Social Choice or Collective Decision-making: What Is Politics All About?[1]

(penultimate draft)

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Abstract: Sometimes citizens disagree about political matters, but a decision must be made. We have two theoretical frameworks for resolving political disagreement. The first is the framework of social choice. In it, our goal is to treat parties to the dispute *fairly*, and there is no sense in which some are right and the others wrong. The second framework is that of collective decision-making. Here, we do believe that preferences are truth-apt, and our moral consideration is owed not to those who disagree, but to the community that stands to benefit or suffer from their decision. In this essay, I consider whether political disagreements are conflicts between incommensurable values or imperfections in our collective search for truth. I conclude two things. First, analysis of real-world disagreement suggests that collective decision-making is the right way to model politics. In most, possibly even all, political disagreements, all parties believe, if implicitly, that there is an objective standard of correctness. Second, this matter is connected to the concept of pluralism. If pluralism is true, then collective decision-making cannot be applied to some political disagreements. More surprisingly, pluralism may rule out the applicability of social choice theory, as well.

Resolving disagreement is both a central challenge for our politics and one of its greatest gifts. It

is rare that a policy commands anything like consensus; different special interest groups have

different desires; and the elements of government compete among themselves for limited

resources. Yet contemporary political systems push through: Decisions get made, even though

some parties are left dissatisfied and uncertainty lingers over whether the decisions were the right

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ones or not. (The U.S. Congress is a salient and worrying exception, a result of Republican obdurance.)

Perhaps it would be nice if there were no disagreement at all, so that government could concentrate on efficiently implementing the unambiguous will of its people. But there is no prospect of that happening (and it is not clear, from the point-of-view of good decision-making, that eliminating disagreement is desirable). So we grapple with a question of both theoretical and practical importance: How should our politics deal with disagreement over policies, candidates, and the like?

I consider this question here. In particular, I consider what, exactly, we hope to accomplish by resolving political disagreement. Our aim cannot simply be to ensure that a decision gets made, as that would legitimate obviously problematic systems of decision-making. We could, always and everywhere, obey the preferences of the oldest, white, male voter. But that seems wrong. It seems wrong, first, because it seems unfair—the preferences of other voters ought to count for something, too—and it seems wrong because no one person possesses the competences and character necessary to make good decisions across contexts. And the quality of our decision-making matters, morally.

These are the two normative frameworks within which disagreement and decision-making are analyzed. The first framework is that of *social choice*. In some cases, whether disagreement gets resolved in a morally correct way turns on how those who disagree are treated by the process: Did everyone have an opportunity to air his opinion about the matter at dispute? Were votes fairly tabulated? Or did the opinions of some people count for more, or for less, on account of (*e.g.*) their race or gender?

An example: A group of friends is deciding where to go to dinner. Each member of the group has a different restaurant preference. The moral challenge facing this group is to extract from these diverse individual preferences a single, group preference which represents, in some sense, the "will of the people". In situations of social choice, a morally correct decision-making process treats individuals involved in the process *fairly*.

The second normative framework is that of *collective decision-making*.[2] In these cases, an important end hangs in the balance, and the moral concern is whether the decision-making process is likely to achieve this end or not.

Imagine a group of doctors debating whether treatment plan *a* or plan *b* will save the life of their patient (suppose that they know that one and only one of these plans will do this). The doctors have different opinions about which plan will work, different levels of ability, different knowledge of the patient and the treatments, and so on. But, in contrast to the restaurant case, they share a common preference—they all want to save their patient's life. Here, the morality of their decision-making turns on whether they do this effectively. So long as the process is an effective one for getting at the truth about the correct treatment plan, no doctor has a legitimate moral complaint. The way his personal preference had or had not influenced the process is of no intrinsic moral relevance.

Which framework is appropriate for politics? When we make decisions about candidates, economic policies, whether to go to war or not, whether to permit or proscribe abortion, and so on, should we be guided by a desire to treat citizens fairly or to get the decision right? Is there a

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[2] Although I will use these terms consistently in this chapter, I note that usage in the literature varies; terms like "social choice", "collective decision-making", and "social welfare function" mean different things to different authors, and so it is important to check definitions.

single answer to this question? Or are there contexts in which both considerations apply? If there are, how should the two be balanced?

