

# On the Legitimate Means for Political Action: John Dewey and the Spectator's View on Politics

## Abstract

As public concern over governmental inaction on climate change grows, it becomes vital to answer the Question of Legitimate Means: *what actions can political actors legitimately take to pursue their goals?* This paper argues that a particular understanding of the political realm, which I will call the *spectator's view on politics*, prevents theorists from confronting this question. Using the philosophy of Noortje Marres, I will demonstrate that the spectator's view posits a transcendental goal to politics, subordinating any means to the realization of this goal. I will then contrast this view with the political philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey's approach not only makes it possible to answer the Question of Legitimate Means, but highlights its importance to any democratic project.

**Keywords:** democratic theory – political activism – political means – John Dewey – spectator's view on politics

## 1. Introduction

In a world where more and more people are convinced that governments and institutions are not doing enough to avert a coming climate catastrophe, people are contemplating different ways of taking matters into their own hands. Should we start blowing up pipelines? Can it be legitimate to commit terrorist violence in the name of climate justice? Should we start planning an authoritarian coup? Or organize global climate strikes? All these questions ultimately stem from one overarching question, which I will call the Question of Legitimate Means: *what actions can political actors legitimately take to pursue their goals?* In our current, alarmingly non-ideal situation, it becomes increasingly important for political philosophy to find an answer to this question.

In this paper, I argue that a particular understanding of the political realm, which I will call the *spectator's view on politics*, is preventing many political theorists from adequately confronting the Question of Legitimate Means. A spectator's view on politics holds, either implicitly or explicitly, that there exists a transcendental goal to politics, and that this goal can be objectively ascertained from a point of view that examines the political realm from the outside looking in. I contend that this view on politics leads to political theories that neglect the Question of Legitimate Means because this view is solely outcome-oriented. I will explain this by focusing on a particular example of a theory starting from this understanding of politics, namely the theory of democracy defended by the Dutch sociologist Noortje Marres. Marres first developed her issue-based theory of democracy in her doctoral thesis *No Issue, No Public*, for which Bruno Latour served as a co-supervisor.<sup>1</sup> She later expanded her political theory in her book *Material Participation* and other publications.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Noortje Marres, "No Issue, No Public: Democratic Deficits after the Displacement of Politics," PhD diss. (University of Amsterdam, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Noortje Marres, *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment, and Everyday Publics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); "Issues Spark a Public into Being: A Key but Often Forgotten Point of the Lippmann-Dewey Debate," in *Making Things Public*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 208–217; "How to Turn Politics Around: Things, the Earth, Ecology," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 48, no. 5 (2023): 973–998.

I have chosen to focus on Marres for three reasons. The first reason is that the interactions between Marres and Latour have had a distinct impact on Latour's thinking on politics.<sup>3</sup> Thus, analyzing Marres' view of political philosophy could provide the foundations for a more general critique of Latour's political philosophy and post-human environmental theorists influenced by him. Second, Marres' theory exhibits a tension between two types of the spectator's view on politics, allowing me to show how both types neglect the Question of Legitimate Means in their own way. Lastly, Marres uses the philosophy of John Dewey as the basis for her theory of democracy. While Marres tries very hard to reconcile Dewey's theory with her spectator's view on politics, Dewey's philosophical project starts from an alternative view of the political realm. I argue that this alternative, pragmatist view of political philosophy is better equipped to answer the Question of Legitimate Means. Examining Marres' interpretation of Dewey will allow me to highlight the advantages of Dewey's pragmatist view over the spectator's view on politics.

In the next section, I will discuss Marres' political theory and show how Dewey's political philosophy inspired Marres to assert that democracy is about solving issues. In section 3, I will argue that Marres subscribes to a spectator's view on politics and that this leads her to neglect the Question of Legitimate Means. In the fourth section, I will demonstrate that Dewey's theory of democracy starts from a different understanding of politics. Instead of finding the transcendental goal of politics, Dewey holds that philosophy must provide a functional account of the political, independent of the content of one's political goals. Only after describing how the political realm works, can we start looking for ways in which democratic ideals can be fitted into this account. By following Dewey's approach to political philosophy, I will outline a method of answering the Question of Legitimate Means that might provide us with democratic strategies for dealing with our current ecological situation.

## 2. Marres' Interpretation of Dewey

The political philosophy of John Dewey has often been read as a precursor to deliberative theories of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is easy to interpret Dewey's emphasis on a lively public sphere and the importance of improving the methods of debate as anticipating the philosophies of Habermas and Rawls.<sup>5</sup> However, Dutch sociologist Noortje Marres claims that reading Dewey as a deliberative democrat does not do justice to his profound reconceptualization of democracy.<sup>6</sup> Marres argues that Dewey was not interested in sketching an ideal democratic institutional arrangement. Dewey was interested in fundamentally rethinking what we mean by democracy. To understand why Dewey would engage in such an undertaking, Marres situates his political theory in its broader intellectual context.

As is well known, *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey's most comprehensive work of political philosophy, must be read as a reply to a contemporary of Dewey, the famous journalist Walter Lippmann. In the early 1920s, Lippmann published *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*, two books that had a

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<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (London: Harvard University Press, 2018), 337; *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 117.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, James Bohman, "Realizing Deliberative Democracy as a Mode of Inquiry: Pragmatism, Social Facts, and Normative Theory," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2004): 23–43; Matthew Festenstein, "Inquiry as Critique: On the Legacy of Deweyan Pragmatism for Political Theory," *Political Studies* 49, no. 4 (2001): 730–748; Jason Kosnoski, "Artful Discussion: John Dewey's Classroom as a Model of Deliberative Association," *Political Theory* 33, no. 5 (2005): 654–677; Melvin L. Rogers, "Dewey and His Vision of Democracy," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (2010): 69–91; Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2016), 190, 225.

