

John Dewey and Contemporary Challenges to Democratic Education

This book reconsiders pragmatist conceptions of democratic education, especially those of John Dewey. It addresses what democratic education can mean in the face of current threats that are undermining democracy.

Since the mid-twentieth century, liberal philosophers have been skeptical of fostering values through public education. Since liberal democracy must embrace different worldviews, education, especially public education, must refrain from teaching values as much as possible. Given the recent undermining of democratic nation-states and their liberal foundations, this educational abstinence can be interpreted as one of the drivers of the current crisis of democracy. This book sketches how a renewed democratic education, modeled after John Dewey and other forms of pragmatist educational philosophy, might look today. It identifies the conceptual, political, and technological challenges to education and democracy and explores how a new democratic education could be implemented in the classroom.

John Dewey and Contemporary Challenges to Democratic Education will appeal to scholars and advanced students interested in pragmatism and American philosophy, the philosophy of education, and political philosophy.

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7 Deweyan Democracy and Education in a “Society of Broadcasters”

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7.1 Introduction

This chapter develops and discusses a Deweyan perspective on the contemporary difficulties of deliberation within the highly fragmented digitized public spheres of liberal democracies. A high level of fragmentation is a key feature of digitized public spheres, as digital technologies like computers, the internet, and social media platforms facilitate the creation of political content, the circumvention of traditional gatekeepers like journalists, and the personalization of access to political debates (cf. Shirky, 2008; Sunstein, 2017; Mounk, 2018). As a result, democratic theorists are concerned that the digitized public spheres are insufficiently inclusive for identifying public opinions that are generally acceptable (Cohen & Fung, 2021; Habermas, 2021; Culp, 2023). The Deweyan perspective developed in this chapter adds new insights into the existing analyses of political deliberation by emphasizing the importance of a well-functioning democracy for citizens’ lifelong education, as well as by highlighting the impact of cultural transformations on liberal democracy. However, despite the valuable insights that can be generated by the Deweyan perspective, this article also criticizes it for failing to deal adequately with the unavoidable pluralism of reasonable understandings of the good life in a liberal democracy. The chapter therefore also seeks to evaluate to what extent, if at all, the Deweyan insights can be taken up as well by a political liberal perspective that seeks to accommodate this pluralism.

The chapter is structured as follows. In Section 7.2, I explain the ways in which, from a Deweyan perspective, democracy matters for lifelong education by way of facilitating exchanges across group boundaries. In Section 7.3, I underline the importance of Dewey’s claim that democracy is a way of life by showing how cultural developments generate problems

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of political deliberation within a communicative environment shaped by digital technologies. For that purpose, I propose the notion “society of broadcasters” as an interpretative device for understanding some of the recent cultural and technological transformations in Western societies. From a technological perspective, a society of broadcasters is one in which citizens possess the technological tools to digitally broadcast their ideas and personalities to virtually all other citizens of society at almost zero costs (cf. Shirky, 2008). From a cultural perspective, it is a society in which all citizens participate in a performative culture in which the expressive staging of one’s singular personality is crucial (Reckwitz, 2020, 2021). In Section 7.4, I clarify, however, that the Deweyan emphasis on cultural transformations is connected to a liberal perfectionist commitment to democracy in all spheres of life, which views individual self-realization or autonomy as an objectively valid conception of human flourishing. The Deweyan perspective is therefore not endorsable from a variety of reasonable conceptions of the good (cf. Talisse, 2010). I therefore reflect to what extent the analysis of the cultural background conditions can be conducted from the political liberal understanding of deliberative democracy, which restricts citizens’ commitment to democracy to the realm of the political (cf. Rawls, 1999). Doing so, I suggest that Dewey’s theory of democratic education provides good reasons for holding that citizens cannot develop properly democratic habits and routines if they do not encounter and practice them outside the realm of the political. Section 7.5 concludes.