Political theorists have devoted insufficient attention to these questions, which are fundamental ones, underlying debates about political legitimacy and the merits of expert rule, among other things. For example, there is lively dispute between scholars who defend democracy on the basis of its *procedural* value—how it treats voters—and those who think that democracy should be preferred on *epistemic* grounds—because it is a good, maybe optimal, way to make decisions.[3] But this debate seeks to first resolve the procedural versus epistemic question *a priori* and then to impose the relevant framework on our politics. I suggest that we do the reverse: analyze real-world political disagreement and thereby gain insight into the appropriate theoretical framework.

These questions are also underexplored in the economics literature. Here is how Shmuel Nitzan and Jacob Paroush—two pioneers in the theory of collective decision-making—describe the state of things:

> Which of the two juristic systems is socially preferable, a randomly selected group of jurors who possess diverse preferences as well as a variety of social norms or a team of professional judges who share a common goal of seeking the truth? Obviously, this dilemma has important applications, but as far as we know, there is neither an answer to this question nor even a theoretical framework within which the question can be analyzed. (2017: 501)

My goal in this chapter is to take some steps toward addressing these lacunae.

I proceed as follows: In §1, I give an overview of the formal frameworks of social choice theory and collective decision-making. In §2, I consider the core questions raised above. I

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[3] In the former, procedural camp one finds, *e.g.*, Dahl (1979) and Schumpeter (1950). The latter, epistemic camp includes Dietrich and Spiekermann (2013), Goodin (2003 and 2008), and Landemore (2013). And then there are hybrid theorists, like Estlund (2008).

conclude that most, perhaps all, political disputes concern matters which citizens believe, if implicitly, to have objectively correct and incorrect resolutions. Politics appears to be a matter for collective-decision making, not social choice. I then turn, in §3, to the seemingly disparate debate over pluralism. If pluralism is true, as I believe it to be (see Mulligan 2015), then in some political contexts there is no single good to pursue and nothing to optimize. Although the social choice framework would seem appropriate for those contexts, pluralism threatens it, too. I offer some final thoughts in §4.

1.   Models of Social Choice and Collective Decision-making

I begin by summarizing the theoretical frameworks used to analyze situations of social choice and collective decision-making. Although the two frameworks have some superficial similarities, they are quite different, as we shall see.

In common are (1) a set of *voters* $\{v_1, v_2, \ldots, v_n\}$ (these could literally be voters, or members of a policy committee, or friends debating where to go to dinner, *etc.*) Each voter has (2) a *preference ordering* over the various alternatives $\{a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_m\}$ at issue (candidates, policy options, restaurants, *etc.*) The goal of both frameworks is (3) to select a *social welfare function* (SWF), which extracts a single, group preference ordering from the *n* individual preference orderings.

In social choice theory, an axiomatic approach is used to select the SWF: We identify the constraints that we believe are required by "fairness" or "reasonableness" to yield a set of conforming SWFs. For example, one common axiom is known as *No Dictators*: It would be unfair and unreasonable if our SWF parroted the preferences of one voter. Note that this is a

weak constraint: Given an electorate of 300 million voters, a SWF that flat-out ignores the opinions of 299,999,998 of them still satisfies No Dictators.

The most important, and surprising, discovery of social choice theory is that it does not take many axioms, nor implausible ones, to reduce the number of conforming SWFs to zero. This is Kenneth Arrow's (1950) celebrated *Impossibility Theorem*: For $m \geq 3$, *no* SWF satisfies three plausible axioms:

(1) No Dictators;

(2) *Unanimity* (if all voters prefer a_x over a_y, then the group preference ordering should prefer a_x over a_y); and

(3) *Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives* (whether the group preference ordering prefers a_x over a_y should only depend on how voters rank a_x and a_y— what they think of a_z shouldn't matter).

The ramifications of Arrow's Impossibility Theorem for politics remains a matter of debate. The claim, sometimes made, that it shows democratic decision-making to be inevitably unfair (because any real-world system, to include democratic systems, must violate one of these requirements) is too quick, not least because elections involving only two candidates (*i.e. m* = 2) are not imperiled.[4] What is appropriate to say is that for many real-world decision-making processes, there is a strong but not conclusive Arrovian case to be made that there is unfairness in the process.

