Reply to Clanton and Forcehimes

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Caleb Clanton and Andrew Forcehimes challenge a controversial thesis that I have proposed in some of my recent work. That thesis is composed of the following two claims: (1) Deweyan democracy is nonviable because it cannot countenance pluralism, and (2) there is an alternative pragmatist conception of democracy based in Peirce’s epistemology that can countenance pluralism. Clanton and Forcehimes argue that there is a “tension” or “conflict” in the two parts of the thesis. They pose the following constructive dilemma: I must commit either to a strong or weak reading of the nonconvergence component of pluralism. If I commit to strong nonconvergentism, then both Deweyan and Peircean democracy are doomed; however, if I commit to weak nonconvergentism, then Peircean democracy is saved, but so is Deweyan democracy. Therefore, we must either bid farewell to both Deweyan and Peircean democracy, or admit that both are viable conceptions of democracy.

Their argument is tidy and forceful. However, I do not think that it succeeds. I should note straightaway that I find their presentation of my views accurate, and I also endorse much of what they say in reaction to my critics. Most importantly, they identify a crucial juncture in my work where I have not been as clear as I need to be. I welcome the opportunity to be more explicit.

I begin with the nonconvergence component of pluralism. Pluralism is not simply the claim that there is on-going disagreement about fundamental moral questions; nor is it simply the recommendation that such disagreement must be tolerated rather than suppressed. Pluralism in all of its varieties involves the further claim that ongoing disagreement over moral fundamentals is not necessarily proof of irrationality, depravity, ignorance, or even error. Pluralists claim that even the best employment of reason leaves underdetermined or unsettled certain moral questions. Accordingly, pluralists hold that we should not expect all rational persons to converge on a single moral view, even when they are all correctly attending to the relevant reasons, arguments, and evidence. In other words, even under highly favorable conditions, disagreement over
fundamental moral matters prevails. This is the nonconvergence component of pluralism.

Different versions of pluralism offer competing versions of the nonconvergence thesis. In the metaphysical version offered by Isaiah Berlin and others, nonconvergence is due to the nature of value. On Berlinian views, different objective goods bear relations of intrinsic hostility to other objective goods, and there is no sumnum bonum by reference to which competing goods may be rank-ordered. As different goods make their respective claims on us, there are many ways of addressing moral conflicts that are consistent with the full employment of reason. Epistemic version of pluralism, by contrast, need make no claims regarding the nature of value; epistemic pluralisms hold that nonconvergence is the result of some fact of moral epistemology. On such views, human reason, even at its best, is not up to the task of finding uniquely rational solutions to moral dilemmas; hence many solutions are consistent with the proper exercise of human reason, despite their being inconsistent with each other. As the view aspires to be strictly epistemological, epistemic pluralism need not take a stand on the question of whether there are uniquely rational solutions to moral conflicts; epistemic pluralism says only that we have not proven able to reach such solutions, and thus there are several distinctive and mutually incompatible options available to reasonable people.

In both cases, nonconvergence is held to be in some sense permanent. Clanton and Forcehimes correctly identify a stronger and a weaker version of the nonconvergence thesis. The strong nonconvergentism holds that widespread reasoned agreement, or consensus, on fundamental moral questions is in principle unavailable. Weaker nonconvergentism holds the more modest view that consensus is not to be expected. Accordingly, both versions hold that widespread agreement, when it appears to exist, should be treated with suspicion; the strong view holds such consensus as proof of suppression, the weak version holds that consensus strongly suggests suppression. Metaphysical pluralists tend to be strong nonconvergentists, and weak non-convergence tends to be favored by epistemic pluralists. To be sure, some epistemic pluralists arguably are strong nonconvergentists, but we need not pursue this matter here.

With this rough taxonomy in place, I turn to the argument. Clanton and Forcehimes hold that, although Deweyan democracy is indeed inconsistent with strong nonconvergentism, strong nonconvergentism is also inconsistent with the Peircean epistemology that lies at the root of my positive view. They contend that strong nonconvergentism, if true, would render Peircean inquiry impotent. They argue that the possibility of convergence is a regulative assumption of inquiry, and strong nonconvergentism denies this possibility.

I reject strong nonconvergentism; however I do not think that it is necessarily inconsistent with Peircean inquiry. Even if we suppose, with the strong nonconvergentist, that some question, \( Q \), is underdetermined by all the evidence there could be, inquiry could still yield results concerning which proposed answers to \( Q \) are nonviable. In other words, even if we suppose that