<sup>6</sup> Marres, "No Issue, No Public," 64.

deep impact on Dewey.<sup>7</sup> In these texts, Lippmann argued that democratic theory was no longer equipped to deal with modern, complex societies. In democratic theory, government should reflect the will of the people. For this ideal to make sense, average citizens must have relevant opinions about political affairs. According to Lippmann, however, society had become so complex that it could no longer be assumed, let alone expected, that citizens had any relevant opinions on the political problems affecting them.<sup>8</sup> The public does not exist of 'omnicompetent' citizens, people with perfect knowledge about such divergent topics as trade tariffs, transportation infrastructure, social security, or environmental policy. This led Lippmann to conclude that we should change our idea of democratic legitimacy and public involvement. Lawmakers and government officials should not try to represent the nonexistent will of the people, but seek the help of experts in crafting policy.<sup>9</sup> The public should only be involved if there is an affair that lawmakers are not able to solve on their own. Through elections, members of the public should pledge allegiance to the specific set of technocrats whom they believe will work to durably solve the affair:

Public opinion, in this theory, is a reserve of force brought into action during a crisis of public affairs. Though it is itself an irrational force, under stable institutions, sound leadership and decent training the power of public opinion might be placed at the disposal of those who stood for workable law as against brute assertion.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to Lippmann, Dewey was not prepared to give up the idea of public participation as foundational to democratic politics. It was clear to Dewey, however, that if he wanted to respond to Lippmann's critique and still maintain the importance of public involvement in politics, he had to fundamentally rethink his conception of democracy. It is this challenge that Dewey took up in *The Public and Its Problems*.<sup>11</sup>

Lippmann's critique forced Dewey to take a radically different approach to constructing his theory of democracy.<sup>12</sup> Instead of looking for an ideal institutional arrangement to facilitate the decision-making processes of some pre-politically affiliated people, Dewey starts from institutional failure as offering opportunities for public participation.<sup>13</sup> When problems become too complex for current institutions to adequately handle, the specific point of failure becomes a public affair, or, as Marres describes it, an 'issue'.<sup>14</sup> For example, a state might have an institutionalized system of waste disposal. If this system is incapable of stopping petrochemical companies from dumping their waste in nearby woods, this can become an issue. The moment an affair becomes an issue it brings a 'public' into being. A public is a collection of actors that have become 'caught up' in the affair in a specific ambivalent way.<sup>15</sup> Members of the public are affected by an issue, but are not directly involved, meaning they do not have the material or epistemological resources to fully grasp and solve the problem in the way an institution would. In the case of the petrochemical company, people in the vicinity of the dumping site might start to notice a decline in biodiversity, an intrusive smell, or an increased incidence of acid rain. While they might not know how to connect these phenomena to the actions of the petrochemical companies nor have the

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Blacksburg: Wilder Publications, 1922); *The Phantom Public* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, [1925] 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Marres, "No Issue, No Public," 34.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Marres, *Material Participation*, 49-51.

resources to mount an expensive legal case against them, they are nonetheless members of a public of actors affected by this issue.

Two further characteristics set Dewey's public apart from the people in traditional democratic theories. First, the public is often a 'community of strangers', as it consists of actors that are only connected through their mutual affectedness by an issue. Members of the public are not necessarily bound by any pre-political affinity, they need not share a culture or familial bond.<sup>16</sup> This once again becomes clear with the issue of the fly-tipping petrochemical companies. While the stench of their waste might affect people near the dumping site, the consequences reach much further. When the garbage decomposes, toxic chemicals will infiltrate nearby waterways, affecting the farmers downstream using the river to water their crops. Further still, the toxins might run out to sea, where they can affect all sorts of aquatic life. If the toxins disrupt nautical ecosystems, this can have a disastrous impact on communities on the other side of the globe that rely on fishing for their livelihood. This disorganized group of neighbors, farmers, and fishermen are all part of the same public called into being by the issue of improper waste disposal. Furthermore, because the public is a loose assembly of persons affected by a specific *problem*, it cannot be assumed to easily agree on a solution to their problem. A public groups together actors with wildly conflicting interests, without a shared lifestyle or commitment to fall back on. In the anti-fly-tipping public, the fishing communities might, for example, call for a ban on all chemicals that could impact fish populations in their part of the world. On the other hand, the farmers might only be interested in stopping the kinds of pollution upstream that make the river water unusable specifically for them, as they might also be contaminating the river with their use of chemical pesticides. So not only is the public a ragtag bunch of barely related actors, but they are also *antagonistically* implicated in the issue that they are affected by.<sup>17</sup> When a problem becomes too complex for an institution to handle, a public sparks into being. This public, a group of antagonistically implicated strangers, must look for a way to settle the issue. For Marres, the existence of an unsettled issue is the starting point for democratic politics. The public has to displace the issue away from the institution that is currently incapable of handling it and must try to identify an institution that *could* solve the issue at hand.<sup>18</sup>