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[4] For a defense of democratic decision-making against Arrow's result, see Mackie 2003.

An importance difference between models of social choice and models of collective decision-making is that the latter assign each voter v_i a *competence*—a probability p_i that his preference ordering is correct. In situations of social choice, such an assignment would make no sense: There is no notion of some people's preferences being correct and others' incorrect. In addition, models of collective decision-making almost always restrict the number of alternatives under consideration to two ($m = 2$): two candidates, two policy options, two ways a referendum question might be answered.[5]

The core result in collective decision-making was obtained by Grofman, Owen, and Feld (1983) and Nitzan and Paroush (1982): Given some assumptions,[6] the optimal SWF is to weight voter v_i's preference in proportion to $\log \frac{p_i}{1-p_i}$, and then apply majority rule.

Consider the medical scenario, above. A critical feature of this scenario, and one which distinguishes it from social choice scenarios, is that the members of this decision-making body (the "voters") share a common goal: They all want to save the patient's life. What they disagree about is which treatment plan, *a* or *b*, will do this.

Suppose that v_1 and v_2 are medical residents, each with a 70% chance of choosing the correct treatment plan ($p_1 = p_2 = 0.70$). The third doctor, v_3, is an experienced specialist with an 85% chance of choosing the correct plan ($p_3 = 0.85$).

The optimal way for the doctors to make this decision—to decide between *a* and *b*—is to weight v_1's and v_2's preferences in proportion to $\log \frac{0.7}{1-0.7} = 0.847$, and v_3's preference in

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[5] An exception is Ben-Yashar and Paroush 2001.
[6] Most notably, the assumption that votes are statistically independent. The model has been extended to cover the relaxation of this assumption; see Berend and Sapir 2007, Berg 1993 and 1996, Boland 1989, Boland, Proschan, and Tong 1989, Ladha 1992, 1993, and 1995, Nitzan and Paroush 1985, Peleg and Zamir 2012, and Shapley and Grofman 1984.

proportion to $\log\frac{0.85}{1-0.85} = 1.73$. Notice that in this case, the preferences of the two junior

doctors fail to outweigh v_3's preference (since $0.847 + 0.847 < 1.73$). Therefore, in making this

decision, the group should ignore the opinions of the two junior doctors. That maximizes the

probability that the correct plan is chosen, and, thus, that the patient's life is saved. For this set

of competences, expert rule—listening only to v_3—is the optimal SWF. Complaints by v_1 or v_2

that they are not being treated fairly (*i.e.* that their votes count for nothing) would indicate both

irrationality—since these doctors' stated goal is to save the patient's life—and immorality—

since any adjustments to the process in the name of fairness work against the patient, to whom

the doctors have a duty of care.

Any set of competences defines a unique, optimal SWF. For $n = 3$ there are two

possibilities: expert rule, as above, and simple majority rule (*i.e.* "one person, one vote").[7] As n

gets large, the number of possibly optimal SWFs grows—but the optimal SWF is always well-

defined and always straightforward to identify.

A comment on the importance of the number of alternatives under consideration by the

group (*i.e.* the value of m). Many real-world cases of decision-making, including political

decision-making, are naturally dichotomous ($m = 2$): American voters select the Democrat or the

Republican; a Federal Reserve committee raises interest rates or it does not; the President

approves a CIA operation against a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, or he denies the

operation.

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[7] For $n = 3$, expert rule is to be preferred over simple majority rule iff for the most competent
voter, v_3, $\log\frac{p_3}{1-p_3} > \log\frac{p_1}{1-p_1} + \log\frac{p_2}{1-p_2}$.

In addition, some cases involving many alternatives can be dealt with through a series of dichotomous steps. Thus, a legislature might select one of many possible tax rates for a revenue bill by holding a series of up-and-down votes on amendments to an underlying bill.

2.   Analyzing Political Disputes

Are our political disputes better modeled by the formalism of social choice or collective decision-making? In this section, I offer some suggestions for answering this question by examining particular cases of political disagreement.