7.2 Deweyan Democratic Education

7.2.1 *Deweyan Democracy as Education vs. Deliberative Democratic Theory*

The Deweyan perspective on problems of fragmented digitized public spheres shares the contemporary deliberative democrats’ concern with political communication (cf., e.g., Habermas, 1996, Chambers, 1996, Richardson, 2002, Forst, 2012). This should come as no surprise, given the importance that Dewey ascribes to communication, deliberation, and discussion, and which has led several deliberative democrats like Bohman (1999), Habermas (1996), Richardson (2002), or Young (2000) to refer positively to Dewey’s work. Indeed, Dewey’s commitment to society-wide communication and discussion across different social groups is so pervasive throughout his philosophical work that it may even seem superfluous to provide any textual evidence in its support. Nevertheless, quoting a full paragraph of his first chapter of *Democracy and Education* seems fitting, as in this passage Dewey (1916/2018) describes communication not only

as an essential means for society’s continuity, but also refers to it as constituting the very nature of society:

Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication.

(p. 6)

Despite the remarkable resemblance between Deweyan and deliberative theories of democracy, however, there are also important differences between these two types of democratic theories. These differences concern especially those between a Deweyan democratic theory and those deliberative democratic theories that are committed to a version of Rawls’s political liberalism (cf. Talisse, 2010). While the political liberal conceptions of deliberative democracy, like Deweyan democratic theory, emphasize the normative importance of political deliberation within modern liberal societies, they view, more so than Deweyan democratic theory, a pluralism of reasonable but conflicting understandings of the good life and of social justice as unavoidable features of liberal societies (cf. Rawls, 1999). Deliberative democrats of this political liberal kind therefore highlight the ways in which *reasonable* political deliberation, guided by a regulative idea of *public reason*, should facilitate dealing adequately with this diversity and the resulting disagreements (cf. Habermas, 1996, 1998; Forst, 2012, 2018). In particular, reasonable political deliberation or public reasoning is meant to facilitate the identification of laws and public policies that are mutually acceptable to all citizens. Like in Deweyan democratic theory, such deliberation involves the free give-and-take of reasons among citizens who relate to one another politically as free and equal normative authorities that can contribute to determining appropriate political decision-making.¹ Thus, one important reason why fragmented public spheres are normatively problematic is that that they are not particularly conducive for identifying the laws and policies that would be mutually acceptable and thus in line with public reason. If citizens do not communicate and do not reason with one another because they do not inhabit shared communicative spaces or because their communicative spheres do not interpenetrate one another, then they cannot find out what they mutually owe one another.²

While the Deweyan democratic theory can accept the *epistemic function* that political discussion has for identifying what is mutually acceptable to all citizens, it also ascribes an important *educative function* to the communication facilitated by deliberative democracy. Indeed, deliberative democrats can also view the identification of mutually acceptable laws and public policies as a process of education facilitated by political deliberation. Different

from Dewey, however, they lack an *educational theory* of how to theoretically conceive this deliberative democratic process as a form of education rather than merely as an epistemic gain. Offering such an educational theory, as Dewey does, allows us to gain a better understanding of the losses and problems involved in fragmented communicative environments. More specifically, the Deweyan perspective enables seeing these environments as hindrances to citizens' lifelong education because they engender inadequate experience and maladapted habits resulting in failures of self-realization. Therefore, the conceptualization of deliberative democracy's educative function is one relevant contribution that a Deweyan perspective can make to the analysis of the normative problems of highly fragmented public spheres.

