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DEMOCRACY AS INTELLECTUAL TASTE?
PLURALISM IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY

ABSTRACT: *The normative and metanormative pluralism that figure among core self-descriptions of democratic theory, which seem incompatible with democratic theorists' practical ambitions, may stem from the internal logic of research traditions in the social sciences and humanities and from the conceptual structure of political theory itself. One way to deal productively with intradisciplinary diversity is to appeal to the idea of a meta-consensus; another is to appeal to the argument from cognitive diversity that fuels recent work on epistemic democracy. For different reasons, both strategies fail, such that a metatheoretical step-aside may be desirable, one that entails modeling democratic theory after the public justification approach.*

Keywords: *cognitive diversity; deep diversity; democracy; democratic theory; meta-consensus; peer disagreement; public justification.*

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It has become a commonplace that contemporary Western liberal (i.e., constitutional) democracies are in deep crisis.¹ Political theory, more specifically democratic theory, has been increasingly called to the rescue, even if mostly by theorists themselves, on the grounds that it is well-equipped for diagnosing what has gone wrong and whether and how democracy can be “saved” (della Porta 2013). After all, political theory is a practical discipline, and an important part of its vocation is to provide a coherent set of guidelines for political action.

However, political theorists themselves tend to agree that their discipline is deeply pluralistic in normative allegiances, meta-theoretical assumptions, and relationships (if any) to empirical research in political science and the social sciences in general. Insofar as political theorists reflect on this particular aspect of their discipline, the majority embrace a celebratory attitude, citing pluralism as a strength of political theory. However, to the extent that normative theorizing about politics can be understood as a struggle for intellectual, and in consequence political, hegemony, there is something puzzling about this complacent attitude toward the anarchical state of affairs in political and especially democratic theory—not least because how one defines, conceptualizes, and theorizes democracy (co-)determines one’s normative expectations towards real-world democracies, as well as one’s critical diagnoses and suggestions for reform or transformation. Democratic theorists aspire to make a difference in the real world, and they believe, perforce, that visions of politics that contradict their own are incorrect, mistaken, wrong, or even dangerous. Is it incoherent to celebrate pluralism while aiming to defeat plural competitors?

On this most general level, deep intradisciplinary diversity should be seen as much as a problem as a virtue. The fact of moral, religious, cultural and other pluralism in the real world has been extensively addressed in recent scholarly literature. Nevertheless, democratic theory proceeds as if the fact of deep pluralism, with all its corollaries, has no bearing on the discipline itself. If normative theorizing is a quest for both intellectual and political dominance, there are reasons internal to democratic theory and external to it to consider deep intradisciplinary pluralism an unhappy circumstance. Self-enclosure in ideologically concurring cliques is an example of an internal problem, irrelevance to the outside world an external one.²

The roots of intradisciplinary pluralism run quite deep, making some commentators wonder whether political theory, understood as a

discipline aiming to provide credible answers to questions of the desirable mode of organizing collective life, is possible at all (Floyd 2017). Other theorists, however—perhaps the majority—believe that diversity is either not so deep or not so problematic. It therefore makes sense to see where sources of disagreement may lie and what kind of consequences follow. To this end, I will make use of resources provided by political theory itself—namely the study of political concepts—and by research on the nature and structure of academic disciplines, particularly the study of paradigms or research traditions. This second plane of inquiry suggests that wariness of intra-disciplinary diversity is justified, for it turns out that preference for this or that theory or conception of democracy is mostly a matter of intellectual taste.

The next step of my inquiry consists in exploring two possible ways of dealing with this predicament productively, neither of which has yet been employed as such, at least to my knowledge: the idea of a meta-consensus, and the idea of the epistemic virtues of cognitive diversity. In neither case, however, are the results satisfactory, if what we are looking for is squaring diversity with the practical task of political theory. In the closing part of the paper, therefore, I entertain the constructive if somewhat controversial suggestion that a productive way of dealing with “the problem of democracy” is not to be found in further theorizing (about) democracy directly but in what has been termed public justification, applied again to democratic theory itself.

After outlining the many faces of pluralism, and the many sources of disagreement, that contribute to the dissonant voices of political theory (section I), I show why deep pluralism should be considered no less a problem for theorizing about democracy (section II). I then suggest that a (modified) Kuhnian view of synchronic paradigm plurality proves useful for identifying certain basic components of any system of thought, which helps explain the prevalence of disagreement within political and democratic theory (section III). I follow by showing that the issue stems from a deeper conceptual logic, with the (unfortunate) consequence that well-intentioned efforts at conclusive semantic decontestation are bound to fail (section IV). In sections V and VI, I discuss whether the ideas of meta-consensus and of the epistemic virtues of cognitive diversity could be used as tools for harnessing intradisciplinary dissonance. Arguing that both ultimately turn *against* the pluralist ethos, I finally suggest (section VII) a metatheoretical “side-step” in democratic theory pointing in the direction of public justification.

I. FACES OF PLURALISM IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY, FROM DIVERSITY TO DISSONANCE

To say that normative political theory is a pluralistic discipline is to state a truism. According to an authoritative source, political theory is “an apologetically mongrel sub-discipline, with no dominant methodology or approach” (Dryzek et al. 2006, 5), and as such occupies a space between (notoriously pluralistic) philosophy and the “happily still undisciplined discipline of political science” (ibid., 4; see also White 2004; Vincent 2004; Schlosberg 2006; Bauböck 2008, 47; Freedman 2013, 14; Lemke and Schaal 2014). What I will call the “happy pluralism” view of political theory then transforms a descriptive statement about the plural character of both contemporary democratic societies and their philosophical reflection into a positive theoretical program. Thus, Dryzek et al. (2006, 4) explicitly affirm “the pluralism of contemporary political theory, a pluralism we regard as a key feature and major strength of the field.” Insofar as political theory provides the semantic context for democratic theory, this characterization applies no less to theorizing about democracy. Conflicts over the meaning of democracy and other concepts are accordingly construed as a central element of public political life (Connolly 1983, 6) and simultaneously as the source of the liveliness of political theory itself (Buchstein and Jörke 2003, 471; Lembcke et al. 2012, 12; della Porta 2013, 5).

To a certain extent, this parallels deep, widespread, and arguably irreducible axiological and normative disagreements within a modern differentiated society. Democratic theory, then, is but a reflection of the “internally riven and uncertain character of the world we live in” (Dryzek et al. 2006, 6; see also Waldron 1999, 1–4; Besson 2005, 1; Bauböck 2008, 40; Rosenfeld 2008, 429; Knight and Johnson 2011, ch. 1; Floyd 2017, 150ff.; Martí 2017, 559; Weinstock 2017, 640; and many others). Indeed, the majority of political theorists probably accepts Rawls’s dictum that the “fact of reasonable pluralism” is an inevitable consequence of the functioning of reason in a free society, stemming from what he called the “burdens of judgment”: the impossibility of arriving at a unanimously accepted moral (ethical) stance without resorting to oppressive use of state power (Rawls 2005, 36ff., 54ff.).³

Typically, pluralism talk concerns conflicts of *values*; however, that is mostly a matter of convenience, for two reasons. The first is that “value” may refer to manifold entities, “from preferences, through

interests, goals and goods, to ideals, virtues, conceptions of the good, entire cultures, moral codes, ideas and assumptions” (Bellamy 1999, 4). The second is a reason that will concern me for the greater part of the paper. It has to do with metanormative sources of diversity. First, people apply differing evaluative standards (“criteria”) when judging conflicts among values (Gaus 2011, §14.4; cf. Ingham 2012, 139; Floyd 2017, 47), where these standards are based either on competing normative commitments or on implicit empirical and often metaphysical/ontological beliefs about the world, or both (see sections III and IV). Evaluative standards thus have a descriptive component that leads to divergent social ontologies (Friedman 2014, ii; Stich 2014, 181n10; Vallier 2016, 12ff).⁴ Second, and not least as a consequence of these social ontologies, we routinely “see” different *outcomes* of given institutional options, i.e., the consequences considered politically or morally relevant (Muldoon 2016, 63). Market capitalism is a completely different beast for a Marxist and a Hayekian liberal.⁵ Third, as long as the need to make tradeoffs between values or evaluative standards arises, different reasoners will insist on different tradeoffs (D’Agostino 2013, 131ff.); in other words, they will rank values and standards differently. Fourth, even if they agree to disagree about what constitutes the optimal course of action, people may clash over which of the range of suboptimal solutions are *tolerable*. Some suggested arrangements may trigger active intolerance (Talisso 2009, 13). Finally, people often disagree over which values are actually in conflict, or even if there is any conflict at all (Bellamy 1999, 8).

