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Democracy's Trade-Off

- 1 You are so stupid, I wouldn't even trust you to watch my cat for five minutes. But I would fight for your right to vote. We all know people whom we deem unqualified to reason coherently and still we do not question universal suffrage. In *Knowing Democracy – A Pragmatist Account of the Epistemic Dimension in Democratic Politics* (Springer 2020), Michael Räber demonstrates that this contradiction is the center of the epistemic argument for democracy. Of course, he has a more sophisticated way of putting the problem. He distinguishes between horizontal and vertical equality. The former implies that as democrats we have equal respect for everybody's opinion, plumber as well as professor, homemaker as well as aviator. No one needs to pass a test to vote. The latter implies that we, at the same time, realize that some people have more expertise than others. Hence, we often wish that expert opinion rules. But we cannot have it both ways. There is a trade-off between these two kinds of political equality.

- 2 Against this backdrop, Räber assesses John Dewey's political philosophy. He argues that the virtue of Dewey lies in acknowledging this trade-off and rendering it productive. According to Räber, this acknowledgment, and with it the insight into a conflictual nature of democracy, is the heart of Dewey's epistemic argument for democracy. He explains and defends this argument with a deep reading of Dewey. The focus is on the *The Public and Its Problems* and on *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Räber manages to provide an interesting interchange between these two books, which are not often combined. The former shows how political problems emerge and the important role first person authority, i.e. the real-life experiences of people, plays in this emergence. The latter yields a theory of inquiry that provides enough space for accounting for the values of everybody's contribution in politics as well as for the necessity for expert knowledge, doing justice to Räber's claim that Dewey is able to render productive the trade-off that characterizes democracy – in successful inquiry horizontal and vertical equality can even be mutually enforcing in parts.

- 3 But the central contribution of Räber's work is not discovering the epistemic argument for democracy in Dewey – in fact, that Dewey had such an argument is well-known and how this argument works has been the subject of a number of recent studies – but the way in which it defends Dewey's case. It argues that Dewey's theory is able to do justice to three claims, all of them integral to an epistemic argument for democracy. First, it does justice to the claim that there are "[e]pistemic costs of social, political and economic inequalities" (128). Räber explains that a democracy that does not integrate everybody leads to biases and a lack of opportunities to learn. Second, Dewey's theory does justice to the claim that "[g]ood political judgment tends to require democratic conditions" (129). Räber explains the similarities between scientific discourse and the way democracies try to solve problems and flesh out policies in a discursive way. While the former of these two claims tends to relate to horizontal equality, the latter tends to relate to vertical equality. Hence, Räber comes up with a third claim, a claim I interpret as the glue that sticks the two together: Dewey's argument for democracy relies on "[g]rowth as the final end of social and political organization" (130). Räber shows how a political community needs expert knowledge as well as the knowledge of as many citizens as possible to grow. So, to make growth the end of political life leads to reinforcing Dewey's effort to combine horizontal and vertical equality instead of playing out the two against each other. By putting the notion of growth center stage in his defense of Dewey's case, Räber not only gives his account the finishing touch but also takes a stand in a larger argument about Dewey's philosophy. I am referring to the controversy over the self-standing nature of Dewey's defense of democracy: whether to Dewey democracy is a value that needs no external support, or derives its legitimacy from doing justice to an ethical value. Räber, if I understand him correctly, belongs to the second camp, the ones who argue that ultimately Dewey does have a normative argument that supports democracy but that is, at the same time, external to democracy, namely growth.

- 4 Besides his case for the internal coherence of Dewey's epistemic argument for democracy, Räber also defends Dewey's case by depicting it as a superior *via media* between two other kinds of political-philosophical arguments in favor of a high participation of ordinary people in politics. Based on the trade-off between horizontal and vertical equality, two possible alternative positions to Dewey's emerge, spanning a continuum with Dewey's in the middle. There is, first, the position that we should favor

vertical equality over horizontal equality. This implies that, since we cannot have both, we should, when push comes to shove, focus on expert knowledge rather than on the inclusion of everyone's opinion. There is, second, the deviation from Dewey into the opposite direction. It implies that, since we cannot have both, we should, when push comes to shove, focus on integrating the position of as many people as possible, rather than relying on expert knowledge.