7.2.2 *Education as Situated Experience of Growth*

The Deweyan perspective lends itself particularly well to conceiving democracy as a form of education, because through this perspective democracy can be understood as a situation providing ample opportunities for learning. This is because Dewey holds that education results from a socially and individually conditioned situation which gives rise to experiences that entail the continuous development of habits and routines that allow solving the problems that the situation presents. Dewey (1938/2015) holds that all education (whether "traditional" or "progressive") consists of experience and that every experience is the result of an "interaction" between "objective and internal conditions" (p. 42). It is this interaction that Dewey refers to as a particular "situation" of education. And this situation of education represents a "development of experience", which is, according to Dewey (1938/2015), "essentially a social process" (p. 58). The social process that leads to education can take place in the classroom just as much as in other settings such as the family, the workplace, or political movements. Thus, in the same way in which students learn more or less depending on the arrangement of school organization, school culture, and teaching practices, adult citizens will learn more or less depending on how societal structures like laws, public policies, family organization, and cultural patterns shape the learning of citizens within their society. This implies that there is no fundamental difference between the learning of immature children and that of mature adults. The main difference between children and adults is that they attempt developing solutions within different types of structural conditions (Dewey, 1916/2018, ch. 4).

On the Deweyan perspective, the structural conditions are crucial for the success of education, as education consists in gaining the right kind of experience and involves the conscious appreciation of how certain types of actions or reactions provide adequate solutions to a particular set of problems arising under certain conditions. This conscious appreciation should

thus lead the individual – the child or the adult – to gradually develop effective routines, partly by one’s changing behavior and partly by changing the structural conditions so as to appropriately respond to the given set of problems. Dewey (1902/1990) elaborates as follows on the structural conditions facilitating the experience of valuable capacities:

Development of experience and into experience that is really wanted [...] is impossible save as just that educative medium is provided which will enable the powers and interests that have been selected as valuable to function. They must operate, and how they operate will depend almost entirely upon the stimuli which surround them and the material upon which they exercise themselves. The problem of direction is thus the problem of selecting appropriate stimuli for instincts and impulses which it is desired to employ in the gaining of new experience.³

(pp. 196–197)

The structural conditions of a democracy thus represent an “educative medium” to the extent that individuals and groups reflectively adapt their habits in response to their environments to solve existing social problems. Education is thus a *process of growth* that involves the ongoing “formation of intellectual and emotional disposition as well as an increase in ease, economy, and efficiency of action” regarding continuously changing problems as they arise in ever new environments (cf. Dewey (1916/2018), p. 53). According to this processual or developmental view, not just any kind of experience is educative, but only those experiences may count as educative that lead to *more* experience. The experience of a new insight that may be intellectually pleasurable would not count as educative, for example, if it does not lead the learner to seek more pleasurable educational experiences later. As Dewey (1939/2015) explains, “every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into.” (p. 38) Put differently, an educative experience must have the quality of energizing or moving the learner toward more educative experience later. And by the same token, education must not be viewed as educative experience if it diminishes the learner’s interest in exploring new knowledge or habits of learning. Accordingly, Dewey (1938/2015) holds: “When and *only* when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing” (p. 36).

7.2.3 Education through Communication

Thereby the normative point of properly arranged public spheres and political discourses, on this Deweyan view, is that of contributing to citizens’ education by enriching and further developing citizens’ experience.

Democracy, as Dewey (1916/2018) puts it, is “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” that promotes growth through a greater appreciation of existing social problems as well as a greater variety of individual experiences (p. 93). To achieve this experience, public communication must not be fragmented. Instead, it must facilitate communication across different social groups as well as the shared experience of participation in society’s common ends (cf. Dewey, 1916/2018, pp. 92–94). Regarding communication across social groups, Dewey (1938/2015) states that “future learning springs from easy and ready contact and communication with each other” (p. 60). Individuals can benefit from learning how other individuals have solved problems differently, as they can try to adopt others’ strategies or habits themselves, and thereby further increase experiences that are potentially educative. And regarding participation in society’s common ends, Dewey (1916/2018) explains the importance of communication for community-building like this:

Communication is the way in which they [i.e. men [sic]] come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—like-mindedness as the sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces. The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements.