Whose Democracy? On Dissonant Meanings

There is no reason to assume that democratic theorists do not count among the “people” who disagree on so many issues (and some more). Thus, it would seem that pluralism on the ground feeds into the acknowledged pluralist character of democratic theory. Since in a moderately free (say, liberal democratic) society there is irreconcilable moral and meta-moral diversity among citizens, including their views on the best political arrangements, it would be both foolish and dogmatic to impose a normative and methodological straitjacket on an intellectual practice that aspires to sort out our best intuitions and beliefs and systematize them into coherent visions of democracy.⁶

Democratic theory indeed follows suit. One thus encounters an impressive variety of beliefs about what democracy *is* (or *is not*), *could be*,

or *ought to be*, from which follow differing diagnoses of the ills of contemporary democracies as well as suggested remedies. This starts with basic definitions of democracy but spills over to their further conceptual elaboration. To give a couple of examples, democracy can be “collective authorization of laws by voting” (Estlund 2008, 65); a “regime in which governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested elections” (Cheibub et al. 1996, 50–51); an arrangement that ensures a high degree of popular control and political equality (Beetham 1999, 5); “a framework of social and institutional conditions that facilitates free discussion among equal citizens” (Cohen 2003, 21); a “necessary correspondence between acts of government and the equally weighted felt interests of citizens” (Saward 1998, 51); a means for promoting inclusion and justice (Young 2000, 5); or “concurrently, or simultaneously, a civic activity, a regime, a form of society, and a mode of government” (Rosanvallon 2011, 225). The numerous meanings of the term *democracy* are usually further elaborated and embedded in normative theories and models of democracy.⁷ Depending on the level of generality, as well as the goals and assumptions of the respective authors, we obtain typologies consisting not just of two or three theories/models (such as aggregative vs. deliberative vs. epistemic), but sometimes of nine, 15, or even more (see variously Habermas 1994; Held 2006, 5, 187; Schmidt 2008, 492–93; Lembcke et al. 2012, 24; Kurki 2013; della Porta 2013, 6ff).⁸

Moreover, the structuring of the field, and by consequence of the very terms of scholarly debate, may proceed along numerous axes which can be variously combined.⁹ There is, in other words, a plurality of approaches to systematization itself—a “metaparadigmatic rivalry” (Kormmesser and Schurz 2014, 36; cf. Lembcke et al. 2012, 14; Dryzek 2004, 144; Freedon 2013, ch. 4). This is why it is rare to come across equivalent images—in the terminology employed below, *maps*—of the landscape of democratic theory, and by consequence, equivalent lists of options that are available to political and social reformers, including their relationships and potential tradeoffs.¹⁰ Theorists thus often differ over which questions are to be asked in the first place. I borrow Jonathan Floyd’s (2017, 121) notion of *dissonance* to capture the rather disorganized state of affairs. Dissonant normative thoughts—and concepts, theories etc.—resist systematization, because they are too much in conflict, both intra- and interpersonally.

At this point, that is merely a controversial claim, although one I hope to substantiate below. If correct, however, it illuminates laments such as

Jack Knight's (Knight et al. 2016, 141) that theorists who debate justifications of democracy not merely disagree but talk past each other.

Why There Is Dissonance in Democratic Theory

One set of objections might arise already at this stage of the argument, questioning either the very claim of deep diversity or the consequences drawn from it. As regards the latter, H el ene Landemore (2017, 290) rejects "pitting democratic theories against each other and trying to ascertain who has the 'right' justification, theory of legitimacy, or picture of democracy," urging democratic theorists instead "to acknowledge explicitly the complexity of the object and unite in a constructive attempt at clarifying the relation between the various properties of democracy, whether intrinsic and instrumental (or procedural and epistemic)." Such a response, however, assumes away the problem in which I am interested, that is, the destructive impact of intradisciplinary pluralism. Landemore thinks that various approaches to democracy—including the epistemic one she favors—are but complementary "one-dimensional snapshots" of the same multi-dimensional object. But this requires us to assume that all conceptualizations of democracy share the same referent, which, arguably, is not so (see especially section IV).

The other path is to argue that notwithstanding the seeming diversity, there is a deeper kind of normative/axiological consensus among political theorists—just as there is (claimed to be) technocratic value consensus among citizens of liberal democracies.¹¹ One anchor for such a consensus might be an abstract idea of individual freedom, perhaps grounded in some even more abstract idea of equality, as suggested by Will Kymlicka (2002, 3-4). Whatever (superficial) divergences there are among theorists, we always have recourse to the underlying unity, a kind of an "egalitarian plateau" (ibid., 4). The real divergence would then again reside in political strategy, i.e., in how to achieve this more or less consensual set of goals, and only here would the various currents of democratic theory start to come apart.

I do not think deep diversity can be evaded so easily. Anticipating section IV, there is a world of difference between, on the one hand, converging on an abstract concept such as individual freedom, and infusing it with a particular meaning, on the other. Borrowing again from Floyd (2017, 38), such an assertion of consensus might be *convincing* ("most rationally compelling"), for most if not all political theorists would

agree that something like equal individual freedom does indeed figure among the deepest sources of liberal democratic normativity. But it is certainly not *meaningful*, for due to its thinness it is incapable of discriminating among the numerous competing “templates for an ideal political constitution” that have been put forward which, arguably, fit within the abstract bounds of “freedom.” Obviously, a participatory democratic understanding of individual freedom has very different meaning and implications than a liberal constitutionalist or a republican one, and all will be viewed with suspicion by populist democrats such as Ernesto Laclau. In other words, convergence on a few abstract intuitions (“*ceteris paribus*, freedom is good”) cannot conceal the more concrete disagreement on what these intuitions entail, especially if what we are after is a coherent, complex theory of democracy.

Moreover, if we agree that what really matters is political strategy, those practical-institutional differences which follow from different political strategies are of such magnitude that a highly abstract consensus would bring little comfort. Suppose we want to know whether the majority principle is the most equality-preserving method of democratic decision-making. For many, the affirmative answer is obvious, while upon more detailed examination, it depends on antecedent theoretical assumptions and goals (Risse 2009). For one, lottery voting (or more generally, the random selection of alternatives) may be a more desirable equality-preserving voting method under certain circumstances and/or assumptions (Saunders 2010). But there are more particular reasons, too. If our conception of democracy includes maximum responsiveness as a core value, then an absolute majority criterion seems defensible, mostly on the back of May’s theorem (e.g., Saward 1998, 68ff.). But not all conceptions do include responsiveness, so this argument is unconvincing. Perhaps we want to maximize average support for a given policy, because we value consensual decision-making—which opens the door to a Borda count and its variants, as well as to other consensual (anti- and non-majoritarian) measures of the Lijphartian sort. Or we might primarily want to avoid false positives (unjustified enacted policies), and therefore believe that some super-majoritarian decision rule is desirable (Gaus 1996, 226–245). Or we might simply prefer fair outcomes, which introduces fair division procedures based on some idea of distributive justice. Or we might insist on institutionalizing (constitutionalizing?) a minority veto in order to give voice to permanent minorities. And the list goes on. A clash of normative intuitions ensues, some of them claiming

the status of axioms (such as in May's or Arrow's theorem), others being just that—intuitions. Similar lists of conflicting reasons could be devised for any fundamental issue in democratic theory, such as the nature of political representation.