If real-world disagreement consists in clashes of incommensurable preferences, none with a claim to objective correctness, then the morally important feature of our politics will be ensuring that voters are treated fairly. In practice, this means that we will likely endorse democracy (although see Brennan 2011 and 2016 for a dissenting view). If, in contrast, we believe that there are right answers and wrong answers to our political questions, then the principal moral consideration will be epistemic quality. And the case for democracy will be weaker.

First, let us consider those political disputes that seem to obviously involve conflicting preferences. Suppose, for example, that a municipal government earmarks $10 million for cultural purposes. Residents of the city are divided between using these funds to renovate the public libraries or to establish a ballet company. At first blush, it seems there is no fiducial standard of correctness against which these two worthy alternatives may be weighed. (While it is possible that some aesthetic tastes are depraved, and thus objectively wrong, that does not seem to be the case here.)

Or suppose, even less controversially, that a newly-formed country is establishing a road network and debating whether to have drivers use the left side of the road or the right side. They put the matter to a vote. How could there be an correct answer to this question? What might make us think that there is a moral feature to the dispute beyond ensuring that voters are treated fairly?

In fact, these examples belie difficult issues. Consider the first example, and imagine that an alderman makes the following argument: "Some people want the ballet and some people want the library. We all agree that aesthetic preferences for ballet and literature are equally legitimate. We're never going to resolve things that way. So let's figure out which project will make our city a happier place and choose that." In this way, the alderman asks voters to (1) recognize the fact of disagreement, (2) accept that there is no first-order answer to the debate, and (3) seek to identify another goal, which might command consensus or something close to it, to resolve the matter.

If we find such an approach plausible, we have moved out of the realm of social choice and into the realm of collective decision-making. Now one of the two alternatives *is* correct— namely, the welfare-maximizing one. This alternative might be selected under a social choice approach, but it might not. If ballet brings more pleasure to its fans than the library brings to bookworms, then the "fair" preference aggregation method—plausibly, simple majority rule— might select the library, not the ballet, despite a consensus on welfare-maximization which demands the latter.

Or consider the second example, above. There is evidence (Leeming 1969) that driving on the left leads to fewer accidents than driving on the right. Given that, could voters still resist

the idea that there is no correct answer to the question of which side of the road they should choose?

To be sure, justifications for right-side driving might be given: Maybe long-standing practice should be respected. Maybe the new roads should be easy for right-side-driving tourists to navigate. But if justifications are being given in this way—if we are offered reasons for thinking that safety is not in fact the controlling value—then we are again being asked to make a judgment about the correctness of the conclusions our arguments are pointed toward.

Next, consider a salient political debate, which is an hotly-contested one in the United States. This is the debate over whether we should mobilize to fight climate change. This mobilization could include new economic regulations, leading to a loss of output, as well as a reallocation of public and private spending from unambiguously worthy causes (*e.g.* humanitarian relief) to environmental protection.

We might again be tempted to say that this is a matter for social choice, since it is a debate over the sort of society we prefer to live in—one in which output is X and we fund public education (or the military, or humanitarian aid, or whatever), versus one in which output is Y and we spend some of our scarce funds to fight climate change.

But that is not correct. Both sides of this debate agree about something important—*if* climate change is happening, *then* we ought to take steps to fight it. Those opposed to environmental regulation and a tax on carbon think that these are bad policies because they are skeptics about climate change itself. With climate change, we have an empirical dispute which masquerades as a matter of conflicting preferences. But if it's an empirical dispute, then somebody's right and somebody's wrong; either climate change is happening or it is not. Again, considerations of social choice are misplaced. And it would seem that some people—namely,

scientists—are more likely to answer the climate change question correctly than the ignorant are. If that is so, then we have reason to endorse an "unfair" decision-making process (*e.g.* one which does not allow the average voter to weigh in on climate change policy) in the name of epistemic quality.[8]

To be sure, the debate is more complicated than that. People disagree about the existence of climate change, but believers disagree among themselves: about the extent to which climate change threatens our economic livelihood; our moral duties to future generations; the appropriate discount rate to use in today's policy decisions; *etc.*

But this does not establish that there is no right answer to the question of whether we should fight climate change. It only suggests that this question is a complicated one. And grappling with inaccuracy is precisely what our collective decision-making processes are designed to do. Imperfections in voters' abilities to get to the truth about these questions will reveal themselves in the quality of our political outcomes. The right response to discovering such imperfections is not to abandon the process; it is to be aware of our epistemic limitations and to try to improve outcomes by improving competence.

