

EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY WITHOUT TRUTH: THE DEWEYAN APPROACH

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Abstract

In this essay I situate John Dewey's pragmatist approach to democratic epistemology in relation to contemporary "epistemic democracy." Like epistemic democrats, Dewey characterizes democracy as a form of social inquiry. But whereas epistemic democrats suggest that democracy aims to "track the truth," Dewey rejects the notion of "tracking" or "corresponding" to truth in political and other domains. For Dewey, the measure of successful decision-making is not some fixed independent standard of truth or correctness but, instead, our own reflective satisfaction with the practical results. I argue that this approach better reconciles epistemic democracy with traditional models of popular authority ("the will of the people") and bolsters the defenses of the epistemic democrat against elitist alternatives.

1. Introduction

It is tempting to see Dewey as one of the historical originators of contemporary "epistemic democracy" (MacGilvray 2014; Anderson 2006). Dewey characterizes democracy as a form of "social inquiry" in which the public's diverse knowledge is brought to bear on common problems. Relatedly, his defense of democracy makes no substantive appeal to procedural fairness or intrinsic rights of political participation. Like contemporary epistemic democrats, Dewey seems to see epistemic output rather than procedural fairness as democracy's ultimate objective (Dewey 1927).

And yet in many respects the connection between Dewey and contemporary epistemic democracy looks strained. Conventionally understood, epistemic democracy holds that democracy is justified at least in part based on its "truth-tracking" tendencies (Estlund 2008; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2013; Cohen 1986). But, like other pragmatists, Dewey was deeply skeptical about the idea of "corresponding to truth" (Dewey 1920) and, while

talk of “knowledge” is pervasive in Dewey’s democratic theory, he does not treat truth as one of democracy’s aims.

In this essay I situate Dewey’s approach to democratic epistemology in relation to contemporary varieties. Dewey’s avoidance of truth-talk in the political context reflects a skepticism about the idea that, as Knight and Johnson put it, “in most political disputes or disagreements, there is a fact of the matter waiting to be discovered” (Knight and Johnson 2011: 130). For Dewey, political inquiry is about figuring out improvements in our communal practice that enable us to flourish together; but the standard of success in this project is constituted by our reflective endorsement of the changes we produce. In this way, the standard of success is both something that, on the one hand, (a) we aim to discover, and, on the other, (b) we ourselves constitute. Conventional epistemic approaches to democracy capture (a) but not (b). Dewey’s ability to capture (b), I will argue, better reconciles epistemic democracy with traditional models of popular authority (“the will of the people”), and bolsters the defenses of the epistemic democrat against elitist alternatives.

Of course, it is possible that Dewey’s view succeeds in this respect while nonetheless failing on its own terms. Below I attempt to situate Dewey’s views, such as they are, relative to epistemic democracy, but largely avoid addressing more general objections to his approach. Others have taken up a more comprehensive defense of Deweyanism elsewhere (Pappas 2008; Knight and Johnson 2011; Westbrook 1991), and I must defer to their work on the present occasion.

2. Agnosticism About Political “Truth”

Following Joshua Cohen’s original formulation, epistemic democrats hold that there is “some standard of correctness” which is “independent of current consensus and the outcomes votes” (Cohen 1986: 34). But they tend to be agnostic about the specific nature of the correctness standard. “Truth” is treated simply as a placeholder for whatever standard of correctness is in fact the right one:

“By ‘correct or right decision’ here, or ‘the truth,’ can be meant an array of things, from objective truth of the matter (about facts or morality) to a more intersubjective, culturally-dependent, and temporary construct (about more socially constructed facts or moral questions). What epistemic democrats emphasize...is merely the Habermasian (and commonsensical enough) point that we wouldn’t be exchanging reasons in the first place if we did not believe that there was something to figure out, whether we call this something the truth, the right, or the correct, just or socially useful answer.” (Estlund and Landemore 2018: 113)¹

¹ Quoted in (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018: 12)

This generic approach to political truth is reflected in the primary lines of argument that epistemic democrats use, which tend to draw on a “wisdom of crowds” logic. Hélène Landemore’s approach (2013) offers a prime example. Landemore argues for the epistemic advantages of democracy by appealing to Lu Hong and Scott Page’s “Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem” (DTA) (Hong and Page 2004). The DTA says that, under several specific conditions, a large number of non-experts will outperform a small group of experts in problem-solving. The particulars of the DTA are not important for present purposes, but the key to the idea lies in the advantages of cognitive diversity, which is what enables larger groups of only modestly competent problem solvers to beat elite, but more cognitively homogeneous, groups. From this point of view, Landemore argues, the key feature of democracy is that universal enfranchisement is a way of ensuring cognitive diversity among “problem solvers” given a set of diverse and unpredictable problems.