There have been numerous attempts at and strategies for defusing dissonance in political theory that I cannot recount here.¹² Fortunately, they have been recently given a book-length critical treatment (Floyd 2017), and the upshot is that although political theorists certainly believe that *somewhere* and *somehow* the true or correct answer to fundamental questions of their discipline will appear, no one has come close to convincing their peers that they have found it. Moreover, there is a tradeoff between convincingness and meaningfulness. The more meaningful (determinate or “thick”), and therefore also more practically realizable, a given conception of democracy (freedom, equality, justice . . .) is made, the less convincing it becomes to those who do not share the requisite normative and meta-normative assumptions.

II. WHY WORRY?

There are two broad sets of reasons to be worried about intradisciplinary disagreement. One is external and concerns the message democratic theory sends to the outside world. Political theorists are often baffled about why the general public (as well as fellow academics) seem to be oblivious to their theoretical findings, which they and their intellectual fellow travelers find so attractive.¹³ Aside from the possibility that political theory is not very well known to outsiders, those who do know of it may find unappealing a cacophony of conflicting voices, no matter how sophisticated (cf. Buchstein and Jörke 2013). As Russell Hardin (2008, 45) observes when discussing methodology of normative theorizing, “a flood of supposedly novel contributions is apt to be ignored or openly dismissed.” That would be great shame, because the “flood” most likely includes some genuinely beneficial ideas. If only it were possible to tell which these are!

Even if the external reason is pushed aside as secondary, an internal set of interrelated problems should concern democratic theorists. The very definition of democracy contains seeds of criteria according to which the degree or quality of democracy is subsequently assessed (Hadenius 1992, 5ff.; Saward 1998, ch. 1; Schmidt 2008, 486ff.; Mair 2008, 192; Merkel 2014, 14). Specific conceptions and theories of democracy lead

to differing assessments of the conditions, consequences, and promises of, as well as limits and threats to democracy. The conceptual delineation of what an ideal democracy is and which institutions and practices it requires thus determines the evaluation of real-world (liberal) democracies—e.g., whether they are, schematically, “the best of all possible worlds” or mere fig leaves over structural oppression and domination. Scott Althaus (2012) provides a more moderate account of how three distinct theories of democracy—republican, (liberal) pluralist, and elitist—put in very different normative lights two current trends affecting the media landscape, the decline of social-responsibility or “objective” journalism, and increasing audience segmentation.¹⁴ An analogous point applies to theory appraisal, i.e., the evaluation of competitors in scholarly debates. Given the fact of evaluative and systemic diversity, showing the superiority of one’s own conception/theory of democracy over others amounts to pulling oneself out of the water by one’s own hair, *à la* Baron von Münchhausen: that is, employing resources provided by that very conception (Freeden 2005, 121; Leca 2011, 99ff.; Saward 2003, chs. 2 and 3; Vincent 2004, 2, 4, and 25).

It might be replied that it could not be otherwise, as theorizing is a struggle over meanings, methods, concepts, and their relations. If the “history of real democracies cannot be dissociated from a permanent tension and contestation” (Rosanvallon 2006, 11), then it ostensibly makes sense that theoretical reflection cannot be anything but a battle (della Porta 2013, 5; Connolly 2002). The “theorizing as fighting” self-description coheres with the construal of political theory as a sophisticated attempt to control meaning, to “monopolise the power of political finality” (Freeden 2013, 94, 239, 271). Theorizing about democracy is, then, no mere battle of wits, but also a quest for political hegemony. Perhaps this is implicitly acknowledged by participants in the debate, although few would openly admit that political theorizing is just politics by other means.

It is, however, questionable whether the necessary categorization of some conceptions/theories of democracy as “progressive” and others as “regressive,” so that morally defective competitors are relegated to the archives, can be reconciled with the glorification of intradisciplinary pluralism. After all, a less plural world in which one’s preferred conception is realized has to be considered superior to a more plural world where some competing conception dominates. This also applies to particular institutional or political suggestions, such as quotas guaranteeing the political

presence of certain societal groups, the introduction of workplace democracy, the use of deliberative mini-publics, supermajoritarian decision-making, constitutional limits on government, populist political strategies, and intraparty democracy. The “findings” of democratic theory often point to a (more or less radical) reorganization of the way authoritative decisions are reached or made possible in a polity, and this is why answers to the question “Whose democracy?” carry potentially far-reaching consequences (Lembcke et al. 2012, 10, 16). So democratic theorists who celebrate pluralism commit a sort of a performative contradiction, engaging in a practice whose point is to eliminate competitors while rhetorically applauding the fact of their existence.

This is magnified by the tendency of various schools of thought to avoid engaging competing accounts of democracy, speaking mostly to those who “share their own particular discourse,” their “predilections and footnotes” (Moon 2004, 26–27). If they do engage, they evaluate competitors on the basis of their own evaluative standards. One consequence is the creation of insulated cliques wedded to particular world-views, whose members and sympathizers praise each other’s work and denounce competing cliques’ contributions. Such an “inward turn” has been spotted by several authors (Brown 2002; Buchstein and Jörke 2003; della Porta and Keating 2008, 36; Kaufman-Osborn 2010, 657); however, whereas they mostly target the hegemonic tendencies of professionalized political theory, the description applies no less to alternative/dissident currents within the discipline. Some causes of this tendency can be traced to the ways scientific enterprise as such is organized, resulting in the segregation of epistemic communities (Lake 2011, 468; Schurz 2014, 54ff.; Lemke and Schaal 2014, 93ff.).

In the fourth section I will argue that basic political concepts are at least partly constitutive of social and political reality. If this is true, then the proponents of competing definitions of democracy and of the resulting conceptions of it will indeed talk past each other, offering incompatible “maps” of the social/political world. The stand-off between liberal and radical conceptions of democracy is a case in point. Where no power inequalities obtain, no need to empower the oppressed via miscellaneous novel instruments and redescriptions of democracy arises. Whether one is convinced, say, by feminist analyses of power relations in capitalist societies (Hawkesworth 2011) depends less on how things “really are” than on the methodological, ontological, and normative assumptions one employs—e.g., the preferred definition of *power*.

Finally, pluralism in democratic theory leads to what might be called conceptual sprawl (Beerbohm 2011), which has a lot in common with the problem of “concept stretching” (or “inflation”), a notion harking back to Giovanni Sartori’s work on concept formation (Mair 2008). Authors want to have their conceptions of democracy sufficiently abstract that they cover most if not all of the logical space of “democracy,” but at the same time expand their extensionality, so that they are clearly distinguishable from rival conceptions. This, of course, is impossible within the Sartorian framework, because a concept’s intension and extension trade off against each other. But even if this framework is rejected in favor of some alternative approach (such as that of “family resemblances”), the basic problem remains. The concept of democracy is subject to inflationary pressures arising from substantive values central to other concepts (such as justice, equality, freedom, and power), and there are few if any criteria other than intellectual taste that could tell the observer—or the participants in the debate—which side to take. In an important sense, such a tendency is unavoidable unless we consciously limit ourselves to some bare-minimalist definition of democracy,¹⁵ and it might be unavoidable *in principle* if conceptual holism is true (see section IV).

Some have insisted on a fundamentally open-ended understanding of democracy as a continuing “process of democratisation” (O’Donnell 2010, 213; cf. Rosanvallón 2011; 225–226). Such a theoretical move, however, comes at a fairly high price: packing democracy with so many substantive claims that it “cannot be distinguished from a full-fledged political morality” (Beerbohm 2011, 26). Arguably, a clash of integrated political moralities is even less tractable than a “mere” clash of conceptions of democracy, which only underscores democratic theory’s justificatory problem.