- 5 Räber sheds more light onto this double-deviation from Dewey's effort to live with the trade-off by attaching a kind of judgment to each of the two. Räber associates the former deviation from Dewey with scientific judgments, the latter with aesthetic judgments. He meticulously engages both of these counter-suggestions and explains why, nevertheless, Dewey's theory towers over the alternatives. In general, it seems as if Räber, who has written enlightening papers on pragmatism's aesthetic theory in the past, is a bit more interested in the aesthetic deviation from Dewey. He thereby focuses on Hannah Arendt as the quintessential proponent of the aesthetic position. Arendt's major point, in Räber's depiction, is that when it comes to policy-making political communities are less about getting things right and more about building a common world together. Therefore, she rejects the scientific wing of the argument for democracy and explains why it is key that as many people as possible become part of politics – this way the political world becomes the world of everybody and not only the world of the powerful few. Regarding the scientific alternative, Räber is not so clear whom exactly he has in mind. Yet, he discusses Apel's and Habermas's deliberative democracy as an example. This implies that he has to show that the deliberative model of democracy relies on an ideal of correctness in politics that is analogous to truth in science and that in turn commits deliberative democrats to focus on expert knowledge at the expense of integration of as many voices as possible – a depiction that most defenders of deliberative democracy would reject. While Räber's juxtaposition between Dewey and Arendt (supported by recent appropriations of Arendt's thought) is a high point of the book and an important contribution to positioning Dewey within the canon of political philosophy, Räber's argument against the scientific alternative to Dewey is harder to fathom. On this latter point, Räber's case could have benefitted from invoking the Dewey-Lippmann-discussion to which Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* belongs. It might have been interesting to see how Lippmann's differentiation between outsiders and insiders ties in with the scientific, and maybe also elitist, alternative to Dewey's theory. Though Räber mentions Lippmann's position (see 162), it is surprising that it does not play a more prominent role in his argument. Engaging Lippmann might have improved Räber's case against the scientific alternative to Dewey. On the other hand, it is also true that there has been much more research on the scientific-elitist alternative to Dewey in recent years, including Bohman's appreciation of the Dewey-Lippmann-debate (2010), than on the aesthetic alternative for which Arendt stands. This justifies that Räber seems to be more committed to the latter. All in all, Räber's case for the superiority of Dewey's *via media* over the two alternatives is full of insight not only to pragmatists, most of whom might be converted already, but to everyone interested in democratic theory.
- 6 Over and above pinpointing Dewey's epistemic argument for democracy, Räber's book also includes what could be called an application part. In chapters seven and eight, it discusses, among other things, how well Dewey's theory can cope with issues of integration as we know them today, with latest insights on grass-roots politics, and with the argument for the wisdom of crowds. For example, Räber shows how Dewey's

focus on integrating affected people in social welfare policy is crucial for not only getting it right but for getting solutions that actually and sustainably help the ones they are meant to help. Also, Räber defends the value of conceiving a political community in (partial) analogy to a scientific community – both intend to get things right – in light of the recent rise of conspiracy theories. Though Räber does not make this explicit, it is natural to read this as a comment on the era of Trump. Besides that, the book's application part does a nice job reaffirming the importance as well as the timeliness of the issue Räber deals with.

- 7 If I am allowed to make a wish for the future – I am writing this on Christmas Eve – I wish that Räber continues his research on the topic and, in a future book, extends his argument from a *Deweyan* epistemic argument for democracy to a *pragmatist* epistemic argument for democracy. While Räber persuasively rejects Talisse's and Misak's appropriations of Charles S. Peirce's epistemic argument for democracy as scientistic, he hints that, as a matter of fact, Peirce is much closer to Dewey in this respect (136–45). I would like to read more about Peirce's true epistemic argument for democracy. Also, it would be interesting to include the work of Hilary Putnam since the late Putnam (2002) has an alternative interpretation of science to the one commonly used. A different, more pragmatic conception of science, like the one Putnam suggests, will have an impact on any epistemic argument for democracy. Last but definitely not least, Jane Addams could contribute to Räber's topic with her insights on the crucial role the affected need to play in impactful social reform, no matter what is their education (1902). The history of pragmatism has a lot of untapped potential for better understanding the epistemic issues that are foundational to democracy. With Räber's and his predecessors' work, it might now be the time for *pragmatism's* epistemic argument for democracy, the time for enriching Dewey with some of his fellow pragmatists.

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