The important point for present purposes is that the DTA is potentially applicable to pretty much any problem-solving context, so long as the problems at hand are neither extremely easy nor extremely difficult.² The argument for democratic approaches to political inquiry, in this respect, is no different from the argument for democratic approaches to any other domain of inquiry with that kind of profile. Indeed, in constructing examples to illustrate DTA in the political context, Landemore focuses on cases where substantive normative questions are not in play. In this way, the epistemology of politics is treated as a particularly broad domain of practical “problem-solving” rather than a sphere of inquiry with unique epistemic properties.

For example, Landemore’s central real-world illustration involves a case in which the local community must figure out how to reduce muggings on a particular bridge (100-102). “Reducing muggings” is an uncontroversial objective, and the case is described in a way that abstracts from the sorts of factors that typically make political issues difficult: contentious trade-offs, value conflicts, or differential effects on community interests. All of these factors point to what is arguably the defining feature of political deliberation, which is the fact that the autonomous judgments of the people themselves play a critical role in determining what counts as a genuine problem, and what counts as a good solution. Landemore’s approach does not take on this set of issues, which makes it harder to see how it is supposed to handle the kinds of contentious moral issues – abortion, religious rights, free speech, etc. – which define a pluralistic democratic society. It also raises the worry that democracy’s radical egalitarianism is dispensable. If the primary benefit of democracy is cognitive diversity, then why wouldn’t the DTA yield much better results through some subset of better qualified, but cognitively diverse groups (Brennan 2016: 184)? To be clear, this is not intended as some kind of knock-down

² If a problem is easy, then any group is likely to solve it, and the advantages of cognitive diversity over expertise disappear. If a problem is extremely hard, then cognitive diversity will not be enough to match the mastery of experts.

objection to Landemore's approach; the point for present purposes is simply to highlight some of its limitations.

Similar points apply to arguments that draw on the Condorcet Jury Theorem (CJT), which serves as the centerpiece of a major recent statement on epistemic democracy from Robert Goodin and Kai Spiekermann (2018). The CJT states roughly that, if the average competence among voters is better than random then, as the size of the group of voters increases, the probability that they will choose the true ("correct") option rapidly approaches 1. Like Landemore, Goodin and Spiekermann state explicitly that their view does not depend on any substantive assumptions about the nature of the correctness standard. This makes sense given that, ultimately, the logic of the CJT is based on the power of large numbers, and the primary epistemic advantage of democracy is simply that it delivers a large body of inquirers. On this view, there is nothing special about political inquiry as such that makes democracy advantageous, and if there were a smaller body of elites with superior "competence," there is nothing in principle which would block the inference to rule-of-the-wise ("epistocracy"). Indeed, Goodin and Spiekerman themselves are perfectly clear about the limitations of their argument, noting that epistemic considerations alone are unlikely to provide a sufficient rationale for universal enfranchisement (238-239).

As much as anything else, David Estlund's (2008) work on "epistemic proceduralism" has been foundational in developing an epistemic account of democracy. Like those above, Estlund explicitly avoids committing himself to any substantive conception of political truth. Instead, he evaluates democracy's epistemic prospects primarily in terms of its capacity to avoid a specific list of "primary bads": war, famine, economic collapse, political collapse, epidemic, and genocide. In a Rawlsian spirit, he suggests that these would be recognized by all "reasonable comprehensive views" as serious harms (162-163).