III. RESEARCH TRADITIONS AND THE PRIMACY OF THE NORMATIVE

An enlightening *extra-disciplinary* explanation of the sources of deep pluralism in political theory can be found in a modification of Kuhn’s philosophy of science.¹⁶ It might be objected that Kuhn remains a controversial figure whose notion of a paradigm cannot be easily applied to political theory and whose views about inter-paradigm incommensurability are questionable. Or it might be argued that although we face intradisciplinary diversity and the existence of numerous academic “sects,” talk about

paradigms is unwarranted unless communication among them is impossible.¹⁷ All I am claiming, though, is that the basic Kuhnian framework is revealing with regard to the primacy of normative, ontological, and epistemological assumptions in political theorizing. (If one insists, however, that we abandon the notion of a “paradigm” and talk instead about insulated, synchronically active “research traditions,” then so be it.)¹⁸

One may distinguish four basic components of any paradigm that aspires to provide a complex basis for research within a scientific discipline: (1) a *theoretical* component, which, apart from any statements of laws (whether fundamental or specific), contains basic ontological assumptions about the world; (2) exemplars of *empirical* application that bolster the theoretical core and normally serve as the main vehicle of expansion of a scientific paradigm (i.e., scientific progress); (3) a *methodological* component that, besides issues of particular methods and/or research techniques, covers epistemology and normative commitments (especially the goal of theorizing, along with fundamental moral and political commitments of the respective theorists or epistemic communities); and finally (4) a *programmatic* component, or shared hopes and expectations attributed to the research program by its supporters and protagonists; with regard to political and democratic theory, we would speak of *practical ambitions*.

Because there are few if any (unquestioned) laws in the humanities,¹⁹ not least because of their focus on meaning and intelligibility of action instead of causality and prediction, the theoretical core of the various paradigms is provided mostly by ontological (and/or metaphysical) assumptions. In political theory, these amount to such choices as between atomism and holism, individualist and collectivist social ontology, value pluralism and value monism, internalism and externalism (e.g., about reasons), differing conceptions of human nature, and various conceptions of rationality. None of these options are uncontroversial, nor can they be conclusively “tested,” which weakens the empirical element. As a result, the methodological component (especially its normative and epistemological elements), often supported by the ontological element of the theoretical component as well as by programmatic aspirations, provides a surrogate theoretical core of the respective paradigms in political theory and democratic theory in particular.²⁰ One can also speak of “pre-theoretical moral intuitions” (Wedgwood 2010, 219), or “background assumptions,” which make up for the underdetermination of theory choice by available facts (Beatty and Moore 2010, 262).

Once the theoretical core of a research tradition is co-constituted by the competing normative visions of given authors and communities of authors, then the effects of pluralism on the discipline are in full swing. The epistemological element is no less problematic, because the criteria by which we could confirm or falsify the “correctness,” “success,” or “desirability” of the numberless suggestions for democratic innovation are mostly internal to the respective theories, as argued above. Finally, differing methodologies and ontologies imply dissimilar understandings of the political, i.e., the realm where democratic decision making takes or ought to take place (Frazer 2008, 176ff; Dufek and Holzer 2013, 125–6; Muldoon 2016, 50). One example is the ontology of power and the tools of studying power in a society. Studies by radical democrats draw heavily on poststructuralist philosophy (e.g., Laclau and Mouffe 2001), but sophisticated accounts of, say, achieving hegemony over the meaning of floating signifiers are of questionable help in understanding the promises and perils of democracy outside the circle of post-structuralist radical democrats. The same goes for ideas such as capillary power or class struggle. But mainstream theories share this problem. Whether there is such a thing as communicative rationality and whether it carries the potential that has been ascribed to it by deliberative democrats depends on how convincing the breathtakingly complex Habermasian theory sounds to you. All these aspects feed into struggles over the proper meaning of basic political concepts, as shown in the following section.

IV. INDETERMINACY, VAGUENESS, AND THE ESSENTIAL MORALIZATION OF DEMOCRACY

An advanced reading of the sources of disagreement *from within* political theory has been developed by Michael Freeden (1996 and 2013). Two basic aspects of his “conceptual” approach can be distinguished. The first consists in understanding the respective political theories as systems of mutually interconnected interpretations of basic concepts such as justice, freedom, equality, dignity, democracy, legitimacy, political authority, and so on. A shift in the meaning of one concept results in corresponding semantic shifts on the part of other concepts. For example, construing “equality” as the fully inclusive democratic equality of individuals as citizens leads naturally to advocating more participatory forms of democracy and probably also a more extensive redistribution of material resources. On the other hand, “equality” conceived primarily in legal

and political terms implies a weaker involvement of political authority in the functioning of a market economy and a more positive stance towards procedural forms of democracy. Conceptions of rights, power, legitimacy, and civil disobedience also vary correspondingly. One may label this phenomenon “conceptual holism,” because seen this way, no single basic concept of political theory makes sense on its own, without recourse to an entire conceptual and normative system (Carter 2015, 290ff.; cf. Dworkin 2011, ch. 1).²¹ Given intradisciplinary diversity, we are ultimately faced with a plurality of competing conceptual holisms (Freeden 2013, 82).

The other aspect of Freeden’s approach is an awareness that political concepts, as basic semantic units of political thinking, have certain features that impose pluralism upon any debate in which they are used. One is conceptual indeterminacy, that is, the fundamental contingency of meaning (in a logical sense). Concepts are open “containers” that invite struggles over how they will be filled. Some speak of “essential contestability,” which is structurally analogous to indeterminacy (Vincent 2004, 98ff.; Freeden 2005, 117; Lembcke et al. 2012, 11).²² Importantly, indeterminacy pertains to most if not all of the concepts that make up a given political theory, which means that the list of available conceptual options multiplies endlessly.²³ Another feature is ambiguity, which seems more manageable because semantically ambiguous concepts can be subjected to disambiguation, for example by means of a “subscript gambit,” which amounts to replacing the disputed concept (e.g., freedom) with more basic elements, such as (libertarian freedom from) interference and (republican freedom from) domination (Dowding and Bosworth 2018). Different conceptual reductions then represent rival ways of “partitioning states of the world,” justified by specific sets of values and assumptions (*ibid.*, 4). Note, however, that while disambiguation is capable of settling a merely terminological dispute, it cannot by itself decide the normative (rhetorical) issue of which option is more desirable.

The last conceptual feature to be mentioned is vagueness, which intersects with the metatheoretical assumptions discussed in the previous section. In cases of *semantic* vagueness, the given concept is open to “precisification” (by methods which need not detain us here; see *ibid.*, 7–11). Precisifications will be manifold, which might be fine for empirical purposes—as these rival descriptions can be confirmed or debunked—but arguably not for normative arguments, where external validation is not

readily available. *Ontic* vagueness, on the other hand, captures concepts which have no referent, even though their precisifications do. In such cases, rival precisifications “create” rival referents, and there is no uncontroversial (“scientific”) way of showing their superiority or inferiority with regard to the parent concept. Bosworth and Dowding (2018, 11–13) use Arrow’s theorem to illustrate the referential impreciseness of the notion of “collective will” (as a result of the cycling problem identified by Arrow). The present paper can be read as claiming that democracy has the very same status. In other words, the quest for discovering the meaning of democracy is futile—“there is *nothing* the term precisely refers to” (ibid., 17)—and many other concepts which could be employed in order to justify a particular conception of democracy (such as freedom or equality) suffer the same fate. All that remains is rhetoric and contested normative commitments. Normative political theory can thus be understood as a special kind of exercise in decontestation, one that is both unavoidable and philosophically doomed. But it is not *politically* futile, for control of political language brings political power.

Democracy occupies a prominent place in this theoretical milieu, because it is now widely recognized as the only permissible political regime within which ideals enshrined in other concepts can be legitimately pursued. Hence the claim that democracy, as a concept that contains the seeds of the institutional structure for deciding on political matters, takes systematic priority vis-à-vis other political concepts (Möllers 2012, 13). The problem for democratic theory is that for the reasons just presented, it lacks a privileged normative or methodological viewpoint from which a definite semantic/ontic closure of the concept of democracy could be orchestrated. At the very least, it is unclear who should be in the possession of the authority to decide, perhaps apart from “the people” itself—which would leave democratic theory with an advisory role at best (ibid.; cf. Pettit 2015, 30), and at the mercy of majority decisions at worst.²⁴ But even here there is a catch, as the conditions and circumstances under which “the people” decide—such as whether majority rule should be the default method of decision, or who should represent whom and how in the decision-making body—needs to be settled beforehand. This is why Floyd (2017, 60) is right when he notes that “democratic solutions” to theoretical pluralism—“leave the case to politics, not philosophy”—beg the question.