At this point, Marres explicitly diverges from Dewey's writing in *The Public and Its Problems*. She argues that democratic theory cannot be concerned with determining the settlement of an issue by appealing to ideal theories about the legitimacy of decision-making procedures. She argues that the institutional procedures that will adequately take care of an issue cannot be determined beforehand, as this would deny the complex, radically perplexing nature of the issue.<sup>19</sup> Nor can democratic theory refer to some 'meta-ideal', to moral values that an issue settlement should respect or establish, because the meaning of moral concepts like 'sovereignty', 'self-determination', and 'freedom' are themselves continuously contested during issue formation. They are mobilized only by parts of the public in favor of their preferred framing of the issue at hand, meaning these concepts cannot function as endpoints with objective content that should be worked towards.<sup>20</sup> For Marres, democratic theory should not be concerned with determining the solution of an issue. Instead, democratic theory should focus on how issues are delivered to a capable addressee.<sup>21</sup>

Marres distinguishes between two ways in which an issue can be displaced away from the institution currently mishandling it. Either the issue is *opened up* for public involvement, or it is *closed off*. A settlement of an issue can only be democratically justified if the issue has gone through a series of

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<sup>16</sup> Marres, "Issues Spark a Public into Being" 214-215; "No Issue, No Public," 51.

<sup>17</sup> Marres, "Issues Spark a Public into Being" 215; "No Issue, No Public," 59.

<sup>18</sup> Marres, "No Issue, No Public" 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, 135.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, 147-148

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

displacements that open up the issue for public involvement. For Marres, the process of progressively involving more people, or the ‘public-isation’ of the issue, is the necessary condition for democratic politics.<sup>22</sup> This public-isation is important for Marres because it is a requirement for making the *adequate* settlement of an issue possible. Only when an antagonistically implicated public coalesces around an issue, can issues appear as what they really *are*: ‘states of affairs in which actors’ mutually exclusive attachments are intertwined, thereby putting one another at risk.’<sup>23</sup> Returning to the example of the anti-fly-tipping public, public-isation will make clear that, aside from the neighbors, the fishermen and farmers are also implicated in the issue but have drastically incompatible interests. Opening up the issue for public involvement also provides opportunities for actors like the fishermen to redefine and contest the definition of the issue, which otherwise might not have taken the impact of toxic waste on their livelihood into account. According to Marres, this public contestation eventually brings about a *more accurate* understanding of the issue:

Only when such issues are opened up for involvement by institutional outsiders, can adequate issue definitions be developed, required courses of action determined, and an addressee identified that is capable of addressing the affair.<sup>24</sup>

When, in contrast, institutions close off issues from public involvement, this leads to a democratic deficit. According to Marres, such an issue displacement essentially short-circuits the debate on the different attachments involved in the issue. This leads to an inaccurate understanding of the issue, meaning it can never *really* be solved.<sup>25</sup>

Marres argues that democracy is not valuable because it brings about a *just* situation. Democracy is *epistemologically* valuable; it makes possible the *correct* appreciation of an issue. It is only after the irreconcilability of different actors’ interests has been brought out in the open, that the issue can be delivered to an institution capable of solving it.<sup>26</sup> For Marres, Dewey’s theory of democracy bases the legitimacy of a solution to an issue on whether the issue took a ‘detour via the public’.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. The Spectator’s View on Politics and Its Problems

Marres’ account of democracy as the public-isation of issues is a radical departure from deliberative theories focusing on the ethical ideals involved in institutional processes. Such deliberative theories, Marres concludes, are incapable of confronting the complexity of our current technological society. By embracing Dewey, though, she admirably resists the calls for complete technocratic government that have persisted throughout modernity.<sup>28</sup> For Marres, the increasing competence of experts does not endanger the democratic ideal of public involvement. Public-isation remains an *epistemological* necessity. Issues will always have to be displaced by publics, to guarantee the correct way of understanding them; as networks of actors whose attachments are often incompatible. Despite her atypical approach to democracy, however, I will argue in this section that Marres remains wedded to a traditional spectator’s view on politics in her interpretation of Dewey. I will first explain what this view on politics entails and

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-145.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> For examples of such technocratic aspirations, see James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

show how Marres straddles the line between two different kinds of spectator's views on politics. After that, I will clarify how both types of spectator's view tend to neglect the Question of Legitimate Means in their own way. In the next section, I will go on to show, against Marres, that the radicality of Dewey's position lies precisely in the fact that he manages to break away from the spectator's view on politics. Furthermore, I will argue that Dewey's alternative view on politics demonstrates that the Question of Legitimate Means is central to any worthwhile democratic project in political philosophy.

Marres remains committed to what I would like to call a *spectator's view on politics*.<sup>29</sup> With a spectator's view on politics, I mean a way of understanding politics that assumes that there is a transcendental goal to politics and that the point of political philosophy is to determine this goal. For a spectator's view on politics, the method to ascertain this goal is to, metaphorically, step outside of politics. The political philosopher must become a *spectator* of the political realm, to get an overview of the whole endeavor and discover its given inner workings. It is by uncovering the goal of politics, that the political philosopher acquires the skill to differentiate between right and wrong in politics. This skill not only pertains to discerning right and wrong institutional structures or policy decisions. Once the political philosopher has knowledge of the transcendental goal of politics, they can distinguish between right and wrong ways of *doing politics*. If politics has a goal, the perversion of that goal becomes a possibility. It becomes possible to determine what politics should or should not be, sometimes to the point that certain actions within the political realm can no longer be considered political at all.

