appeals and manipulation? He relies on good judgment but this depends on the cultivation of habits. Encouraging certain virtues in a community is the best way to prepare for particular collective decision making. The best way to counteract the seduction of images, coercive rhetoric, wishful thinking, and appeals to fears, is to work on the conditions required to encourage individuals that have the capacity to be critical. Instilling virtuous traits is the alternative to the imposition of proper rules or restrictions on public discourse, and that is the reason Dewey put so much faith in education. This is the most democratic solution since the defenses against the forces mentioned emerge from within instead of being something external or imposed to particular situations and communities. But is not Dewey just saying we need to work on making people more "rational"? Is not making people more rational just a new form of rationalism? Dewey's notion of the ideal character is, however, so inclusive and so distant from the traditional use of the word "rational" that even "intelligence" (a term he preferred) seems narrow, misleading, and a distractions from appreciating the uniqueness of his view.

According to Dewey's view of the ideal character, what we need to counteract the seduction of images and emotional appeals that distort inquiry is more, not fewer, emotional and imaginative habits.¹¹ Pragmatists understood the force of habits. It is not enough to become consciously aware that we are emotionally manipulated in order to protect ourselves from being emotionally manipulated. What we need is character that is emotionally receptive to doubt and has a habitual passion for criticism. To counteract the craving and comfort provided by absolutism and dualism, we must learn to habitually find some emotional zest or thrill in facing uncertainty and contingency. One could also argue that against the seduction of images what is needed is character that can negotiate more, not fewer, images. Visual literacy, communication, and criticism may well have their own logic and the proper place in the sort of education that is needed.

The main difference between Dewey and recent deliberativists is that for Dewey there is more to experience than what is at the foreground of inquiry. There is more to democratic experience than democratic deliberation. How we experience each other in our everyday local and direct interactions is something more inclusive than how we talk and inquire together. Democratic discourse takes place in the non-discursive context of our

democratic relationships, which is why democratic communication is perhaps a notion that captures better Dewey's view than simply "deliberation." Hence, as important as public deliberation was for Dewey, the "turn" that he hoped for in the philosophy of democracy was towards a view of democracy as experience. Thus, for Dewey, the recent effort to formulate a normative vision of democracy in terms of rules and conditions of ideal deliberation may be too formal (not substantial enough). As Frank Cunningham has recently noted, ". . . deliberative-democratic theory may be seen to overcome the formalism of liberal democracy: by introducing the idea of deliberation and its conditions, substantive content for abstract democratic rights can be justified. A question that poses itself is whether deliberative democracy might not itself be too formal."¹²

Proponents of deliberative democracy tend to describe the ideal dialogue in terms of an exchange of reasons within certain norms and conditions. However, our ordinary descriptions of the sort of communicative situations they have in mind are more attuned to the qualitative, imaginative, and emotional aspects of these situations. Ideal talking and listening happens when we "take each other's views to heart"; when we "take the standpoint of the other"; when there is an environment of "good faith" in the discussion; and when we "feel others have really listened" to our views, even if we did not agree with the final decision. To avoid the same sort of formalism that is common in ethics, democratic theory should formulate its normative prescriptions in terms of certain types of relationships and habits instead of rules. If people are genuinely engaged in democratic deliberation, it is because they have certain habits and not because, as Jürgen Habermas claims, they are committed to certain implicit rules of discourse.¹³

Central to democratic deliberation is *judgment* and, for Dewey, this is a context-relative activity that is best fostered by encouraging certain virtues. Virtues as embodied habits (or ways of interacting in a deliberative situation) are better than the mere following of rules in describing and capturing the spirit of democratic deliberation. Democratization requires more than improving rules. We must, for example, ask which imaginative and emotional capacities are required for taking seriously the standpoint, reasons, and beliefs of others. Without a cadre of people with these imaginative and emotional capacities, there is no hope for democracy. The art of listening needed in a democracy is a matter of embodied habits. As Mary Carole McCauley has pointed out ". . . in a world of visual stimulation listening culture is drowned out" and we have forgotten how to listen."¹⁴ How can we in a democracy expect to have more people willing to change their minds (when they engage in public debate) if the basic habits of careful listening are in jeopardy in our visually centered culture?