The advantage of focusing on primary-bad-avoidance is that it allows Estlund to pursue an epistemic defense of democracy without tethering himself to any controversial account of the good. So long as the primary bads would be weighty on any plausible correctness standard, the epistemic argument for democracy can go through. The disadvantage of this approach, however, is that the relationship between "correctness" and the contingent attitudes of the citizenry – "the will of the people" – remains unclear. This question becomes vitally important when there is disagreement about important issues. Even a primary bad such as war is sometimes justified and, as Estlund himself notes (163-164), that tends to inspire reasonable contestation about its justifiability, scope, and appropriate execution. Estlund's approach suggests that epistemic criteria only kick in under the relatively limited set of conditions in which there is a very strong consensus about the correctness standard. At the same time, when the scope of epistemic success is so tightly circumscribed around primary bads, it is not clear that democracy would tend to beat more elitist alternatives. Indeed, Estlund notably does not stake his view to that

stronger argument. Instead, his primary defense against epistocracy is on procedural rather than epistemic grounds, i.e., that no epistocracy would be justifiable from all “qualified” points of view. Thus, while Estlund’s theory insists on the importance of epistemic criteria, the epistemic properties of democracy ultimately play a limited justificatory role.

3. The Deweyan Alternative

Unlike the approaches above, Dewey’s take on political epistemology offers a substantive account of good political “outcomes.” As noted above, however, his approach is distinctly skeptical of the idea that political truth is something “waiting to be discovered.” In this section I sketch Dewey’s general understanding of inquiry, and then move on to characterize his understanding of democratic inquiry in particular. Once the Deweyan approach is in place, I return in the next section to pursue the contrast with contemporary epistemic democracy.

Dewey’s view of inquiry does not invoke a standard concept of truth and he takes pains throughout his work to distance himself from the idea. Being the good pragmatist that he is, Dewey tends to characterize inquiry as an attempt to solve practical “problems” and successful theory-making ultimately involves the generation of ideas which enable us to do that. So “truth,” for Dewey, is a matter of providing successful guidance in action (Dewey 1920: 169-172). The language of “problem-solving” makes him sound a bit like Landmore. But the resemblance here is merely terminological.

For Dewey, problems arise from the experience of frustration or dissatisfaction – “something the matter” (Dewey 1920: 141) – with some idea or set of ideas as they function in our lives. Inquiry involves the attempt to improve those ideas in ways that alleviate this dissatisfaction, and that requires experimentation. In the case of natural science, puzzles about the natural world arise from gaps in our present theories that lead to failures of explanation. Scientists generate hypotheses, which constitute potential revisions in the scientific community’s established set of beliefs, and these are tested through deliberate manipulations of the natural world (experiments) which generate novel experiences. Hypotheses which generate satisfactory predictions and explanations of what is observed are absorbed into theory and these revisions, in turn, generate yet further puzzles and interventions. Epistemically successful theories are those which are ultimately responsive to problems salient in human experience – they allow us to answer questions that we care about, and the test of a good answer is that it resolves the experience of frustration which gave rise to inquiry (1938).

One of the most notable features of Dewey’s epistemology is his view that inquiry into questions of value is not categorically different from inquiry into matters of fact about the natural world. That is why he sees “science” as the overarching paradigm for epistemology in both factual and normative domains. Inquiry into matters of value arises from durable dissatisfaction – a

“problem” – with the status quo in our experience of moral norms and practices. A process then ensues in which the moral community deliberates about different potential changes in our practice. On Dewey’s view, moral claims amount to hypotheses about whether we, as a moral community, will experience a social world transformed by the relevant changes in our moral practice as satisfactory. Successful moral inquiry thus involves making accurate projections about human experience within a particular context of practice (1939b; 1922). And doing that requires the input of natural and social science, as well as a cultivated sympathetic imagination (Fesmire 2003).

The idea that moral inquiry involves hypotheses about the generation of human satisfaction makes Dewey sound as if he is some kind of utilitarian. But Dewey criticizes utilitarianism on the grounds that it collapses all of our aims under one single rubric of “happiness.” On Dewey’s view, ends like liberty, fairness, community, and creativity all constitute different forms of flourishing, and they engender different kinds of subjective response. Unlike “happiness,” which connotes a hedonic experience, “satisfaction” encompasses the plurality of affective responses associated with different kinds of goods (Dewey and Tufts 1932: 301-303; Dewey 1922: 199-209). Likewise, satisfaction is not a brute affective response. It is informed by information, argumentation, and rational cognition. The satisfaction associated with a successful theory of freedom sustains endorsement upon informed rational reflection (1922: 248-264; 1920: 170).