Marres' issue-based theory of democracy provides an interesting example of a spectator's view because she combines two different, incompatible types of the spectator's view on politics. To start, Marres advances a 'moral-type' spectator's view on politics, believing that there exists a transcendental goal with determinate content that normatively structures the political realm. In her theory, this transcendental goal of politics is solving issues. This goal normatively structures the political realm; it privileges the action of public-isation because this leads to the *correct* solution to an issue. Only issues that are opened up for public involvement can hope to be solved correctly, because this is the only way of understanding issues as they really are, as a contingent tangle of incompatible attachments. Likewise, Marres' understanding of the goal of politics allows for the possibility of the perversion of politics. As mentioned, issues that are displaced away from public participation give rise to a democratic deficit. Because Marres has redefined democracy as the public-isation of issues, however, a democratic deficit is not an infringement against the ideals of democracy, but a perversion of the goal of politics itself. If a democratic deficit occurs, an issue can never really be settled:

The democratic deficit must be understood as a particular issue displacement, one that produces a disintegration of democratic spaces to the point that the definition and settlement of public affairs is made impossible.<sup>30</sup>

One could argue, as Graham Harman has, that Marres rejects the spectator's view on politics because she denies that there exist any transcendental standards for evaluating the outcome of the process of issue formation.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Marres asserts that democratic issue-solving is an open-ended process, whose settlement cannot be predicted beforehand. When a public comes into being and tries to task an institution with solving an issue, this is characterized as 'a risky, uncertain undertaking, the failure of which is a real possibility'.<sup>32</sup> Because it is fundamentally impossible to fully grasp an issue, she argues that it is

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<sup>29</sup> I have based my characterization of the spectator's view on "The Promise of Politics" (Arendt 2005) and "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" (Dewey 1993, 1-9).

<sup>30</sup> Marres, "No Issue, No Public," 145.

<sup>31</sup> Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*, (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 163.

<sup>32</sup> Marres "No Issue, No Public," 61-62.

pointless to attempt to use ethical ideals to confirm the right- or wrongness of a particular issue settlement. However, the refusal to incorporate ethical concerns to construct her theory of democracy does not necessarily mean Marres evades the spectator's view on politics. In Marres' case, this just means that her theory of democracy is also based on a different type of spectator's view, namely a 'power-type' view on politics.<sup>33</sup>

A power-type view on politics denounces the idea that political action can be judged as transcendently good or bad because it corresponds to an ethical ideal with determinate content, like 'justice' or 'democratic legitimacy'. Instead, the power-type view holds that politics is nothing more than a process of unmediated struggle for the power to impose one's particular views or desires on society as a whole.<sup>34</sup> For the power politician, there are no ethical ideals that can limit political action from outside the political realm. But while this view denies the existence of ethical ideals that structure political action, power politics still accedes that there is a goal to politics, namely imposing your own view on the entire society. The goal of politics is to defeat your opponents, not because they are ethically despicable, but because this is just what politics *is*.<sup>35</sup>

In Marres' theory, the requirement of public-isation discards some issue displacements as illegitimate (or more accurately, as non-political), because they make the pursuit of the goal of politics impossible. After this initial requirement has been met, however, Marres leaves no way to determine the legitimate actions members of the public can take to settle an issue. After a public has coalesced around an issue, it appears to be up to the actors within the public to get their preferred solution to a capable institution that will settle the issue to their advantage.<sup>36</sup> As a consequence, any settlement of an issue is determined by a struggle in which the most powerful actor prevails. In our contemporary political landscape, this means wealthy actors are more likely to solve an issue in accordance with their interests. We only need to look at the recent past to discover examples of actors using their financial power to weigh on issue definition,<sup>37</sup> discredit their opponents<sup>38</sup> and use their privileged access to institutions to settle an issue<sup>39</sup>. In debates surrounding the dangers of smoking, the effects of acid rain, and, of course, anthropogenic climate change, corporations spent substantial sums of money to shift attention away from issue definitions that would implicate them as being primarily responsible.<sup>40</sup> In all these examples the public-isation of the issue is not enough to counteract the massive power imbalances that exist between members of the public. Moreover, public-isation is often a vital part of the strategy of wealthy actors. In sowing distrust for scientific studies and institutions, they create the public inertia necessary for their proposed issue settlements to be accepted by institutions. Because Marres does not describe how such

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<sup>33</sup> Even though I believe Harman is wrong in thinking Marres escapes the power-type view on politics, I do think his characterization of power politics (2015, 3-4) remains very useful.

<sup>34</sup> Harman, *Reassembling the Political*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> In a spectator theory of power politics, there also exists the possibility of perverting the goal of politics. For example, Schmitt (e.g. 2007, 69-79) spends quite some time explaining that Liberals are perverting politics. These Liberals try to dissolve the political realm into the ethical and economic realms, refusing to see politics for what it is in essence: an existential struggle between groups of people.

<sup>36</sup> In Marres' discussion (2005b, 88-91) of the role of special interests in publics, the power imbalance between actors is conspicuously absent.

<sup>37</sup> Charles H. Cho, Martin L. Martens, Hakkyun Kim, and Michelle Rodrigue, "Astroturfing Global Warming: It Isn't Always Greener on the Other Side of the Fence," *Journal of Business Ethics* 104, no. 4 (2011): 571-587.

<sup>38</sup> Edward T. Walker and Andrew N. Le, "Poisoning the Well: How Astroturfing Harms Trust in Advocacy Organizations," *Social Currents* 10, no. 2 (2023): 184-202.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1994)

<sup>40</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

settlements would be illegitimate, she at least implicitly embraces a form of power politics once the requirement of public-isation has been fulfilled.

Marres' theory of democracy thus brings together two different types of spectator's views in a confounding mix. On the one hand, she endorses a moral-type view, positing an ideal that must be fulfilled for politics to be considered democratic (public-isation). On the other hand, this requirement is not enough to regulate a complete process of issue settlement. Marres therefore willingly or unwillingly ends up embracing power politics, acceding that any settlement of an issue beyond its public-isation will be the result of an unregulated struggle between members of the public. Both views agree that there is some transcendental goal to politics, however, and that there are right and wrong ways of doing politics.