(pp. 6–7)

In this Deweyan perspective, thus, political communication plays an educative role because it creates mutual understandings of what the contemporary social challenges are, and what potential solutions to these challenges might be. It thereby helps applying “social intelligence” to a given social challenge (cf. Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 83). “Intellectual organization,” Dewey (1938/2015) holds, “is the means by which social relations, distinctively human ties and bonds, may be understood and more intelligently ordered.” (p. 83) Establishing such intellectual organization is a process of education, as Dewey conceives it, as these mutual understandings are part of a process of reflectively developing habits in response to new social environments. Thereby the Deweyan democratic perspective frames problems of political communication as problems of citizens’ life-long education. Citizens within distorted communicative environments lack experience of others’ points of view and lack a common political identity, whereby they are hindered to develop habits and routines that would properly respond to the existing situation.

7.3 Mis- and Noncommunication in a “Society of Broadcasters”

Adopting the Deweyan understanding of democracy, this section concentrates on certain cultural and technological aspects of contemporary public spheres that contribute to their fragmented nature and thereby pose a central challenge for political communication within liberal democracies. A closer examination of these aspects justifies, I argue, labeling contemporary Western societies as “societies of broadcasters”. Indeed, there are also other aspects of the current public spheres that are relevant for explaining the difficulty of deliberating reasonably, including economic aspects like an increase in national inequalities of income and wealth (cf. World Inequality Lab, 2022).⁴ I focus on cultural and technological aspects, however, because they are especially important within Dewey’s encompassing understanding of democracy and pragmatist philosophy. Let me explain.

Cultural aspects of democracy are all-important for Dewey, because he does not view democracy as a set of formal institutions of government – for example, one that is characterized by regular, secret elections of competing candidates for offices of political representation. Accordingly, when reflecting on how to enhance democracy, Dewey (1927/2016) argues that he is “not concerned [...] to set forth counsels as to advisable improvements in the political forms of democracy” (p. 174). Instead, Dewey (1927/2016) emphasizes that “the idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion” (p. 171). Dewey’s (1927/2016) concern with cultural orientations is motivated by the goal of finding ways of how, under modern conditions of mass society, “a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests” (p. 174). Dewey claims that in order to achieve this aim, democracy must take on the shape of a social form of life that is marked by certain cultural orientations toward community life and society-wide communication across group boundaries (cf. Dewey (1916/2018), ch. 7).

Regarding the technological aspects of contemporary communication, my concern with them is congruent with the evolution-theoretic, Darwinist, background assumptions of Dewey’s pragmatist philosophical approach. Pragmatism, in line with evolutionary theory, denies the existence of a fixed human nature and static natural or social environments. Instead, it assumes that ever changing natural and social environments continuously give rise to new practical and theoretical problems. Thus, Dewey’s pragmatist outlook is congenial to my focus in this chapter on the ways in which the use of digital technologies has contributed to new social and political environments and thereby transformed problems of society-wide communication through fragmented public spheres.

7.3.1 “Society of Broadcasters”

Analyzing these new environments, it seems appropriate to hold that the cultural-cum-technological transformations of the past few decades have resulted in a “society of broadcasters”. From a technological point of view, this term is meant to capture that due to the Web 2.0 technology citizens, in their capacity as internet “producers”, can now publish and transmit information and cultural contents to an indeterminate audience of listeners and viewers at almost zero costs (cf. Shirky, 2008). This shift is often described as a change from a “one-to-many” to a “many-to-many” form of communication. From a cultural perspective, by contrast, the term captures the performative and phatic character of political communication (Miller, 2011, pp. 203–205; Reckwitz, 2020). The point of such communication is to perform and express one’s singular identity and to seek recognition of one’s identity from the other members of the relevant (online) community. Thus, today’s communication often consists mainly of staging and expressing one’s political position and identity vis-à-vis a large audience but without seriously engaging with the audience’s responses, except for noting the audience’s approval or disapproval. It may not even count as proper political communication, as it is more one, rather than bi-directional, and does not involve a back-and-forth of arguments. From a Deweyan perspective, communication in a society of broadcasters suffers from a lack of communication across the divides of social groups and fails to facilitate the experience of shared common ends of society at large.