To see how this works, consider the value of freedom, which figures as a prominent example in Dewey’s writing. What is the correct theory of freedom? Dewey observes that this question, which figures prominently in philosophical theory, emerges within a particular historical context defined by the legacy of political and economic innovations in the 18th century. In the late 18th century, Dewey notes, the value of freedom emerges as a response to the over-bearing and coercive tendencies of the monarchy. Freedom as non-interference served as a powerful alternative to the status quo at that time. However, with the rise of the free market and mass production through the 19th Century, Dewey observes that human agency was increasingly limited, not by overbearing political authorities, but by the imperatives of survival within a market system (1927: 87-110). A progressive notion of liberalism – one encompassing more substantial forms of redistribution and state interventions in the market – thus emerges as a hypothesis about how to improve human life. On this story, progressivism introduces an intervention that solves a problem (1939a).

On Dewey’s view, political life emerges from the fact that our lives as individuals intersect with the lives of others. Our practices generate substantial consequences for one another which require mutual accountability, and there are many goods that are impossible to realize unless we coordinate action through shared institutions. Democracy arises as an institutional approach for this coordination and accountability. Democracy constitutes a kind of inquiry, then, because it involves the experimental pursuit of norms and practices which will generate shared flourishing

under conditions of co-existence. In effect, democracy takes the model of normative inquiry that I sketched above and adopts it on a mass social scale. Political questions are questions about how we ought to act together. The need for inquiry arises from the durable experience of dissatisfaction with the status quo within the public (1927).

Dewey sees democracy's characteristic institutions of election, representation, and rights of political and civic participation as important but historically contingent devices for inquiry (1927: 82-85). But his account of political inquiry suggests a natural interpretation of these institutions: they provide a mechanism for the articulation of durable social frustrations – “problems” – which, in turn, initiates a process of deliberation about what sort of intervention in our practices would resolve those problems. Egalitarian political rights, fair elections, basic civil liberties, and processes of public deliberation are crucial to this process of inquiry in two fundamental respects. First, they provide channels for identifying problems with the status quo across the full spectrum of society, and for considering potential changes in response to those problems from all points of view. Democracies thus create mechanisms for sharing information and arguments in a way that protects against the tendency of centralized power to marginalize the concerns of those who are less powerful.

On its own, however, pooling information and perspectives is not enough to engender shared flourishing, and that is because the satisfaction of disparate groups is highly contingent on the particularity of their life experiences and their tendency toward mutual sympathy and identification. Thus, the second crucial feature of democracy on Dewey's view is that it sustains shared experiences and mutual identification in the social crossroads: public institutions of culture and education (1927: 143-184; 1916). For this reason, Dewey argues, democracy cannot be understood only in terms of its characteristic decision procedures and formal rights; it is “the idea of community life itself” (1927: 148). But this communitarian ambition is only attainable against the backdrop of robust opportunities for ongoing contestation: “the adjustment of interests demands that diverse interests have the opportunity to articulate themselves” (1939a: 154). Dewey seems to treat social consensus in the public sphere – “shared meanings” (1927: 153) – as a kind of regulative ideal while acknowledging the inevitability of ongoing disagreement, and the value of maintaining a plurality of ideas and practices for further inquiry (1939a: 131).

The recent history of gay rights in the United States stands out as a particularly compelling illustration of democratic epistemology as Dewey understands it.³ In 2004, Americans were opposed to same-sex marriage by a margin of 60% to 31%. In 2019, that has flipped almost perfectly, with 61% now supporting it and 31% opposing (Pew Center 2019). A brief sketch of that transition goes like this⁴: Beginning in the 1960s, gay Americans began to articulate, in

³ The next two paragraphs draw on the more developed account offered in (Fuerstein 2016).

