Two Democratic Hopes

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Robert Westbrook claims that pragmatist political theorists share a common hope for democracy. I argue that there are at least two distinct and opposed pragmatist conceptions of democracy – one Deweyan, the other Peircean – and thus two distinct and opposed hopes for democracy. I then criticize the Deweyan view and defend the Peircean view.

In his new book, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth*, Robert Westbrook provides a compelling account of the state of play in pragmatist political theory. On the whole, I find his analyses and narrative agreeable. However, Westbrook’s discussion provides occasion to draw attention to an important and growing schism within contemporary pragmatist political theory. Although Westbrook writes as if there were a single, though variously expressed, democratic hope that pragmatists adopt, I see at least two separate and opposed democratic hopes that claim to be pragmatist in origin. These two democratic hopes derive respectively from the two different pragmatisms of John Dewey and Charles Peirce.

I begin by posing a dilemma that confronts Deweyan democracy. I shall then argue that the Peircean approach to democracy that Cheryl Misak and I have proposed avoids this dilemma. If, as I allege, this dilemma represents a serious difficulty for Deweyans, and if Peircean democracy succeeds in avoiding it, then there is a significant difference between the “epistemic justification for democracy” deployed by Peirceans like Misak (195) and the Deweyan commitment to a participatory democracy grounded in a substantive moral ideal (230). This difference, I contend, marks a significant divide between Deweyan and Peircean democracy. This divide entails that there is not a single pragmatist democratic hope. There is instead a Peircean hope and a Deweyan
hope. I find myself on the side of the Peircean hope, and I oppose the Deweyan one. I am not sure where Westbrook stands, and would like to hear more.

1. A Dilemma for Deweyan Democracy

We may characterize Deweyan democracy, at least in a preliminary way, in terms of the contrast between substantive and procedural theories of democracy. To make sense of this contrast, consider Schumpeter's famous definition of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people's vote." (1950, 250) On Schumpeter's view, democracy is strictly procedural. Embodying no particular normative vision for society beyond that of efficient and limited government, it consists simply in procedures of political decision.

Given its procedural orientation, Schumpeter's view also implies a position regarding what we might call the scope of democracy. If democracy is simply a procedure by which elites compete for political office, then democracy is focused exclusively on the state. Hence, on Schumpeter's view, democracy is maximally narrow in scope; it is, we may say, statist.

The Deweyan view, by contrast, holds that democracy is not simply a procedure for deciding who shall hold political office; it is instead a "way of life" (LW11: 217; LW13: 155) that manifests a substantive "moral" (LW7: 349) and "social" (LW2: 325) ideal, a commitment to the "liberation of the potentialities of members of the group in harmony with the interests and good which are common" (LW2:327). On the Deweyan view, democracy's home, then, is not the voting booth or the jury box or the floor of congress; rather, democracy resides "in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life" (LW14:226). In short, Deweyans see democracy as moral "through and through: in its foundations, its methods, its ends" (LW13:173); they identify democracy with the moral aspiration of a political order in which each "feels [the community’s] success as his success, and its failure as his failure" (MW9:18). In fact, Dewey associates democracy with "the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity" (EW1:248).

Because of its substantive nature, Deweyan democracy also rejects the statist orientation of Schumpeter's view. Since on the Deweyan view democracy is a moral ideal in its own right, "the idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best" (LW2: 325). As it is a "mode of associated living" (MW9:43) and the "idea of community life itself" (LW2: 328), Deweyan democracy has a broad scope. For Deweyans, democracy is deep; that is, they take democracy as a moral ideal that extends down into "all modes of human association," including "the family, the school, industry, religion" (LW2: 325).

Now let us turn to the dilemma. Much of contemporary political philosophy is motivated by the problem set for substantive theories of democracy by