Some recent deliberativists, like Robert Talisse, are moving away from rules and reasons by proposing the importance of the "deliberative virtues" as the intellectual habits that can "foster in the individual epistemically responsible habits of belief."¹⁵ Talisse, in fact, joins Hilary Putnam and Cheryl Misak¹⁶ in proposing a pragmatic epistemic conception of democracy. How well does this square with Dewey's view? What points of contention are worth exploring with these "pragmatist" theories of democracy? Dewey would be suspicious about the separation of epistemic virtues from moral virtues; the very integrity of our lived character forbids such separation. Openness is a democratic virtue that serves more than epistemic goals. Openness contributes to a better quality of our present

experience and is required in order to learn from each other to appreciate (e.g., aesthetically, morally) the features of our everyday experience. This has very little to do with truth and knowledge unless one wishes to reduce all experiences to knowledge experiences, something that is for Dewey the philosophical capital sin!¹⁷ Thus, for Dewey, the "deliberative turn" must be more than an "epistemic" turn. Democracy is more than a means to knowledge. There is more to democratic inquiry than the exchange of reasons and arguments by thinkers with excellent epistemic habits.

NOTES

1. John S. Dryzek says, "... an emphasis on deliberation is not entirely new. Antecedents can be found in theorists of the early twentieth century such as John Dewey (1927)" 2. Richard Posner also considers Dewey a deliberative democrat (50). I do not think it is an exaggeration to claim that Dewey is being mentioned and quoted more than ever in political theory thanks to this new deliberative movement. Among those that claim a Deweyan lineage are Barber, Talisse, and Bohman.

2. Talisse 44.

3. See Young 120-136.

4. See Cohen 95-119 and Seyla Benhabib's "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy" 67-80. See also Dryzek and James Bohman.

5. Citations of the works of John Dewey in this article refer to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. In the citations the initials of the series are followed by volume and page numbers. Abbreviations for the critical edition are:

<i>EW</i>	The Early Works (1982-1898)
<i>MW</i>	The Middle Works (1899-1924)
<i>LW</i>	The Later Works (1925-1953)

6. For Dewey, even the proper deliberations characteristic of scientists require qualitative sensitivity. He wrote, "... scientific thought is, in its turn, a specialized form of art, with its own qualitative control. The more formal and mathematical science becomes, the more it is controlled by sensitiveness to a special kind of qualitative considerations" LW 5:252.

7. See Young 120-136.

8. See the *New York Times* article "Appealing to Voter's Emotions," Oct 17, 2004. <http://medialit.med.sc.edu/votersemotions.htm>. Research during political debates showed that viewers are drawn to heat, not light. Abrasive, confrontational style gets more people to watch, but seldom with open minds. See <http://www.statesman.com/specialreports/content/specialreports/greatdivide>.

9. In an interview with David Gergen, Michael Sandel says, "... the answer isn't to flee moral and religious discourse in politics, it seems to me, but to engage it, deepen it, to contest it, because otherwise there will be a kind of moral void and emptiness in our political discourse that will open the way to the most intolerant, narrow moralisms, and I think democratic politics can't be sustained in a way that's value neutral." <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/sandel.html>.

10. See LW 7:276.

11. Dewey says, "The conclusion is not that the emotional, passionate phase of action can be or should be eliminated in behalf of a bloodless reason. *More 'passions,'* not fewer, is the answer. To check the influence of hate there must be sympathy, while to rationalize sympathy there are needed emotions of curiosity, caution, . . ." MW 14:136, my emphasis.

12. Cunningham 180.

13. This is common understanding of Habermas. See Cunningham 176.

14. See http://www.friends.ca/News/Friends_News/archives/articles08080302.asp.

15. Talisse 314.

16. See Putnam and Misak.

17. I am not accusing my fellow pragmatic thinkers (Talisse, Putnam, or Misak) of such a "sin." I am only pointing to a danger with which they are familiar when the epistemic aspect of experience is overemphasized. To be fair, Talisse is explicit that his emphasis on epistemology has to do only with the role of the state. There is no reason why his proposal needs to exclude aspects of democracy that are not intellectual. His proposal is after all nothing more than a preliminary sketch and not a full-blown democratic theory. I do think, however,

that, in his remarkable effort to build intellectual bridges between pragmatism and contemporary political theory, he (and all of us) must not succumb unwillingly to the philosophical bias in the debates. The intellectualist bias that Dewey criticized in ethics is also operative in political philosophy. Whether the avoidance of this bias is necessary to be a “pragmatist” is a matter of debate. For a Deweyan view of politics that takes political experience to be something more than the search for knowledge and truth, see Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn.

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