The general point may now be reiterated. Conceptual choices in political theory are in an important sense contingent (or even arbitrary),

because the very grounds for infusing basic concepts with particular meanings are contingent. This is significant, because it supports my claim that each author's definition of democracy, as well as the basic attributes she ascribes to a democratic society (either as an ideal type or in the real world), are fundamentally dependent on the wider context of her political theory. Freedman (2013, 65–66) further observes that many attempts at prioritising a preferred attribute (power, consensus, participation, etc.) “clearly emerge from an identifiable ideological standpoint.” In other words, basic political concepts are laden with normative theory. To borrow David Zimmerman's (2001, 235) terms, my contention is that democracy is prone to be *essentially moralized*—so that the “specification of its content or conditions of application makes ineliminable reference to the most general normative properties, *right/wrong, required/prohibited, morally good/bad.*” Note that this again coheres with the primacy of normative/methodological and programmatic components of research traditions in political theory, as expounded in section III.

All this leaves democratic theory between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, an across-the-board unification of thinking about democracy is either impossible or undesirable, and most likely both. On the other hand, without some kind of common ground, we remain stuck in a never-ending clash of competing worldviews, incompatible definitions, and conflicting institutional solutions.

Is it somehow possible to navigate the sea of normative and meta-normative pluralism, in order to avoid the unpopular conclusion that democracy is indeed a matter of intellectual taste, and that normative democratic theory as a whole is doomed to remain a “conceptual Babel,” well-intended claims to the contrary (such as O'Donnell 2010, 29) notwithstanding? Or more ambitiously, is there any way of deciding which normative conception or theory of democracy is better than its rivals, and perhaps which is the best one? This is a question of “theory-appraisal” that a number of social sciences, such as economics, have already posed to themselves as a matter of philosophical concern (cf. Latsis 1976, vii), while political theorists seem to remain content with talk about “good reasons,” without seriously attempting to provide an explanation of what makes a normative reason “good.”²⁵

If my diagnosis is correct, then there is no direct way of solving the puzzle. But there seem to be at least two promising indirect ways of approaching it, both using tools that have been devised by democratic theorists to help deal with *societal* diversity. To my knowledge, neither

has been applied to democratic theory itself, despite the problem being essentially similar.

V. THE HOLLOW PROMISE OF META-CONSENSUS

The first approach builds on the notion of paradigms or research traditions discussed in section II. Stephan Kornmesser and Gerhard Schurz (2014, 23ff.) suggest that by abstracting from paradigms that share certain methodological components, and perhaps a vague outline of a programmatic component, a so-called *super-paradigm* can emerge (or be constructed); they take the empirical-analytical and critical-dialectical approaches to the study of politics as examples from within political science. They also show that overlaps as well as divergences between the components of various paradigms are possible, and, most importantly, that the plurality of paradigms may have both negative and positive impact: ignorance and eclecticism, or, worse, destructive rivalry on the one hand, and constructive competition on the other—where the latter allows either for the further development of individual paradigms on the basis of external critique, or (under certain circumstances) for direct comparison of them. Constructive rivalry is, of course, what democratic theorists have in mind when they speak about mutual enrichment, cross-fertilization, and other supposed benefits of intradisciplinary diversity.

It seems to me that Kornmesser and Schurz's approach has strong affinities with the idea of a deliberation-induced normative, epistemic, and/or preference meta-consensus or meta-agreement that would overlay first-order (substantive) normative pluralism, an idea that has been recently given favorable attention by several political theorists (List 2002; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006; List 2007). The vision of a higher-level common ground that would incorporate lower-level diversity is certainly alluring, not least because it promises a way of eliminating meta-paradigmatic rivalry in democratic theory (i.e., disagreement over how to describe the very nature and landscape of the discipline). So a fruitful area of research appears to emerge at the interface between democratic theory and philosophy of social science.

However, the necessary conditions for productive engagement are hard to obtain. On the super-paradigm side, reconciliation between research traditions first presupposes an unambiguously and mutually “accessible” subject area. Second, metaparadigmatically neutral benchmarks are required; otherwise we cannot tell which “competitors” get

it right and which are completely off the mark. Third, the threat of ideological disputes fueled above all by the normative subpart of the methodological component is always there, opening the door to destructive rivalry. Obviously, what has been said in the previous sections points to the conclusion that all the triggers of a destructive type of rivalry are abundantly present in democratic theory. There is no agreed-on subject area due to widely divergent definitions of democracy and even delineations of the political. There are no shared evaluative (meta-)standards, and if some were suggested (e.g., by rational-choice theorists), many theorists would rise in protest, as they indeed have done repeatedly. Finally, the rationales behind normative theorizing about democracy—the practical ambition, the contest for intellectual and power hegemony, the priority of the normative—ensure that the tendency towards ideological disputes is engraved into the very nature of the discipline (Vincent 2012, 165; cf. Knight and Johnson 2011, 43).

On the meta-consensus side, my explorations overlap with Valeria Ottonelli and Danielle Porello's (2013) wide-ranging inquiry into the conditions of meta-agreement. One might even argue that their findings apply *most strongly* to democratic theory. Ottonelli and Porello note that in order to work, meta-agreement needs to be secured at three levels simultaneously. The first one is *normative*, which concerns a relevant semantic dimension “in terms of which a given decision problem is to be conceptualized” (List 2007, 68) and evaluated. As Ottonelli and Porello point out, the normative dimension in fact presupposes agreement on a pair of opposite values, not just one, so that defenders of “less of something” (e.g., less popular participation in deciding macroeconomic policies) can have a positive justifying vocabulary for their preferred option (e.g., “less democracy equals a more competent decision”). The other two levels are factual, concerning the expected outcomes of a given policy or institutional arrangement (as measured via the semantic dimension); and rationality, which amounts to a single-peaked ordering of available options.

What I have said thus far suggests that neither condition is reasonably achievable in democratic theory, such that we are even less likely to secure all three at once. While theorists are capable of discovering a common normative dimension for the sake of a particular discussion about a selected issue, it is quite another thing to agree that this particular dimension should be the *decisive* one for theorizing democracy—that is, that all conceptions/theories of democracy should be ranked along this single

dimension. As long as there are differences over the ranking of evaluative standards, no meta-consensus is possible; to make it possible, some ordered subset of standards would have to be imposed on the otherwise dissonant debate in democratic theory. Here we can see how metaparadigmatic rivalry can seriously affect first-order normative preferences. It makes a world of difference whether we sort out conceptions/theories/models of democracy along the dimension of (the extent of) participation, responsiveness, deliberation, truth-tracking capacities, rights protection, socio-economic equality, minority inclusion, agonistic contention, public justifiability, etc. The “easier” case is when theorists disagree on the relevant dimension in the first place, because the case is thereby closed, and sectarian theorizing proceeds as usual. The “harder” case arises when theorists (a) agree on the dimension, (b) disagree substantively, and also (c) disagree on the importance of the dimension in the broader picture. The occasional dimension-agreement obscures that there is rarely just one dimension at stake, and also that the “opposite” value, residing at the other pole of the dimension, need not be the same for different theorists. For example, equality can be contrasted to inequality, but also to freedom or responsibility.

Second, Ottonelli and Porello (2013, 81) show that meta-consensus requires *factual* meta-agreement about the expected outcomes of a given policy or institutional measure (in order to disagree substantively about the relative desirability of the outcomes); this corresponds with Dryzek and Niemeyer’s (2006, 640) “credibility of disputed beliefs.” The immediate catch is that theorists would have to assign “exactly the same value to the pair of [opposite] values” (ibid.) which is basically ruled out by interdisciplinary features discussed in sections III and IV. But there are also more mundane yet still theoretically relevant factual disagreements, such as whether large numbers of middlingly or even below-average competent actors can produce collectively wise decisions (Brennan 2014; Landemore 2014, 206–11; Quirk 2014; Somin 2014), or whether an increase in immigration to liberal democracies entails substantial costs to their welfare systems or leads to a rise in criminality (Koudelka 2016, 358–61). Disagreement on these two meta-levels (normative and factual) is fatal for the third one (*rationality*), because it prevents the single-peakedness of first-order preferences necessary to prevent Arrowian cycling and the instability and strategic manipulation of options.