This might sound surprising, given that the transformation from a one-to-many to a many-to-many form of communication initially might appear as a shift toward a more inclusive – and thereby also more democratic – form of communication. After all, the Web 2.0 technology allows virtually everyone with an internet connection and a digital device to circumvent the traditional gatekeepers of political public communication such as newspaper editors or journalists. Thereby it increases tremendously the potential reach of citizens’ speech, and thus apparently also enhances citizens’ individual agency and the quality of deliberation (cf. Kahne et al., 2015).⁵

7.3.2 *Technologically Conditioned Miscommunication and Noncommunication*

Yet, problematically, this democratic imaginary of Web 2.0 powered communication falsely suggests that there are not only many persons emitting information and cultural contents but also many persons receiving, listening to, and engaging with information and cultural contents. This is misleading, however, as there are not as “many” citizens who are receiving, listening to, and engaging with the many self-empowered, individual

broadcasters. At least there are not as many citizens receiving, listening to, and engaging with these many individual broadcasters as there are citizens receiving and listening to the information and cultural contents of the small set of (often public) broadcasters using TV or radio in the second half of the twentieth century.

One way of how to understand why digital technologies fail to truly improve agency and deliberation is by taking account of their structural effects on the communication environment, including information overload, fake-news, and the personalization of media content. Information overload and the ubiquity of low-quality information arises from the ease and low monetary cost with which information can be published and shared without any editorial control (cf. Castells, 2003, Barney, 2004). Fake-news has similar reasons but also results from the large number of bots and false identities, which are programmed and paid to spread inaccurate information and can rise to great numbers (Harsin, 2018; Ford, 2021; O’Neill, 2022). Personalization of media content means that various applications of digital technologies – including search engines, social media platforms, and streaming services – are algorithmically programmed and functionally designed to display information and operations that are tailored to the expressed preferences of their users so as to increase their employment of these technologies (Sunstein, 2017). Thereby these structural features significantly lower the individual agency and deliberative quality that digital technologies initially might have seemed to facilitate.

7.3.3 The Ethos of Authenticity within a Singularizing Culture

To understand why there are nevertheless “so many” citizens who are producing and sending information by employing Web 2.0 technologies, despite the little agency and the low quality of deliberation that is thereby achieved, it is necessary to look at some relevant cultural shifts.⁶ Particularly important are the cultural shifts that Reckwitz (2020, 2021) refers to as processes of singularization. These induce individuals to display their distinct personalities by way of engaging in phatic types of communication that produce the experience of possessing and sharing a singular identity as individual or group. The “singularizing culture” (Reckwitz) represents a development of tendencies already inherent in Romanticism. Emphasizing singular, authentic experience, individuals, and groups have been developing an “ethos of authenticity” in opposition to the unifying and generalizing normative expectations arising from a supposedly all-encompassing way of conceiving reason and rationalization in the Enlightenment (cf. Taylor, 1991).

In line with this oppositional stance toward rationalist standardization, the more recent processes of singularization contrast with the generalizing culture of the mid-twentieth century within Western societies. In this



Accordingly, the digital net in general and social media in particular puts special emphasis on pictures and videos, which affect users more than mere text (cf. Mirzoeff, 1999). And online texts on social media often have, as already stated, the character of a “phatic” communication that merely affirms one’s identity rather than actually engaging in an exchange of reasons. This orientation toward affects is further intensified through algorithms that are programmed to increase the use of social media and other online platforms like search engines, and which prioritize emotional content, including hate speech, simply because this generates more attention as measured by likes, clicks, or screen time (cf. Lanier, 2018).

Digital speech in a “society of broadcasters” is thus quite often a form of mis- or noncommunication. The technologically induced, structural features of information overload, fake-news, and personalization, as well as the culturally-shaped emphasis on emotional, phatic or identity-affirming speech entail discursive fragmentation and are not necessarily conducive to a reasonable exchange of political argumentation.