⁴ (Faderman 2015) offers a good account of the relevant history.

particularly public and forceful ways, their deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. Social agitation led to greater awareness, which facilitated deliberation among various mini-publics, which led to a growing array of anti-discrimination measures and gradual changes in the social acceptability of anti-gay attitudes and discourse. These changes in turn facilitated yet further representation of gay experience in public life – in politics, the media, and culture – which in turn facilitated further deliberation, further policy changes, and a gradual shift towards sympathetic identification with gay Americans.

There are a few features of this episode worth drawing attention to, though in this context I can only offer a suggestive story. The first is that the validity of gay rights is discovered, not through rational deliberation about moral principles alone, but instead through an experimental social process of trying out progressively more expansive rights regimes. This is one respect in which Dewey's model of democratic inquiry differs crucially from the approach favored by deliberative democrats (Fuerstein 2016). Rational arguments in favor of equality remained unchanged since at least the 1960s; the expanding social endorsement of same-sex marriage arises from the experience of living in a world where those rights exist. That is because the public appraisal of reasons is dependent on emotional dispositions that make the relevant concerns salient (Railton 2014; Lerner et al. 2015; Damasio 1994; Hall 2007; Krause 2008), and therefore on experiences and social relationships which support shifts in affective cognition (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000; Pettigrew et al. 2011). Rational cognition about formal rights is, on the Deweyan model, necessarily informed by affective capacities that make the concerns of other social groups salient, and that guide our practical understanding of abstract principles. Democracy plays an essential role in this process, because democracy enables the articulation of grievances before the public, it enables broad social deliberation about the concerns articulated, it enables agitation for interventions in social practice, and it provides levers of formal power for realizing change.

To summarize: On Dewey's view, "correct" political outcomes are those which engender durable, reflective satisfaction across the citizenry under conditions of practice. Statements about what the government ought to do involve implicit hypotheses that acting in some way or other will yield outcomes which improve in this respect on the status quo. Democracy is critical from an epistemological point of view because the experience of citizens varies substantially across diverse social identities and practical circumstances. It is therefore necessary to consult in a wide and egalitarian manner in order to make reliable projections of the experience associated with different political actions.

4. How the Deweyan Model Differs from Epistemic Democracy, and Why it Provides a Better Response to Epistocracy

Let's return now to consider the relationship between Dewey's approach and the one favored by epistemic democrats. Dewey's model of political inquiry is epistemic in that the standard at

which it aims is independent of our presently existing attitudes and choices. It is objective in that sense. This is because correct outcomes, from Dewey's perspective, are characterized by a particular counterfactual: what a wide swath of citizens would experience as satisfactory under informed, reflective conditions of practice. But whether or not some course of action meets that standard is a matter of fact that is independent of citizens' present subjective attitudes. In this sense, the Deweyan standard of success is epistemic.

Thus, widespread opposition to same-sex marriage was partly based on brute tradition, but was also based on false factual claims. One of these, for example, is the view that the welfare of children of same-sex couples would be at risk, a claim now widely rejected by psychologists (Tasker 2005; Wainright et al. 2004). Objections to same-sex marriage were also founded on antipathies which have proven unstable in the more socially integrated world supported by gay rights. The growing provision for marital rights and various anti-discrimination measures has corresponded to rapid changes in public and cultural expressions of gay identity. In turn, there have been correspondingly large changes in attitudes towards homosexuality, particularly but not exclusively among the young (Pew Center 2019). The end of this story has not yet been written, but there is no sign that these trends will not continue.

The large gaps in public attitudes before and after the steady introduction of gay rights support a Deweyan model of objectivity about public decision-making. Pre-existing hostilities to gay rights were substantially sustained through the suppression of those very rights. From a Deweyan point of view, the continued spread and reflective stability of sympathies for gay rights under conditions of their practical implementation is evidence of their "correctness." That is, it is evidence of the continued durability of reflective satisfaction – at least into the near future – with a gay rights regime under conditions of informed practice. The validity of gay rights is something that had to be discovered through experimental interventions in social practice which reconfigured social relationships and affections, and the objectivity of political inquiry is revealed in the difference between what citizens believed about gay rights prior to their practical implementation, and their (still unfolding) experience of that implementation. No doubt, our present approach remains imperfect, and further questions, complexities, and challenges remain open to further experimentation. Improving this kind of projection, and making continual changes to our practice in response, is the essence of social inquiry as Dewey understands it.