Whichever way Marres goes, she remains within the framework of the spectator's view on politics. But what is wrong with such an approach to politics? In my view, the fundamental problem with spectator's views on politics is that they tend to ignore the Question of Legitimate Means. We can see this by looking at the two types of spectator's view I discerned in Marres' theory. Both the moral-type and the power-type view on politics neglect the Question of Legitimate Means in their own way. For the power-type view, it is obvious why questions about legitimate means are unimportant. If the goal of politics is nothing more than to become the victor of a power struggle, everything is allowed. When there are no ethical constraints pertaining to the methods of achieving one's goal, the only evaluative criterion is effectiveness. As an example, whether an eco-fascist is justified in committing a terrorist attack on a mosque, depends on how effective his actions are in achieving dominance over others. Of course, there are not many philosophers who subscribe to such a bare-bones theory of brutal power struggle. Carl Schmitt might be the only one who has come close to developing such a theory when he writes that political concepts 'receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing.'<sup>41</sup> According to Schmitt, the political realm consists of enemies that are involved in existential conflicts that 'can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party'.<sup>42</sup> Political actors must therefore judge for themselves how to deal with their existential enemies, not based on any moral consideration, but based on the effectiveness of proposed courses of action.<sup>43</sup>

The moral-type spectator's views on politics, positing the pursuit of certain transcendental ethical ideals as the goal of politics, also tend to neglect the Question of Legitimate Means. Once a theorist has proven the existence of a true transcendental goal to politics, the means of achieving this goal become less important. In the case of philosophers like Rawls and Miller, this has led to a deafening silence when it comes to discussion on what means can be used to establish their transcendental ideals of a just society.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, other philosophers holding a moral-type spectator's view on politics have *explicitly*

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<sup>41</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Georg Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Philosophers that have recently drawn on Schmitt's work, like Chantal Mouffe (2005), have taken great care to limit his political antagonism, placing it within a broader framework based on certain ethical ideals meant to guide the struggle of politics. In doing so, however, it becomes unclear what we should do to establish the framework needed to transform political antagonism into agonism (Jackson 2018, ch.5). Mouffe essentially fits Schmitt's philosophy into a moral-type view of political philosophy, meaning she still neglects the Question of Legitimate Means, just in a different way.

<sup>44</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979); David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). This silence can also take the form of discussions which are so abstract as to become inapplicable to real life circumstances. For example, Rawls (1979, 351) limits the scope of his discussion of the legitimacy of civil disobedience to societies that basically are already 'just'. Or see Pasternak's (2018) analysis of political rioting. She states that rioting can only be justified if it is proportional and has a reasonable chance of success. However, the content of the terms 'proportionality' and 'reasonableness' is precisely what is at stake in the Question of Legitimate Means.



discarded the Question of Legitimate Means.<sup>45</sup> For them, any action that brings us closer to establishing the transcendental goal of politics is fair game. It is up to those individuals who have grasped the objective goal of politics to do whatever it takes to acquire their rightful positions of power and establish a just society. Andreas Malm, for example, explicitly advocates for ‘ecological Leninism’.<sup>46</sup> In the spirit of Lenin, Malm argues that in our current crisis, ‘the objective logic of the situation’ leaves us no choice but to take extraordinary measures to achieve climate justice.<sup>47</sup> What this climate justice exactly entails, seems rather clear to him:

[E]verybody knows what measures need to be taken; everybody knows, on some level of their consciousness, that flights inside continents should stay grounded, private jets banned, cruise ships safely dismantled, turbines and panels mass produced – there’s a whole auto industry waiting for the order – subways and bus lines expanded, high-speed rail lines built, old houses refurbished and all the magnificent rest.<sup>48</sup>

For Malm, the goal of politics is achieving climate justice. As a supposedly neutral spectator, he has looked at the facts and determined that this means dismantling cruise ships and mandating veganism.<sup>49</sup> As Malm sees it, the only way to implement such drastic measures, is by seizing the state and using its extraordinary sovereign powers to enforce these measures.<sup>50</sup> Undemocratic uses of the sovereign state’s discrete powers are not a problem in itself. The problem today is that the goal currently pursued by the state, upholding the system of global capitalism, is unjust. In line with moral-type spectator’s views on politics like those of Malm, we would have to argue that an eco-fascist terrorist is wrong because his conception of the ideal end goal of politics is wrong. Whether the eco-fascist was justified in pursuing his goal *by committing terrorist violence*, is a question neglected by both power-type and moral-type spectator’s views on politics.

So, how can we construct a democratic theory that *can* confront the Question of Legitimate Means? In the next section, I will circle back to Marres’ inspiration for her theory of democracy: the political philosophy of John Dewey. I will argue that Dewey had a view of political philosophy that was radically different from the spectator’s view. Because of this, he was not only able to confront the Question of Legitimate Means; he also placed this question front and center in a comprehensive theory of democracy.

#### 4. Dewey’s Pragmatist Theory of Democracy

It is ironic that Marres used John Dewey to construct her theory of democracy, claiming that democracy should be about solving issues. As one of the founders of American pragmatism, Dewey spent a substantial amount of his career agitating specifically against those types of theory claiming the discovery of

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<sup>45</sup> Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2020); Ross Mittiga, “Political Legitimacy, Authoritarianism, and Climate Change,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 3 (2022): 998–1011. See also Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2020).