7.4 Assessing the Deweyan Perspective

Thus far, I have pointed out two insights that can be gained by adopting a Deweyan perspective on the problem of highly fragmented public spheres within contemporary liberal democracies. The first Deweyan insight, presented in Section 7.2, was that malfunctioning public spheres are hindrances to citizens’ lifelong education, given that citizens in such communicative environments lack the experiences they need to develop the attitudes and habits that would properly correspond to the existing social challenges. Accordingly, as inadequate public spheres affect everyone’s education, everyone should be concerned about these inadequacies as a matter of self-interest and not only out of a justice-based concern for democracy.⁷ The second Deweyan insight, presented in Section 7.3, was that cultural transformations toward an ethos of authenticity coupled with a technological environment facilitating many-to-many “communication” sustains a “society of broadcasters” in which a great number of citizens speak (digitally) but do not properly communicate by way of exchanging reasons. Accordingly, the Deweyan perspective urges us to revise the ways in which technology and culture interactively sustain mis- or noncommunication. These are valuable insights for better understanding the ways in which contemporary public spheres are fragmented. They must nevertheless be treated with caution, as the Deweyan perspective represents a political philosophy of liberal perfectionism that seems incompatible with core features of liberal democracies.



7.4.1 Dewey's Liberal Perfectionism

To clarify, by “perfectionism” I mean a view that includes the idea that values about the good life can be objectively valid for a person irrespective of the judgment of that person about these values.⁸ Formulated in this manner, perfectionism represents a cognitivist position regarding the normative status of ethical claims about the good life. In line with this meta-ethical characterization, liberal perfectionism as a political philosophy stands for the view that a liberal conception of the good, which ascribes value to liberty or autonomy, is objectively valid. Thus, liberal perfectionism should inform not only personal lifestyles but also political choices concerning the institutional arrangements of a society, as well as the cultural orientations expressed in civil society that are framing political and personal perspectives. Thus, a liberal perfectionist political philosophy (1) affirms the objective value of a liberal conception of the good, (2) maintains that this value consists in liberty or autonomy, and (3) holds that this conception should inform not only political arrangements but also individual's ethical choices and cultural patterns, thus denying a (strict) separation between morality or ethics and politics.

Consider how Dewey subscribes to these three features of a liberal perfectionist political philosophy. Regarding (3), Dewey (1939/1988) states that “democracy is a personal way of individual life; [...] it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life” (p. 62). Furthermore, in a central passage of *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey (1927/2016) states that democracy is “the idea of community life itself”, and the “clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications”⁹ (pp. 175–176). Dewey is hereby not only suggesting that democratic orientations should overcome the pitfalls of atomistic individualism in personal life. He is also claiming that democracy should forge a social unity that is constituted by a shared cultural commitment to democracy in all walks of life. As Dewey (1939/1988) states clearly in his essay “Creative Democracy”: “For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched” (p. 65). In that way, democracy is not simply a political ideal, as it is for the political liberalism of Rawls. It is also a private ideal for personal life as well as a cultural ideal for civil society associations and the organization of the workplace. Talisse (2010) refers to this aspect of Dewey's work as the “Continuity Thesis”, whereby “the democratic political order is a moral order characterized by a distinctive conception of human flourishing” (p. 510).

Regarding (2) and (1), the defense of a liberal conception of the good which has objective value, Dewey holds that the process of education as

growth involves the realization of autonomy, and that autonomy is objectively valuable. In *The Child and the Curriculum* Dewey (1902/1990) states, for example:

The child is the starting-point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all the studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth. Personality, character, is more than subject-matter. Not knowledge or information, but self-realization, is the goal.