While applying the collective decision-making framework requires consensus about a goal, the goal may be a very "thin" one. Despite widespread disagreement over rights, utility, liberty, and myriad empirical facts about our world, do we not all agree that the *just* climate change policy ought to be chosen? So long as we can reach consensus on some fiducial standard—such as the establishment of justice—we share the necessary common goal. Even a thin consensus, like the pursuit of justice, suffices to show that these disputes are not clashes

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[8] See Kappel 2017 for a discussion of the ramifications of these fact-dependent policy disputes for political legitimacy.

between preferences, but collective searches for truth.

Consider one more example: the debate over abortion. Here it is hard to interpret the debate as one of clashing preferences. Abortion is as hotly-contested as it is because people are driven by strong moral sentiments about the objective rightness or wrongness of killing a fetus. It does not help to resist this by arguing that public policy cannot be purely determined by the demands of morality but must also be shaped by attention to citizens' preferences. For example, we might concede the immorality of abortion but yet still think that a just society permits it if it is sufficiently desired by its citizens. If that is true, it simply pushes the collective decision problem up one level: Instead of asking, "Is abortion morally wrong or not?", we ask, "Given some accepted fact about the morality of abortion, and the degree to which it is supported (or opposed), should it be permitted in our society?" That is a normative question which has a right and a wrong answer.

Suppose that God were to come down and deliver the True Principles of Morality to us, and we thus learned that abortion is immoral. What would we think of a person who, despite this knowledge, continued to agitate for the permissibility of abortion in society? Is there any way in which she could be exculpated for her conduct, for promoting a political view which she *knew* to be wrong? I do not see how.

While this might seem like a trivial point, there is in fact an interesting and subtle consequence of admitting that political questions like these are truth-apt. This is that a rational voter might both (1) judge that X is the correct policy within some domain, and (2) endorse a decision-making procedure which she believes is likely to select Y rather than X.

Imagine a voter, Sally, who forms a belief about the moral permissibility of abortion in an epistemically optimal way: She surveys the evidence in detail; she works to free herself from

bias; and she takes care to scrutinize the various arguments on offer. She may even modify her own belief in light of what she knows about the beliefs of others (this possibility is considered in the literature on the epistemology of disagreement).[9] In any case, let's stipulate that, given the evidence available to her, Sally has arrived at a maximally justified belief about abortion, and has concluded *X*.

Now Sally may act in one of two ways, politically. First, she may try to maximize the probability that the abortion policy corresponding with her view—*X*—obtains.

But this would be irrational. Sally understands that collective decision-making has epistemic power. Therefore, she should accede to a political process that can more effectively get at the truth of the abortion question than she alone can. This is true *even if* Sally believes that the process is likely to select *Y* and not *X*. For example, if the government offers Sally the ability to choose, by fiat, the abortion policy that society will live under—in lieu of majority rule—a rational Sally will turn this power down. And she will turn it down even if she believes that by doing so there is a greater probability that *Y*, which is by her lights the wrong policy, will obtain.

Sally has done the best that she can to arrive at the truth about the morality of abortion; she believes it is *X*, others believe that it is *Y*. But the question of what moral belief she is maximally justified in adopting is different from the question of what political decision-making process is most likely to implement the correct policy. And Sally's moral responsibility, vis-à-vis that second question, is to comport herself so that the system that is most likely to choose the correct policy, *whatever that happens to be*, is established.