Most generally, all this implies that the idea of a meta-consensus *precludes* disagreement over the meaning of words we use to describe and

evaluate political and social reality—that is, disagreement about basic political concepts (Ottonelli and Porello 2013, 85). This is because in order to “agree to disagree,” we need to know in advance that we are talking about the same thing (in technical terms, single-peakedness rules out multiple rival descriptions of state of the world). Recall, however, that disputes over the proper meaning of concepts are meant to be precisely the point and lifeblood of political theorizing under conditions of pluralism. In the same manner, meta-consensus precludes variances in ontology, epistemology, and methodology, which are endemic to the discipline. In an important sense, meta-consensus thus works against intra-disciplinary pluralism, because it entails the reduction of available options. So an uneasy dilemma arises: One can have meta-consensus and less diversity, or more diversity and no meta-consensus, but not both at once.

VI. COGNITIVE DIVERSITY AND INCOMPATIBLE MAPS OF THE SOCIAL WORLD

The second indirect approach to interdisciplinary diversity that I will explore views societal pluralism from yet another angle.

As with the meta-consensus approach, I do not think there has yet been an attempt to apply it to democratic theory itself. Since this approach promises to provide a systematic, coherent, and heretofore missing *argument* for why diversity in democratic theory is a good thing even if no robust meta-consensus is in sight, even a crude attempt of the kind I provide here might be of some benefit. Accordingly, my use of others’ arguments and theoretical resources for the present purposes (my main interlocutor shall be H el ene Landemore and her collaborators) should be read as an attempt to imagine a possible or expectable response to the unique challenge at hand, rather than an accurate reproduction of the respective authors’ views on the topic.

With this disclaimer in mind, let me look at some nodal points of the fast-developing research on the epistemic benefits of diversity, which, at first glance, would seem to lend support to the belief that intra-disciplinary diversity has productive consequences. In general, cognitive diversity within a group is said to bolster the virtues of epistemic improvement, predictive strength, and ability to avoid suboptimal solutions (Page 2007; Beatty and Moore 2010; Knight and Johnson 2011, 159–163; Landemore and Elster 2012; Landemore 2013; Landemore and Page 2015;

Muldoon 2016, 48ff.; Landemore 2017; Martí 2017; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, chs. 7 and 8). Although there are several theorems in play (such as the Condorcet Jury Theorem and the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem), each driven by a different logic, they share the assumption that, provided certain conditions are met, more cognitive diversity among participants in some enterprise that requires collective decision making leads to a higher probability that after open deliberation, the outcome of a collective decision is likely to track the correct outcome, or truth. Cognitive diversity here stands for plural perspectives, interpretations, heuristics, and predictive models (Landemore 2013, 102). It is no surprise that cognitive-diversity arguments constitute the main pillar of epistemic conceptions of democracy: Instead of trying to get around diversity, epistemic democrats double down on it.

The promise of this approach is obvious. If the argument and corresponding theory hold—and it would represent an enormously important social scientific finding if they did—then under proper conditions, they could be applicable to any subsection of society, including academic research on democracy. However, insofar as the site of application of these theoretical tools is democratic theory, several additional problems besides those standardly associated with the cognitive-diversity argument emerge. I start with the latter, in order to get an idea of what is at stake.

One is that the epistemic strategy needs to assume the existence of a procedure-independent criterion of correctness as well as shared evaluative standards (Cohen 1986; Estlund 2008; Landemore 2013, ch. 8; Landemore 2017).²⁶ However, authors engaging in this type of argumentation are, for the most part, reluctant to apply the epistemic logic to normative issues (Landemore 2012, 10). The reason might be suspicion (quite widespread in political philosophy) about the existence of moral/political truths, although some of the foremost protagonists of epistemic democracy are objectivists of some kind (Landemore 2013, ch. 8; cf. Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, 38ff.). Another possibility, which I find more promising, is that such a position entails, among other things, that the opinions of a sufficiently numerous and diverse group are likely to be morally correct, no matter what experts—such as democratic theorists—think. This is, after all, the main contention of the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem.

For their part, Landemore and Scott Page (2015, 236) claim that their diversity-based epistemic framework is suited to “at least some” normative disagreements in the realm of politics and morality in general. If the

argument of this paper (especially sections III and IV) is accurate, however, then a “uniquely correct solution” is unavailable either to citizens or theorists. There is no global optimum in normative matters which could be seen as obvious by all participants once it has been revealed to them—which is, however, one of the fundamental conditions for the argument to hold.²⁷ What is “best” depends on the evaluative standards applied, and these differ widely among theorists. At the very least, contemporary democratic theory lacks a widely persuasive argument showing that, irrespective of deep disagreement in both substantive and second-order matters, there *is* a set of agent-neutral moral truths (or external reasons) serving as procedure-independent standards.

Political theorists sometimes say that the extent of disagreement has been blown out of proportion, and that much of apparent moral disagreement can be either reframed as disputes about facts, or bracketed for the sake of the issue at hand (e.g., Landemore 2013, 192, 216; idem 2014, 200ff.; idem 2017, 280). I have already questioned such views in section I; here I note that shifting the debate from society at large to the academic realm arguably makes the situation worse, because democratic theory is a normative type of exchange where testable factual assertions play only a supporting role for morally loaded claims. If it is “utterly demanding,” as Paul Quirk (2014, 137) puts it, for citizens to simultaneously (1) think very differently and (2) see the solution as obvious once it is suggested to them, then it is even more so in the case of democratic theorists, for we would have assume that all relevant accounts of democracy share some global optimum (a uniquely desirable conception/theory of democracy) which turns out to be obvious to all after a sufficient amount of deliberation. This, however, would contradict self-description by leading figures of the discipline (see section I) as well as all experience with, or a bird’s-eye view of, the landscape of democratic theory—not to mention the empirical fact that after decades of discussion, no *Eureka!* moment has occurred in which even some small portion of disagreement is resolved, as if by an oracle. Such a resolution might perhaps hold with respect to particularly clear-cut policy issues, but is highly unlikely about normatively and metatheoretically difficult questions such as “which theory of democracy is better/the best?” Doubling down on diversity implies, in this case, doubling down on *dissonance*, which has destructive, not constructive consequences.

There are more foundational problems, though. The argument by Landemore and Page (2015) that deliberative disagreement in both

problem-solving and predictive contexts leads to better outcomes assumes a background of shared fundamental values, as the authors acknowledge (*ibid.*, 248n16), as does Lu Hong and Page’s original formulation of the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem, according to which the diversity of values and goals “would actually harm the collective effort to solve a problem” (Landemore 2013, 102). Again, if the arguments of sections III and IV hold, then no such shared normative background exists among democratic theorists, at least once we look closely enough—that is, once we descend from the level of basic concepts to the level of their diverging conceptions (“precisifications”). Cognitive diversity, after all, is likely to be positively correlated with moral/value diversity and vice versa, as critics observe (Stich 2014, 178) and defenders admit (Page 2007, ch. 11; Knight et al. 2016, 167; Landemore 2014, 205–6). To this we should add the pluralism of evaluative standards and their possible tradeoffs, which precludes agreement on whether a particular suggestion leads to an improvement over the current state of affairs or not. Taken together, these conditions constitute “fundamental diversity,” under which, as Gerald Gaus (2016, 130ff.; cf. Ancell 2017, 166ff.) notes, the Theorem ceases to hold. In more technical terms, once deliberators cannot collectively see an improvement upon the current state of affairs, they stop searching, and this will hardly come about at the point of the global optimum (Stich 2014, 175ff.). Such diversity probably has detrimental effects on the quality of both deliberation and decisions (Ancell 2017, 168). Note that this harks back to the destructive rivalry among research traditions (“paradigms”) discussed in the previous section.