(p. 187)

In addition, in *Education and Experience*, Dewey refers to this self-realization as a form of self-control (cf. Dewey, 1938/2015). Thus, it seems clear that Dewey views a liberal understanding of self-realization or autonomy as an objectively valid account of human flourishing (cf. Talisse, 2010).

7.4.2 Rawls’s Political Liberal Critique of Liberal Perfectionism

Dewey’s liberal perfectionist political philosophy is inadequate for liberal democracies because civic liberties like freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression, which liberal democracies institutionally protect through the rule of law, necessarily give rise to a plurality of reasonable understandings of the good life and thus of what human flourishing involves. The reason for this is what Rawls (1993/2005) calls “the burdens of judgment” (pp. 56–57). These burdens of judgment state that people live through distinct experiences, differ on which empirical information they deem relevant for practical judgment, and have to rely on interpretation of moral and political concepts that are necessarily underspecified. It is because of these burdens that within social and political practices that allow their members to think and judge in the way they see fit, the exercise of reason makes the plurality of reasonable views as to what ideal justice is become a permanent feature of a liberal social and political world (cf. Culp, 2014). This plurality is thus incompatible with a liberal perfectionist view, according to which a certain kind of freedom represents the only valid account of what the good life or human flourishing consists.

As a consequence of his political liberalism, Rawls (1993/2005) has explicitly challenged the view that perfectionist liberal education could be shared by all members of democratic societies holding reasonable conceptions of the good.



Various religious sects oppose the culture of the modern world and wish to lead their common life apart from its unwanted influences. A problem now arises about their children's education and the requirements the state can impose. The liberalisms of Kant and Mill may lead to requirements designed to foster the values of autonomy and individuality as ideals to govern much if not all of life.

(p. 199)

The solution that Rawls's (1993/2005) political liberalism proposes in response to the recognition of plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines is to avoid to "impose the unrealistic – indeed, the utopian – requirement that all citizens affirm the same comprehensive doctrine, but only, as in political liberalism, the same public conception of justice" (p. 39). By "comprehensive doctrine", Rawls understands a conception of personal human flourishing, which is different from a "public conception of justice" concerning what citizens owe one another. Regarding this "public conception of justice", Rawls acknowledges the possibility of a reasonable pluralism concerning of what this conception consists. This is why Rawls (1993/2005) comes up with the following understanding of how public reason should determine a public conception of justice:

It is crucial that public reason is not specified by any one political conception of justice [...]. Rather, its content – the principles, ideals, and standards that may be appealed to – are those of a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice and this family changes over time.

(pp. l–li)

Rawls's (2001) own favored conception of justice – *justice as fairness* – is but one possible "public conception of justice" determined through public reasoning in the public sphere. Yet there are also other reasonable conceptions of political justice, which are part of a family of reasonable conceptions of political justice. These reasonable conceptions must fulfill a number of conditions, including the recognition of basic rights and liberties, which must be conceived as enjoying priority over the realization of general welfare, and the recognition of the material and social presuppositions of these rights and liberties.¹⁰ As these conditions can be filled out differently, it is essential that citizens reason within the public sphere how to understand these conditions and which conception of justice to adopt. In that way, a political liberal conception of deliberative democracy claims to be able to deal adequately with the reasonable pluralism of conceptions of the good life.



7.5 Dewey’s Educational Challenge for Political Liberalism

Assuming that political liberalism’s critique of Dewey’s perfectionist liberalism is valid, the question arises to what extent the Deweyan insights about citizens’ lifelong democratic education and the cultural problems emerging within a “society of broadcasters” can be employed from within a political liberal understanding of deliberative democracy. Initially, it may seem that such a political liberal perspective could integrate Dewey’s insights as long as citizens’ lifelong democratic education and the potentially needed cultural transformation are couched within “political” terms that restrict them to political citizenship and culture.