The objectivity of Deweyan inquiry is what situates it under the rubric of epistemic democracy. At the same time, we can now appreciate how Dewey's approach differs. While the correctness of any given outcome is independent of citizens' actual attitudes, it is constituted by the subjective attitudes – what I have been calling "reflective satisfaction" – they would have under conditions of informed practice. This is the sense in which, on a Deweyan approach, the standards of success at which we aim are at the same time constituted by our own particular perspective on the world.

In this respect, one might be tempted to see a certain parallel between Dewey and moral constructivists like Habermas (1996), who conceptualize legitimate outcomes in terms of an idealized counterfactual: what would be accepted under optimal conditions of rational deliberation. While I lack space for a careful comparison here, I'll note nonetheless that Dewey's approach is distinctive in its pragmatist emphasis on the contingency and historical particularity of social problems and what counts as a successful solution to them. The problem presented by same-sex marriage is an artifact of numerous social and historical particularities: the legal and social meaning of marriage and the family, the liberal model of individual autonomy, the ideal of romantic love, and the particular history of anti-gay sentiment and oppression. The very idea of "rights" to marriage, and the strong desire to participate in them, cannot be understood apart from these contingent social institutions and the particular set of aspirations that grow out of them.

The example of "freedom," discussed a bit earlier, also illustrates this point. The proper social understanding of freedom, for Dewey, grows out of a particular set of historically conditioned problems: the harms of monarchical tyranny followed by the harms of market tyranny as their successor, all of which are connected to historically contingent technologies, institutions, practices, and desires. For this reason, there is no ultimate ideal of freedom "waiting there to be discovered"; different societies face different problems, and successful forms of freedom are responsive to different problems. In this way, the standard of correctness is never final. It continues to evolve as societies change.

On standard construals of epistemic democracy, the correctness of a given outcome is something that remains what it is independently of our own shifting subjective attitudes towards that outcome. For Dewey, however, the process of democratic inquiry – of deliberating and ultimately testing options through experience – causes transformations of our attitudes towards a given outcome which themselves bear on its correctness under a particular set of social conditions. Whereas epistemic democrats tend to emphasize the role of democracy in aggregating dispersed information, Dewey sees the epistemic benefits of democracy as much in its capacity to facilitate progressive transformations of our subjective experience. That is why he is so keen to emphasize the affective dimensions of democratic society, and the role of communal institutions in building up a core of common, sympathetic experience.

When I canvassed several approaches to epistemic democracy earlier, I noted in each case the potential for a challenge from more elitist forms of political organization. The general reason for this is that the epistemic benefits of democracy in each case are contingent on factors – such as the number, competence, and cognitive diversity of inquirers – which might be defeated by a well-designed epistocracy. Dewey's approach to political inquiry has an advantage in this respect because of the role that citizens' subjective attitudes play in constituting correct

outcomes. Correct outcomes involve improvements in human experience across a broad and heterogeneous set of social groups. Achieving those improvements depends on the kind of technical knowledge held by elites. But it also depends on the varied landscape of constraints, grievances, capacities, and aspirations distributed among citizens without relevant technical expertise.

Once again, the same-sex marriage case illustrates this point nicely: the problem of gay rights is something that arises from the distinctive frustrations and humiliations of living “in the closet.” And an adequate solution likewise depends on how successfully it improves human experience across diverse circumstances. Addressing that kind of challenge does indeed require trained lawyers, economists, sociologists, and philosophers. But there is no subset of elites who could reliably represent and attend to the full spectrum of relevant concerns, and there is no body of technical knowledge which, on its own, suffices to project human experience in this domain. Similar sorts of points could be made in the case of other landmark questions surrounding gender, race, and religion. From a Deweyan point of view, inquiry requires a continual interchange between diverse “ordinary” citizens and people with varying forms of technical expertise. This is one reason why Dewey was so insistent on the need to break down the traditional divide between intellectual and “practical” or “vocational” tracks in the educational system (1916). Democracy is the only social structure which supports that kind of interchange on a systemic level.