The upshot is that under such conditions, theorists explore different social worlds rather than applying distinct cognitive tools to a shared object of inquiry (cf. Gaus 2016, 114ff.). A stranger’s “map”—a system of mutually interrelated interpretations of basic political concepts—of the social world built on extraneous convictions and beliefs cannot serve as a collective guide (either descriptively or prescriptively), for some of the open routes and obstacles to be navigated do not exist in my version, while the price for taking others is too high and the corresponding tradeoffs unacceptable to me. So it is again no surprise that reasoners cannot agree on a global optimum, or the “best” theory of democracy (although it is not *strictly* impossible). This corresponds with constructivist implications of diverging social ontologies and conceptual holisms, as explicated in sections III and IV. Hong and Page (2004, 163–89) themselves recognize that deep diversity of perspectives might

result in the weak mutual intelligibility of the proposed solutions. Ryan Muldoon (2016, 64) puts the point especially starkly, for according to him, once we subscribe to a particular political-theoretical position, we have “cut off the ability of people who have a different perspective to even properly represent their views” to us. So the introduction of diverse “perspectives” brings about unexpected consequences.

Finally, there is the question of whether democratic theorists are numerous or diverse enough. Most theorems/mechanisms of the epistemic sort take a large number of participants as a necessary condition, far more than there are democratic theorists.²⁸ I will therefore focus on the diversity desideratum, not least because the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem is claimed to work fine for very small groups as well—as Landemore (2013, 164) puts it, “as small a group as three people” can be enough. So if there is enough intradisciplinary cognitive diversity—and my claim in this paper is that it is indeed very deep and wide—then the Theorem applies. However, this entails that once a correct solution, such as the most desirable model of democracy, the best conception of political representation, and so on, has been found, then intradisciplinary diversity ceases to be an asset and turns into a burden, simply because democratic theorists now know who had been right (and wrong) all the time. If, on the other hand, democratic theorists as a group are too homogeneous for these purposes (due to relatively similar training, sources of knowledge, etc.), then the argument never gets off the ground. The former option nevertheless implies even more counterintuitive (or paradoxical) conclusions, to which I turn next.

Amateur Disagreement, Peer Disagreement, and Majority Truth

Let us then have a look at what actually happens once the Diversity Trumps Ability argument “succeeds” (or perhaps its generalized and more ambitious Numbers Trump Ability version; cf. Landemore 2013, 104). For one thing, it would seem that the epistemic benefits of diversity would be much enhanced if democratic theory itself became radically democratized, so that the decision about the best conception/theory of democracy would be made by the people themselves (probably by majority decision), provided it is preceded by a sufficient amount of deliberation. After all, if there are truths about normative matters, then

numbers plus diversity trumps expertise in revealing these truths. Thus, Landemore (2014, 190) ups the ante when she writes approvingly of blurring the boundaries between amateurs and experts. The less extreme but still radical version of the idea would be that while non-experts would not be invited to decide on theories of democracy, democratic theorists should defer to the opinion of a majority of themselves; this would still constitute a procedural solution to deep value disagreement (ibid., 205). John Beatty and Alfred Moore (2010, 200) suggest that “vote counting” does in fact play an important role in science, and if anything, should be accorded *more* weight. This means (among other things) that the scorned *argumentum ad populum* becomes a perfectly legitimate argumentative strategy rather than a logical fallacy. Again, Landemore (2014, 230) ups the ante (slightly) in this respect when she writes that in cases of peer disagreement—that is, disagreement among epistemically equally competent debaters—the very fact that one has found oneself in the minority has “some epistemic significance.” In this way, the problem of (moral) deference sets in for democratic theorists as well.

But before I delve into it, it is worth noting that epistemologically speaking, the fact of peer disagreement within an academic discipline can be construed as requiring suspension of judgment, or at least openness to compromise in one’s normative beliefs—where this applies to all parties to the debate, not just the numerically weaker one(s) (Kelly 2010; Elga 2011; Ebeling 2017).²⁹ This would require democratic theorists to give up some of their deepest convictions, in the hope of discovering some kind of common ground, most likely procedural, with their interlocutors. Taken to its logical conclusion, peer disagreement might even lead to epistemic and moral skepticism (Feldman 2006; Kelly 2010, 127ff.). Others think that one should retain one’s original commitments even in the face of peer disagreement (Moffett 2007; Estlund 2008, 57). While the suspend belief/compromise view is more in line with the official “diverse and open” self-presentation of democratic theory, exhibiting respect for our interlocutors by taking a temporarily agnostic stance towards their views (cf. Rostbøl 2017, 629), the steadfast view seems more in line with the sectarian reality of the discipline (or more strongly, the first option does not describe how normative theorizing is done at all).³⁰ Unfortunately, the latter also leaves us more or less where the paper begun. So it seems apposite that in epistemic defences of cognitive diversity, numbers *do* count, which reintroduces the issue of deference.

The consequences, however, would be strange. Assessing the place and the degree of acceptance of various conceptions, theories, and models of democracy, while assuming the roughly equal epistemic competence of their originators and supporters, we would have to accept that the most academically popular view (suppose we could measure academic popularity, for example by organizing a worldwide democratic vote among theorists) is most likely correct, no matter how obsolete, morally unacceptable, or intellectually silly it seems to a given observer. But that is not all. The epistemic-democratic argument is, within the field of democratic theory, a decidedly *minority* view. By its own logic, it is likely to be wrong, and the whole story is a textbook example of self-defeat, both on the societal and academic levels. So it seems that the cognitive diversity approach is ultimately of little assistance.

VII. FROM DEMOCRACY TO PUBLIC JUSTIFICATION

The discussion in this paper has been motivated by the belief that deep intradisciplinary diversity should be a matter of concern rather than pride for democratic theorists. Correspondingly, I have tried to highlight at least some root causes of dissonance in democratic theory. If I am not completely off the mark, then we can hardly expect substantial rapprochement among the many currents, positions, and voices. In other words, a direct solution to the problem of pluralism is unlikely. And the upshot of sections V and VI is that two promising indirect ways of dealing productively with inter-disciplinary plurality fail. No doubt there are others,³¹ and my own interpretations of meta-consensus and epistemic arguments from cognitive diversity are certainly far from exhaustive. But if what I have said makes sense, then two intuitively compelling desiderata—the plural, open, ecumenical nature of democratic theory on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to be able to conclusively distinguish good and bad, desirable and undesirable theories (on the merits other than logical consistency and similar formal requisites)—cannot be achieved simultaneously.

I cannot profess to have any brilliant solution up my sleeve, yet I do feel uneasy about democratic theory remaining a matter of intellectual taste. So here is a brief and very tentative outline of an idea about what could be done next, even though not necessarily how. Following up on the peer disagreement debate, it partly builds on the “suspension of belief” route.

Perhaps democratic theorists should give up theorizing *democracy* directly, and start their intellectual journeys from elsewhere and with different expectations. It seems to me that in order to move forward, a meta-theoretical “side-step” is needed, one that starts from the notion of public justification, according to which the reasons adduced in favor of a certain norm need to be publicly accessible and mutually acceptable by those upon whom they are to be imposed, so that they can “recognize [the reasons] as valid” (Vallier 2013; cf. Peter 2013, 619).

Because the public consists of both non-experts *and* democratic theorists, one important aspect of the public-justification approach concerns the application of the intersubjective justifiability criterion to political theory itself (Laden 2014, 125; cf. Freyenhagen 2011, 335). As we have seen, democratic theory is currently next to impotent to justify particular conceptions and theories of democracy to a disagreeing audience. This is why I think that in order to move forward, democratic theory might have to avoid theorizing democracy directly. A particular conception or theory of democracy might be the output of the theoretical enterprise, instead of providing, explicitly or implicitly, the basic assumptions for political theorizing (cf. Floyd 2017, 197).

Of course, public justification has already emerged as a respectable academic philosophical enterprise in itself, and the challenges with which it presents theorists are no easier to meet than those related to democracy as such. But perhaps the “mere” change of perspective can make some difference.

