Rethinking Democratic Ideals in Light of Charles Peirce

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Talisse proposes a reconstruction of a pragmatist view of democracy based on Peirce’s scientific method. I argue that on the one hand, Talisse’s “Peircean” account of democracy is not truly Peircean because it ignores his metaphysics; on the other hand, that his account minimizes Peirce’s possible contribution by focusing too narrowly on his epistemology. I show how Talisse’s account is open to the same kind of objections he makes to Dewey’s theory, and how Peirce’s remarks on ethics can contribute towards a more compelling pragmatist democratic theory than Talisse allows.

The pragmatist most often associated with democratic theory is John Dewey, not Charles Peirce. Dewey wrote extensively on the topic; Peirce, not at all. However, as often happens with Peirce, what he does say can frequently be used with great benefit towards understanding many different topics, even if he does not explicitly address them as such in his writings. Such is the case, I argue, with Peirce and a theory of democratic ideals.

The claim that Peirce’s theory can contribute to a robust democratic theory is not novel. Robert Talisse, for example, claims just that in his latest book. But on the one hand, Talisse’s “Peircean” account of democracy is not truly Peircean because it ignores his metaphysics; and on the other hand, his “Peircean” account minimizes Peirce’s possible contribution to a democratic theory by focusing too narrowly on his epistemology. I will show, first, how Talisse’s “Peircean” account is open to the same kind of objections he makes to Dewey’s democratic theory, and then I will show how Peirce’s often misunderstood remarks on ethics can contribute towards a more compelling pragmatist democratic theory than the one Talisse allows.

Drawing on concerns introduced by John Rawls in his later works, specifically his claim that “a continuing shared understanding on one comprehensive doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power,” Talisse argues that the Deweyan conception of democracy is such a comprehensive (substantivist) political system in Rawls’ sense, and hence cannot accommodate “reasonable pluralism” (Talisse 2007, 23), defined early on as the claim that disagreements over certain questions are permanently and
unavoidably irresolvable (Talisse 2007, 34). Talisse finds Rawls’ own proceduralist conception, which sees democracy as essentially the administrative task of managing social conflict, though supportive of reasonable pluralism, as not substantive enough, that is, as not concerned with the larger “moral project of crafting a certain kind of society by cultivating a certain kind of citizen” (Talisse 2007, 23). Talisse proposes instead a reconstruction of a pragmatist view of democracy based exclusively on Peirce’s method of scientific inquiry. The claim is that, just as inquirers “must attend to reasons, argument, and evidence” in proper formation of beliefs, the democratic citizen must attend to reasons, argument, evidence (as opposed to “slogans, insults, threats, or blows”) in proper policy formation (Talisse 2007, 71). Since this proper epistemic community is necessary for responsible epistemic agents, the state and social institutions must cultivate and maintain it. This is how Talisse comes up with what he calls a “Peircean” account that supports a non-oppressive account of democracy, and which he claims is superior to Rawls’ bare-bones “thin” democratic theory since it is substantive, but yet has no “philosophical commitments,” which is the fault found with Dewey.

But what exactly is wrong with the conception of democracy as provided by Dewey, “the philosopher of American democracy” par excellence? (Talisse 2007, 27). Talisse claims that Dewey inflates pragmatism’s “philosophical commitments,” resulting in “a systematic and comprehensive philosophy in itself, complete with its own metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics” (Talisse 2007, 18). This makes Dewey’s pragmatism “normatively thick,” and since again “the fact of reasonable pluralism entails that any normatively thick account will be reasonably rejectable and therefore inappropriate as a basis for policy and political action,” (Talisse 2007, 54). Dewey’s democratic theory is fatally flawed. But since, according to Talisse, “Peirce’s pragmatism itself entails no “positive philosophical commitments beyond the pragmatic maxim,” it can serve as a substantive epistemic account of democracy that can accommodate reasonable pluralism, thereby avoiding Dewey’s mistakes (Talisse 2007, 10).

One of Talisse’s objections to Dewey’s pragmatism as we saw above is that it has too many metaphysical commitments.

Dewey builds into his definition of inquiry the idea of a “situation,” and the corresponding distinction between “determinate” and “indeterminate” situations.... Dewey’s view of experience is philosophically weighty. (Talisse 2007, 16)

And one of the merits of Peirce’s pragmatism, according to Talisse, is that it is essentially an anti-metaphysical strategy, a way of dismissing the “make-believers” of previous philosophizing. (Talisse 2007, 6)