<sup>46</sup> Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*, 100.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 89. Note that I am not saying that these are not commendable policies. I am arguing specifically against the way Malm uses a spectator’s view on politics to justify these policies.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

transcendental, absolute truths as the basis of philosophical knowledge.<sup>51</sup> Dewey blames philosophers, from classical Greece to modernity, for understanding philosophy as having an 'intimate concern with supreme, ultimate, true reality.'<sup>52</sup> This obsession has led these philosophers to adopt very peculiar methods of inquiry, trying to parse these absolute realities from mere appearance. Because this distinction is not a given in everyday life, as we are easily deceived by dreams, lies, and stories, philosophers can only construct a theory of absolute reality by trying to adopt a perspective that transcends everyday life. For philosophers in this influential tradition, '[k]nowing is viewing from outside.'<sup>53</sup> According to Dewey, this method of doing philosophy does not work. Philosophers of absolute reality, he writes, remain dedicated to a 'metaphysics of feudalism'.<sup>54</sup> Such theories assume the world is ordered according to fixed values, resulting in an eternal hierarchy of Being. Dewey believed that such assumptions about the world inevitably justify hierarchical systems of authority, where some are categorically *right* to rule over others. In contrast, Dewey was permeated by a pragmatist view of reality. Knowledge to Dewey was never something transcendentally or eternally true. For him, it was impossible to take on a viewpoint outside of reality. Persons are confronted with problems in their everyday lives. Philosophy, just like other forms of intelligence, finds ways of dealing with these problems, to increase human flourishing.<sup>55</sup> For theories of philosophy, the primary concern is not some correspondence to an absolute Truth, but whether it reliably permits us to live our lives in common.<sup>56</sup>

Dewey's pragmatist dismissal of any type of 'spectator notion of knowledge'<sup>57</sup> might explain why *The Public and Its Problems* seems to actively resist Marres' interpretation in certain places. Marres follows Matthew Festenstein's analysis of *The Public and Its Problems* as presenting two diverging accounts of democracy. Festenstein reads the first part of Dewey's book as describing the 'political machinery of democracy'.<sup>58</sup> In the second part of the text, Dewey develops an additional ethical account of democracy. Marres believes these two accounts to be incompatible and opts to discard Dewey's second account of democracy as 'community life itself'.<sup>59</sup> For her, the first part of *The Public and Its Problems* already amounts to a comprehensive account of democratic politics, where publics attempt to find appropriate institutional structures to solve issues. There is no real reason to rely on ethical ideals of community life to guide this process, as the process of public-isation itself *is* democratic. For Marres, the fact that Dewey only starts speaking about democratic states in the second part of his book becomes a puzzling inconsistency.<sup>60</sup>

That Dewey mentions the term democracy only halfway through is not an inconsistency, though. In the first chapter of *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey puts forth the 'hypothesis' that issues bring publics into being, which eventually form states and governments to systematically take care of these issues.<sup>61</sup> Nowhere does Dewey assert that this hypothesis only applies to democratic politics, however. When Dewey writes about officers of the public, he writes about presidents and politicians, but also about religious figures, military leaders, or village elders.<sup>62</sup> As Dewey makes clear in a footnote in his second

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<sup>51</sup> Edward C. Moore, *American Pragmatism: Peirce, James, Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 193.

<sup>52</sup> John Dewey, *The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> Moore, *American Pragmatism*, 219.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>57</sup> Dewey, *Political Writings*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Festenstein quoted in Marres, "No Issue, No Public," 39-40.

<sup>59</sup> Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 175.

<sup>60</sup> Marres "No Issue, No Public," 56.

<sup>61</sup> Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 84.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, 118-119.

chapter, his account of publics coalescing around issues 'is meant to hold good generally'.<sup>63</sup> When Dewey writes about publics organizing themselves to confront issues in the first part of *The Public and Its Problems*, he is not merely describing the machinery of *democratic* politics, as Festenstein and Marres believe. He is developing a theory about the functioning of *the political*. Dewey sees publics and issues not only as necessary concepts for thinking about democracy but as the basic components of political action in general.<sup>64</sup>

Following this interpretation, we see a rift emerge between Dewey's and Marres' views on political philosophy. Marres tries to force publics and issues into her spectator's view about right and wrong ways of doing politics. Dewey gives a *functional* description of the political realm; a description of how political change comes about regardless of any ethical ideas about right and wrong. Dewey's description can be used as a roadmap for enacting democratic change, but it can just as easily be used to theorize political change brought about by eco-fascist ideologies. In Dewey's eyes, to solve a perceived issue means both the committed democrat and the eco-fascist will have to follow the same scheme; they will have to make people aware of a certain issue to bring a public into being, they will have to organize this public and convince its members to act in common, and they will have to put pressure on existing institutions to solve the issue. But Dewey would not say the actions of the democrat and the eco-fascist are both legitimate. To understand the difference between the two, the second part of *The Public and Its Problems* is of vital importance. Reading this second part closely, it becomes clear that the fundamental difference for Dewey lies in the means the democrat and the eco-fascist employ in pursuing political change. These different means are situated at different points in the process of issue formation.