Now, one might think that such a demand is tantamount to asking Sally to violate her conscience. It is, but that is not a problem. If actions were legitimate so long as those taking

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[9] The best introduction to disagreement is Feldman 2007.

them believed that they were doing the right thing, many of history's worst moral monsters would be exonerated. That you believe that what you are doing is right does not justify you in your action.[10]

Nor is following one's conscience a necessary condition for acting morally, as explained. Or consider vaccine skeptics: people who believe, against the scientific consensus, that vaccines do not prevent disease and may even be harmful. Some people are vaccine skeptics because they are willfully stupid, or because they propagandize themselves on the Internet, or because they have not devoted sufficient time to studying the issue—or for other blameworthy reasons. But surely not all skeptics are like this; surely some are intelligent and careful people who have simply arrived at (what we believe to be) the wrong conclusion about vaccine safety.

Now suppose that one of these skeptics is considering now what to *believe* but how to *act*: She is considering whether to vaccinate her child or not. If her goal is maximizing the welfare of her child, as it ought to be, then she will vaccinate her child. Why? Because she recognizes the epistemic value of the *de facto* collective decision-making process that has already taken place: The investigation of vaccine safety by expert scientists, and the consensus they have reached. If this parent is rational, and if she seeks *to act* in the best interest of her child, she will subordinate her own judgment to the judgment of the collective for the purpose of action—even as she believes the collective's judgment to be wrong.

None of this requires that the parent change her mind about vaccine safety, or that she refrain from trying to persuade others that her skeptical view is the right one. The point is that one cannot move from (1) *P* believes that *X* is the right thing to do in domain *D*, to (2) *P* ought to try to establish, politically, *X* in *D*. That does not follow. *P*'s moral responsibility is to act in

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[10] On the moral (ir)relevance of conscience, see Foot 2002 and Schueler 2007.

such a way that maximizes the probability that the correct alternative in *D*, *whatever it happens to be*, obtains.

Two final notes. First, I have advanced theoretical reasons for believing that politics is a matter for collective decision-making. There are empirical reasons as well. It is well-known from experimental economics that people are not single-minded self-interest seekers,[11] and political science research tells us that the same is true when it comes to voting: Citizens do not vote with an eye toward maximizing their own advantage but select the policies, candidates, *etc.* that they believe are in the interest of their country at-large. Citizens vote, that is, "sociotropically".[12] This suggests that there *is* a common goal which voters pursue.

Second, there may be formal ways to reduce scenarios of social choice to collective decision-making. Even in scenarios of social choice, there is a sense in which there *is* a best preference ordering: It is the "fair" preference ordering, the one that would be selected by a properly constrained social welfare function—whatever that happens to be. In this way, individual preference orderings can be regarded as noisy judgments about this objectively correct preference ordering (Conitzer and Sandholm 2005).

3. The Relevance of Pluralism

The concept of moral pluralism (sometimes, "value pluralism") has three elements: (1) There are multiple, irreducible, incommensurable moral goods; (2) these goods sometimes come into conflict in the real world (in the sense that pursuing one requires foregoing another); and (3) there is no rational way to resolve these conflicts. For the pluralist, moral loss is inescapable.

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[11] This line of research began with Güth, Schmittberger, and Schwartze (1982).
[12] Kinder and Kiewiet (1979 and 1981).

Although the idea of pluralism is most commonly credited to Isaiah Berlin, it was in fact first elaborated by Sterling Lamprecht (1920 and 1921), four decades earlier. Lamprecht gives the example of a military commander who, in deploying his forces, must choose between protecting a cultural treasure—the cathedral at Chartres—or saving the lives of some of his soldiers. For the pluralist, there is no right answer: Human life is a genuine moral good, sublime art is a genuine moral good, and there is no "correct" solution to the commander's dilemma. This stands in contrast to the views of most normative theorists. The utilitarian, for example, reduces the value of the cathedral, and of the soldiers, to the happiness they now possess or will create. And in that way, the utilitarian provides, at least in principle, unambiguous guidance to the commander. For the pluralist, no such guidance can possibly be given, because no such reduction of value is possible.