It is tempting to think that more technical kinds of policy questions would be different, but here Dewey insists, once again, on the foundational epistemic significance of varied human experience. To choose one example of particular significance at present, consider the case of economic policy. The United States, and much of the globe, has in recent decades experienced remarkable economic growth. Those gains have nonetheless been distributed highly unequally, a fact which bears on the present rise of global populism and broad dissatisfaction with the economic system. Given the present situation, what constitutes an epistemically “correct” way of proceeding? And why might we see democracy as crucial to identifying a better way forward?

Here is a brief and speculative Deweyan analysis: the present populist moment grows in part out of the bifurcation of the population into knowledge elites and a large working class who have relatively little shared experience or sympathies. Economic policy elites tend to focus on “growth” as an aggregate output even as questions of social relationships, power, dignity, and meaning remain side issues at best (this point is particularly true in the American context, where labor rights and power have been on the decline for decades). An understanding of the problem to be solved thus requires an understanding, not only of economic factors which contribute to growth, inequality, wage stagnation, etc., but also of the widespread sense of loss, indignity, and vulnerability that arise in the present economic transition.

An understanding of the solution likewise requires thinking through the complex interaction between economic policies and the experience of human beings vulnerable to replacement by robots, global outsourcing, and newcomers willing to perform the same work for lower pay, or under harsher working conditions. Universal basic income (UBI), for example, is currently a hot topic among PhDs thinking about the problem of displaced labor. But UBI represents that problem principally in terms of lost income; it does not address the question of how to replace the sense of purpose and (for some) community that work has often provided. Doing so requires a deeper engagement with the textured experience of workers in a globalized and automated economy. For Dewey, the point is that no room full of PhDs could, on its own, produce an adequate framing of the problem or its potential solutions. What we need, instead, is a robust and ongoing social interaction between those with high level technical knowledge and diverse non-experts “on the ground.” Epistocracy fails, not only because scientific elites are likely to be motivationally corrupted in various ways, but also because scientific elites lack the knowledge they need, on their own, to articulate and solve vital social problems. Epistocracy fails, that is, on epistemic terms.

5. Conclusion

Dewey’s approach to political epistemology models the objectivity of correctness standards favored by epistemic democrats. But it also captures the dependence of those standards on the contingent attitudes of citizens. In that way, his approach represents the normative significance of the popular will. By attaching importance to the diverse lived experience of citizens, Dewey also offers a much stronger defense of democracy’s comparative epistemic value.

Dewey’s approach is notably complex and, admittedly, the account above moves quickly past a number of important worries.⁵ While I lack the space to address those worries, I will note in closing that many of the advantages of Dewey’s approach can plausibly be retained without taking on some of his more contentious claims. Consider, in particular, Dewey’s suggestion that inquiry aims at improvements in “reflective satisfaction” across society. That claim is significant because it implies the need to consult widely with citizens about their lived experience. Still, there are other ways of explaining the value of that kind of consultation. One, for example, might be traditional utilitarianism; if the causes and conditions of happiness vary substantially across the citizenry, then that suggests the importance of recruiting a wide array of perspectives. Another approach to this topic (more appealing in my view) draws on the importance of autonomy. Suppose that autonomy is a fundamental aspect of correct political outcomes; and suppose that realizing autonomy requires attending to the widely varied aspirations, impediments, and experiences of a diverse citizenry. On that assumption, it looks doubtful that any body of elites would be positioned, on their own, to attend adequately to liberty (Fuerstein

⁵ See (Talissee 2011) for a particularly trenchant critique.

forthcoming). A widely inclusive, broadly egalitarian, model of social inquiry would probably be the right one.

These are just suggestive remarks. The point is that Dewey's understanding of political inquiry delivers an insight which extends beyond his own controversial ethics and epistemology. The insight is that democracy derives its epistemic value, not only from the general benefits of large numbers, diversity, or an open contestation of ideas, but also from the fact that politics is intrinsically oriented towards the shifting and varied texture of human life in modern, pluralistic societies. Democracy creates a social architecture unique in its capacity to represent that varied texture at the level of decision-making. This point deserves greater attention in the present conversation surrounding democracy's epistemic dimensions.

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