First, the democrat and eco-fascist conceptualize issues in very different ways. For Dewey, individuals necessarily perceive an issue as existing in a certain context. This context includes assumptions about the world we live in, the entities we share it with, and the relations between these entities. When a problem is understood as an issue, a situation that will need a concerted effort by a group of individuals to resolve, the context in which the issue is situated impacts the perception of possible solutions, as well as the perception of people that must be included in the process of solving the issue.<sup>65</sup> In the case of the eco-fascist, perceiving the world as divided between monolithic races of people involved in an existential struggle has obvious consequences for how issues and their possible solutions are conceptualized. If one places some superior white race over and against other, inferior races of people, certain aggressive solutions to climate change come to salience over others. In addition, the eco-fascist will exclude members of the perceived inferior races from consideration when trying to organize a public to address the issue of climate change. In contrast, Dewey demonstrates that democrats must adopt a very different conception of social reality when thinking about issues. In the eyes of the democrat, social life requires individuals to live together as part of many different groups, which have the potential to complement each other to contribute to the individual flourishing of all humans.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, the democrat must believe all individuals can act in a private or a public capacity. Individuals can either act to fulfill private interests or act to facilitate social life in general.<sup>67</sup> To act in a public capacity when solving an issue, one must imagine a public, a set of individuals that is *affected* by the issue because it obstructs their social functioning. Because the democrat does not accept the existence of an *a priori* correct solution to an issue, they must understand that it is necessary to include all members of the affected public in the process of addressing the issue at hand. When members of the public have a way of influencing the officers that are selected to solve an issue, Dewey believes, this provides the best guarantee that an issue

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>64</sup> Eric MacGilvray, "Dewey's Public," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (2010): 31–47.

<sup>65</sup> Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 81-2, 116-117.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-76, 211-213.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

is solved so that it contributes to achieving the ideal of social life as harmony between interrelated social groups.<sup>68</sup> Of course, a specific kind of awareness of an issue does not solve it. The democrat and the eco-fascist must convince other people of their specific interpretation of an issue. In the words of Michael Warner, growing a public will always involve ‘poetic world making’.<sup>69</sup> In convincing people of a certain issue, they must also be convinced of the context it is situated in.

At some point in the growth of a conscious public, organizational structures will have to be set up to make a concerted effort to deal with the issue possible. As Dewey writes, the public will have to charge representatives with certain duties and powers, to work toward resolving the issue.<sup>70</sup> Here the conceptualization of the issue again gives rise to differences in the types of structure the democrat or the eco-fascist perceive as legitimate ways of selecting such representatives and deciding the actions they must pursue. For the eco-fascist, there is an objective end goal to politics. The role of representatives is therefore best left to professionals, who have the best understanding of this goal and have the power to coerce others to work towards this goal. In the worldview of the eco-fascist, there is no need for democratic procedures to select the representatives of the public. In the democratic understanding of the world, the representatives of the public must be selected through a system that increases the chances that these representatives will act according to the public interest.<sup>71</sup> Dewey explains that such a system would probably require routine consultation between officials and members of the public and a coherent system of law.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, how the public interest is to be established is also bounded by specific requirements. Again, democratic deliberation cannot presuppose that there will ever be an objectively correct description of the public interest. Because of this, Dewey stresses the importance of ‘free and full intercommunication’ between members of the public in ‘face-to-face communities’ to come to an agreement about their common interests.<sup>73</sup> These debates must be informed by experts, as they can provide the public with information about the causes of issues that affect them.<sup>74</sup> However, the role Dewey awards to the expert is different from the role that is sometimes bestowed upon them by theorists subscribing to a spectator’s view on politics.<sup>75</sup> Lippmann and Malm, for example, see the expert as having unmediated access to the public interest, relegating the need for democratic discussion. For Dewey, experts provide input, but it is up to the public to deliberate on what to do with it.

Once an organizational structure has been set up by members of the public, it can attempt to solve the perceived issue, by addressing institutions and other organized members of the public. Again, a difference in the means of doing this becomes apparent. As multiple horrendous examples attest, eco-fascists see no qualms in using deadly violence to coerce institutions into implementing their preferred solution.<sup>76</sup> A democratic organization cannot follow this line of action. The democratic conceptualization of an issue means that all affected persons must be granted consideration and be included in the process of formulating a solution to the issue. In anticipation of an ideal society in which all members could one day flourish together, the democrat cannot use murderous violence, as this would negate the possibility

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<sup>68</sup> Joshua Forstenzer, *Deweyan Experimentalism and the Problem of Method in Political Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2021), chapter 6.

<sup>69</sup> Micheal Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 114.

<sup>70</sup> Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 78, 82, 84.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 100, 229.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 227-229.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>75</sup> Forstenzer, *Deweyan Experimentalism*, 223.

<sup>76</sup> Joel Achenbach, “Two Mass Killings a World Apart Share a Common Theme: ‘Ecofascism,’” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2019; Sarah Manavis, “Eco-Fascism: The Ideology Marrying Environmentalism and White Supremacy Thriving Online,” *New Statesman*, September 21, 2018.

of flourishing for those that are murdered.<sup>77</sup> In Dewey's straightforward formulation: 'Democratic ends demand democratic means for their realization'.<sup>78</sup> However, Dewey did not naively believe that all institutions and members of the public would just come together out of some natural inclination toward cooperation. Most people, and especially those in positions of power, have a private interest in improving or maintaining their societal position at the cost of others.<sup>79</sup> In situations of social inequality and entrenched forms of domination, Dewey called deliberation and discussion 'weak reeds to depend upon' for enacting social change.<sup>80</sup> Dewey believed that democratically organized publics would in such cases have to rely on coercive actions to get institutions to accept their demands, as long as these actions do not irreparably destroy the social bonds necessary for human flourishing. In a Deweyan theory of democracy, strikes, sabotage, and occupations are not categorically inadmissible means for organized publics to force institutions and other organized publics to negotiate with them on possible solutions to their issues.<sup>81</sup> Which actions are permissible for democratic organizations would have to be the result of careful, thorough discussion by members of the organized public.