By definition, disputes between plural values cannot be resolved with the collective decision-making framework. That framework only applies when there is agreement about the right goal; and a consensus goal is precisely what the pluralist denies. As Robert Talisse puts it,

> pluralism must countenance "no fault" moral disagreement: two parties may hold opposing judgments on a moral question, and yet it could be that neither is wrong. . . . Certain moral disagreements are "no fault" not because of some lack of objectivity about value judgments but rather because it is a fact about certain judgments that they correctly identify and properly estimate the significance of certain objective goods, which are incommensurate with other such goods. (2012: 22)

That is straightforward enough. What is surprising is that the social choice framework may also be unhelpful. There are two reasons for this. First, the pluralist's principle (3) tells us that there is no rational way to resolve conflicts between incommensurable goods ("when a moral dispute is due to a conflict between heterogeneous goods, there is no uniquely rational resolution to the dispute." (Talisse 2012: 22)). Much of social choice theory is devoted to providing precisely such a resolution.

Second, social choice is normative: We believe that we should obtain a group preference ordering in such-and-such a way because that way has moral value (typically, because it is *fair*). But if that is true, then the fair group alternative is just one more morally good thing, to stand beside the moral goods of the alternatives themselves. And pluralism would suggest that it has no claim of superiority over them. What, then, does the social choice framework get us? Does it not introduce one more way for our world to produce moral loss?

Perhaps the moral value of fair aggregation is of a different order than the values of the individual alternatives we seek to aggregate. That is, perhaps we could both (1) agree with the pluralist that there is no standard measure against which the value of the cathedral and the value of the soldiers' lives may be measured, and (2) say that new, better, second-order value is created when we treat those tasked with this decision fairly. The first-order moral loss associated with whatever choice we make is a terrible one, but some good may come of it—if we structure our choice in the appropriate way.

In sum, for disagreements which concern plural values, the framework of collective decision-making is clearly misplaced. The framework of social choice would seem appropriate for modelling these disagreements, but its application leads to problems, described above.

Some of these problems disappear with more precise definitions: Is the "rational" resolution to value conflicts which pluralism denies equivalent to the "rational" constraints we seek to put on our SWFs? If not, then pluralism will not threaten the social choice approach.

Other problems are deeper. For example, does the pluralist maintain that normative value *simpliciter* is incommensurable? Or only a subset of this value? If the latter, then it may be possible to make claims about the superiority or inferiority of second-order, political decision-making processes while denying the possibility of similar claims at the first-order level.

Finally, we might wonder to what extent the political disputes considered in §2 are instances of pluralism in action. Disputes over climate change, at least as described—in which they are disputes about an underlying empirical thesis—are not. But perhaps claims about whether to build a library or fund a ballet company are—and if that is the case, then satisfying resolutions at the first order level may not be possible.

4. Conclusion

The issues raised in this chapter will, I believe, command increasing attention in coming years. Brexit, the Colombian people's (initial) rejection of peace with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia after decades of war, and the election of Donald Trump are all political events which are arguably upright in the social choice sense (since they were results of fair, democratic, political processes) but morally dubious in the collective decision-making sense (since they are, or will lead to, objectively bad outcomes).

But assigning value or disvalue to these events requires that we first determine what our politics are all about. I have argued that much of politics is a collective search for truth, and if that is so then recent events should indeed unsettle us.

We are in a better position to answer Nitzan and Paroush's question, "which of the two juristic systems is socially preferable, a randomly selected group of jurors who possess diverse preferences as well as a variety of social norms or a team of professional judges who share a common goal of seeking the truth?" The answer is the latter. Often we can agree on an objective standard of correctness, and if so then we are obliged to arrange our decision-making process to best serve that objective. The standard may be a thin one, such as "justice" (with no further definition given for that term). But no matter how thin the standard, if it is endorsed by

all those who participate, then all must defer to that process, whatever the implications for their own, personal preferences.

To be sure, there will be vigorous debate over exactly what is meant by "justice". Is justice in a criminal trial convicting defendants who more likely than not committed the crime? Or does justice require, as we typically think it does, a burden of proof above and beyond this? But again, this dispute is not one of conflicting preferences; it is a dispute about the proper "thick" definition of "justice".

All that said, as discussed in §3, the possibility of pluralism raises problems for addressing politics through collective decision-making. Pluralism provides richness in our culture while creating challenges for our politics. This is well-known. What is surprising is that perhaps there is a similar dichotomy at work in our theory, as well.

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