While it might be objected that the justification of public rules and political institutions is just what democratic theorists do, we need to distinguish what may be called orders of justification (Gaus 2011, 275ff.): that is, different levels of “basicness” on which justification proceeds. The prior order of justification entertained here amounts to returning to the original “big question” of political theory—the justification of political authority—as opposed to more specific questions about its precise shape and goals (Nozick 1974, 4; Gaus 1996, 249ff.; Simmons 2007, ch. 1). So the basic question is not, “Which conception of democracy is the best or rationally required?,” since we disagree, *inter alia*, about the criteria for evaluating competing proposals. Not “Why democracy?” either. Rather, “How is it ever possible to justify political authority, and if it is, what does it tell us about its shape?”

This strategy would certainly make political and democratic theory radically open. So there is the distinct possibility that we end up in

pretty much the same predicament that this paper set out to explore, but on another level. But it would be an illuminating dialectical development nonetheless, one that would give all the involved parties a better, more self-critical understanding of what type of activity they are in fact engaged in.

NOTES

1. But see Merkel 2014 for a more cautious view of whether there is crisis of exceptional proportions.
2. As a political scientist with a keen interest in political theory asked, at an international conference, *Who does actually listen to political philosophers? Who do they think listens to them?* In this regard, my discussion parallels recent reflections on the state of International Relations theory (Lake 2011).
3. It might be objected that although this narrative of pluralism has seized the contemporary imagination, there is nevertheless a significant “technocratic value consensus” among citizens of liberal democracies, revolving around such goals as peace, low unemployment, a better life for one’s children, good education, low crime rates, quality health care, freedom from fear, and so on (Friedman 2018, Introduction; cf. Landemore 2013, 192, 216). If there is disagreement, then it concerns the means of achieving these goals, not the goals themselves. I admit that there is some substance to this response, but still, there *are* deep value disagreements in liberal democracies about fundamental policy issues, and many “consensual” values cease to be such once we have to make tradeoffs (say, between economic growth and environmental protection). At any rate, whether the “fact of pluralism” on the ground is real or just imagined is not central to my own argument about the state of democratic theory, as the analogy with real-world societies has been suggested by those who think interdisciplinary dissonance is a good thing.
4. Mark Bevir notes that political theorists routinely make implicit ontological (“a priori”) claims about the nature of the world (Knight et al. 2014, 22).
5. A similar point was made decades ago by Charles Taylor (1967) with respect to the supposed scientific neutrality of political science.
6. One interesting corollary concerns whether any kind of convergence can be expected. Many democratic theorists believe that properly designed deliberation can lead to greater consensus among participants in the practice. But is such an expectation plausible in case of democratic theory itself? I will return to this question in section VI.
7. I take *models* as the most general level of conceptualization. Models might comprise several *theories* of democracy, which are themselves theoretical elaborations of various *conceptions*. At the most basic level stand *definitions* of democracy. However, various authors use these terms promiscuously. One exception is Philip Pettit (2013), who reserves the term *model* for a set of institutional suggestions derived from a theory of democracy (in his case, republican).
8. The figure rises further once we include lists of “democracies with adjectives” (Dryzek 2004, 143; Collier and Levitsky 1997; Beetham 1999, 5).
9. Examples include the extent of direct participation vs. representation; grounds of legitimacy (input/procedure vs. output); normative (critical) vs. empirically based

definitions; consensus vs. conflict as the guiding idea; instrumental vs. intrinsic justifications; methodological individualism vs. collectivism (also actor vs. structure); scalar (degreeist) vs. dichotomous conceptualizations; historical (inductive) vs. ahistorical (deductive) approaches; fixed (aggregative) vs. malleable (deliberative) preferences and identities; and first-order normative demandingness (relationship to justice; positive vs. negative freedom).

10. See also the discussion of the possibility of a super-paradigm/meta-consensus in section V.
11. I am grateful to Jeffrey Friedman for pressing me on this point.
12. Besides the intuitive choice of abstract moral principles discussed above, the foremost ones are reflective equilibrium based on considered judgments, and the construction of a suitably idealized choosing position that models impartiality. See Floyd 2017, 120–65.
13. Could universal basic income be the turning point? Or is it just an exception to the rule?
14. Whereas for republican democracy, the decline of social-responsibility journalism represents a clear threat to the quality or even possibility of the informed public debate necessary for cultivating “civic virtue,” liberal pluralism is more concerned with providing channels of political mobilization for numerous social groups, together with arenas for fair bargaining and compromise among them. In this sense, the discussed trend might even be viewed positively by liberal pluralists. Elitist democracy, by contrast, requires impartial, efficient media to check corruption and incompetence on the part of ruling elites, while also promoting the general legitimacy of the regime. The (non)problematic nature of audience segmentation follows a similar logic.
15. It should be noted that even the delineation of a consensual “core meaning,” “basic level,” or “minimum definition” of democracy proves extraordinarily difficult.
16. I follow here the account of a paradigm (or “cognitive system”) put forward in Kommesser and Schurz 2014, 17ff., which, while slightly reorganizing Kuhn’s (1996) original categories, puts his fundamental insights in systematic order.
17. Azevedo 1997 thus defends “diversity without paradigms” in sociology.
18. A nontechnical sense of “multiparadigmaticity” in political theory is, I think, widely accepted by theorists themselves.
19. That is, along with the social sciences, a parent subject area of political/democratic theory.
20. As is the norm in the social sciences in general (Schurz 2014, 50ff.).
21. The need for caution about the label stems from the difficult philosophical questions surrounding semantic holism; cf. Jackman 2014.
22. I am not taking sides on the issue of essential contestability as I do not need to. My argument rests on the (weaker) assumption that there is no consensual neutral ground—no evaluative meta-standard—for deciding which conception of democracy is the best.
23. Carter 2015 argues, contrariwise, (a) that certain concepts, such as freedom and power, are essentially non-evaluative, in the sense that their definition is grounded in empirical (value-free) properties of the world, and (b) that we can discover (or rather develop, by abstraction) higher-order value-neutral concepts (say, justice or democracy) to cover various comprehensive concepts. Carter’s analysis is too elaborate to be addressed here; I proceed on the assumption that deep disagreement over the meaning of democracy does represent a “genuinely

substantive disagreement about what counts as one of the defining elements of a concept of *x*" (Carter 2015, 302, italics omitted). Perhaps tellingly, Carter does not engage the concept of democracy in his analysis. But see Busen 2015.

24. I return to the latter option towards the end of section VI.
25. One important exception is Jonathan Floyd's *Is Political Philosophy Impossible?* (2017), which resonates with much of what I say in this paper. Although I have some doubts about the implications Floyd draws from the "normative behaviorism" approach he advocates, his critical exposition of the state of political philosophy is penetrating and sobering. Sustained engagement with Floyd's argument would require a separate treatment, though.
26. But see Schwartzberg 2015 for a deflationary account ("judgment democracy" is her label) that eschews the procedure-independent standard assumption while retaining belief in epistemic capacities of deliberation and aggregation.
27. The other three are the reasonable difficulty of the problem ("not too easy"); the sufficient smartness of participants ("not too dumb"); and a large number of participants (Landmore 2013, 102).
28. For 1000 participants, the Condorcet Jury Theorem (in its original formulation) predicts a collective probability of getting things right at around 0.7 (assuming their individual *P* is 51 percent). The probability quickly rises once many more "voters" are added, but we should note that a thousand competent democratic theorists might actually constitute a bold assumption. Besides that, for such important issues as the type of democracy to be instituted, we might require a much higher probability.
29. One question that might arise concerns the permanent or temporary nature of such suspension (see Warren 1996 for an argument in favor of the latter option). I do not think political theory actually works like that or ever could, even though it is an intriguing possibility worth some further attention.
30. Sectarian justifications might be ultimately all that is left to epistemic conceptions of democracy and/or democratic theory; cf. Ingham 2012, 150.
31. Although they represent very different types of reaction, the agonist (agonistic pluralist) approach to democracy, and Jonathan Floyd's (2017) "normative behaviorism," come to mind.

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