When carefully reading *The Public and Its Problems*, it becomes clear that, for Dewey, the Question of Legitimate Means becomes *the* vital question for any political philosopher. He does not point to any transcendental goal to politics but provides a functional description of the mechanisms of political change. Thus, to differentiate his normative theory of democracy from others, he must focus on how to use his functional scheme of politics in a *legitimate manner*. His democratic theory not only explains what organized publics can do to address their issue but also how these organizations must be structured and even how they must conceptualize their issue to give rise to democratically legitimate politics.

## 5. Conclusion: The Groundlessness of Politics

In addition to neglecting the Question of Legitimate Means, one might have noticed that the most obvious examples of theories starting from a spectator's view on politics are not really compatible with democracy. Schmitt and Lenin did not believe in democracy as a means for establishing what they saw as the goal of politics.<sup>82</sup> Malm, however, seems more hesitant. Against Lenin, he contends that the state cannot use summary executions or labor camps to achieve its goals.<sup>83</sup> Just as with 'regular' Leninism, though, it remains unclear how this is to be prevented given the absolute discretion Malm affords to the state to break any opposition against the 'objective' climate measures he proposes. Marres explicitly calls her theory democratic, but in practice, she seems to either fall on the side of moral-type or power-type authoritarianism. Either institutions should implement the *correct* solution to an issue, or members of the public should engage in a barely mediated power struggle to settle solutions in line with their interests.

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<sup>77</sup> See Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 175.

<sup>78</sup> Dewey, *Political Writings*, 205.

<sup>79</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 202-3.

<sup>80</sup> John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1935), 70.

<sup>81</sup> R.W. Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 780–807; Alexander Livingston, "Between Means and Ends: Reconstructing Coercion in Dewey's Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 522–534. Dewey is known to have been a strong supporter of the 1894 Pullman strike and was engaged in some aggressive lobby work as chair of the People's Lobby in the 1930s and 40s. See Forstenzer, *Deweyan Experimentalism*, 107; Mordecai Lee, *The Philosopher-Lobbyist: John Dewey and the People's Lobby, 1928-1940* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> At the very least, there is quite some debate on whether Lenin and Schmitt could be considered in favor of democratic methods for achieving their political goals. For just two examples, see Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, chapter 5; Peter C. Caldwell, "Controversies over Carl Schmitt: A Review of Recent Literature," *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 2 (2005): 357–387.

<sup>83</sup> Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*, 106.

But I believe the spectator theorist's aversion to democracy holds on a conceptual level too. The spectator's view on politics assumes that the political realm has a goal with determinate content. The theorist starting from such a view, must therefore assume that all political discussions have an *a priori* right and wrong outcome. But this assumption undermines the need for democracy. Democracy starts from the assumption that the political realm is fundamentally groundless; there are no universal objective ethical values that form the underlying structure of all political action. Instead, in the words of Hannah Arendt, democracy starts from a view of politics 'based on the fact of human plurality'.<sup>84</sup> Humans are fundamentally different, they have their own interests, their own wants and desires, but also their own values and beliefs. No person can ever have a privileged, transcendental viewpoint outside of politics, as no one person can ever grasp the complexity of all interactions between all humans living on earth. It is because of this radical diversity in human beings, that, politically speaking, anything is possible. When acting together, humans are only constrained by their own capacities. Precisely this unpredictability of both human action and thought founds the need for democracy. Democratic theory is such a profoundly attractive line of thinking, precisely because it accepts the groundlessness of politics *and* maintains the idea that there can be ethically justifiable ways of acting within the chaotic realm of politics. The essential feature of the spectator's view on politics is that it rejects the groundlessness of politics. The spectator's view could therefore never form the basis for a convincing theory of democracy.

Contrary to Marres' reading, Dewey's pragmatist theory of democracy fully embraces the groundlessness of politics. His overarching pragmatist views led him to deny the existence of a political realm structured by transcendental truths with determinate content. At the same time, however, Dewey did not resign himself to legitimizing some form of brutal power struggle. Instead, he intensively focused on making democratic ideals applicable to our political lives. The eventual solution he proposes in *The Public and Its Problems* is truly radical. First, he constructs a formal account of how political change comes about, without discriminating between wrong and right types of political change. Then, he searches for ways in which this formal account should be used by persons committed to democratic values. The Question of Legitimate Means thus becomes the most important normative question for his political theory.

Dewey's answer to the Question of Legitimate Means specifies a legitimate context for thinking about issues, explains how to organize with those who are equally committed to this context, and clarifies how to legitimately deal with those institutions and organizations that are not. Dewey does not state that his normative theory is the only right one, but emphasizes the importance of experimentation and historical contingency.<sup>85</sup> Neither does he posit that other ways of organizing publics are not political, as spectator's views of politics tend to do. These organized publics very much are political, which is why we must find ways of dealing with them that are democratically justifiable. Lastly, Dewey's is not very useful if one would try to convince some amoral spectator of his normative political project. In contrast to what spectator's views on politics seem to believe, however, he does not have to. Every human on earth is always already caught up in the political realm and most of us are already concerned with finding theories that help us navigate this realm.<sup>86</sup> In my opinion, the democratic theory of Dewey provides us with a promising starting point for coherently thinking about democratic action today, especially now that climate change is starting to warm people up to more authoritarian strands of politics.

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<sup>84</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, trans. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken books, 2005), 91.

<sup>85</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 83.

<sup>86</sup> This line of argument is similar to that of Bernard Williams in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (2006). Williams argues that the endeavor of justifying ethics from an Archimedean point outside of our ethical lives is not only a doomed project, but also not that important as we are all already interested in finding appropriate ways of living together. Dewey would defend a similar position when it comes to politics.

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