The problem with this strategy, however, is that it may not take seriously enough the ways in which Dewey’s perfectionist political philosophy, and its emphasis on a liberal democratic culture as success condition for democracy, is connected to Dewey’s theory of democratic education. This is because, as we have seen in Section 7.2, democratic education requires developing the right emotional and mental attitudes, routines, and habits in response to the existing set of social problems, by way of engaging in communication in all walks of life – in political life understood in a narrow formal sense, but also in family life, in professional life, and so on. One central idea of Dewey thus seems to be that unless the democratic way of communicating with others, of exchanging ideas with others, and of experiencing commonality through communication, is cultivated and practiced in all spheres of life, citizens may not be sufficiently disposed to take up these democratic habits and routines in their political life as citizens.

This is to say that from a Deweyan perspective, the political liberal view of deliberative democracy, according to which citizens could develop democratic routines and habits in the political domain while still clinging to a different set of values and corresponding routines and habits in other domains like the family or in professional life, may simply be naive from a pedagogical point of view. Dewey’s educational theory thus seems to suggest that unless democratic citizens practice democracy at home, in school, and at work, one must not expect that citizens can display and act upon properly developed democratic attitudes, routines, and habits in the political domain. This is Dewey’s educational challenge for political liberal versions of deliberative democracy. Indeed, Rawls (1993/2005, pp. 272–273; 2001, pp. 156–157) has argued that the so-called basic structure of a well-ordered democratic society would suffice to cultivate and nourish citizens’ democratic orientations. However, Dewey’s educational theory strongly suggests that this argumentation is mistaken on educational grounds.

Notes

- 1 Deliberative democrats disagree on how exactly deliberation results in an impactful contribution to political decision-making. Habermas (1996, ch. 8), for example, refers to a “two-track-model” through which informal political deliberation within civil society can unfold communicative power by being transformed into the administrative power of formal political decision making. Forst (2012; 2015), by contrast, focuses on the ways in which narratives of justification can unfold noumenal power within structures of justification.
- 2 This follows Rawls’s understanding of the criterion of reciprocity laid out in his *Political Liberalism* and about which he says that it must be met for the exercise of coercive political power to be justifiable. The criterion holds that “our exercise of political power is proper only when we sincerely believe that the reasons we offer for our political action may reasonably be accepted by other citizens as a justification of those actions.” (Rawls 1993/2005, p. xliv).
- 3 From the perspective of the educator, the generation of a conscious appreciation of how one’s habits or routines are woven into a certain environment is also a matter of good timing, so that, for example, the experiences of energy and interest are harnessed for the continuation of a child’s (or adult’s) educative experience. As Dewey (1902/1990, p. 192) puts this point nicely: “Other activities [of the child] are signs of a culminating power and interest; to them applies the maxim of striking while the iron is hot. As regards them, it is perhaps a matter of now or never. Selected, utilized, emphasized, they may mark a turning-point for good in the child’s whole career; neglected, an opportunity goes, never to be recalled.” (1902/1990, p. 192).
- 4 In Culp (2022) I distinguish four challenges of contemporary political public spheres for political autonomy education: a political, an economic, a cultural, and an educational challenge.
- 5 At least this holds true as long as this form of speech remains free and is not subject to webpage Blacklisting or Whitelisting practices as can presently be found in Russia or China, respectively.
- 6 The remainder of this and the next paragraphs are taken or adapted from Culp (2022).
- 7 See, however, my defense of a justice-based understanding of deliberative democracy arising from a justification-centered notion of moral respect in Culp (2014, ch. 5; 2019, ch. 2).
- 8 For this understanding, cf. Christman (2004, p. 152) who refers to Hurka (1993, p. 3).
- 9 Indeed, Dewey even goes so far to speak of “the search for conditions under which the Great Society may become the Great Community” (1927/2016, 174).
- 10 Rawls (1993/2005) puts these three features as follows:

first, a specification of certain basic rights, liberties and opportunities [...]; second, an assignment of special priority to those rights, liberties, and opportunities [...]; and third, measures assuring to all citizens adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their liberties and opportunities.

(p. 6)

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