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# Beyond Dewey's Uncertainty: Banausic Knowledge as Democratic Foundation

Cédric Cortial

Université Clermont-Auvergne, LAPSCO, Clermont-Ferrand, France
Email: cedric.cortialpro@gmail.com

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**Abstract**

John Dewey holds that uncertainty is a central feature of the concrete interaction between organism and environment, and he mobilizes this diagnosis to explain both the emergence of inquiry and the persistence of speculative and abstract philosophies. However, we show that material reality is not uncertain and that the quest for certainty cannot explain the flight from the concrete, but should explain a return to it. Drawing on historical, philosophical, and sociological sources (most notably Edgar Zilsel's thesis and the embodied knowledge of artisans) we invert Dewey's interpretative framework: epistemic uncertainty arises not from material reality, but from theoretical abstraction. This reinterpretation enables a reformulation of Dewey's critique of dualism and provides the basis for a pragmatist epistemology grounded in the relative stability of practical experience. Finally, it opens the way for a reconsideration of the foundations of democracy from a non-relativistic perspective.

**Keywords:** John Dewey; democracy; fact; craftmanship; uncertainty

## 1. Introduction

John Dewey's pragmatism represents a sustained effort to reorient philosophy toward the contingencies of lived experience and to revalorize elements traditionally devalued by philosophical tradition, such as the body, the concrete, and action. From this perspective, the American philosopher regards the precariousness, uncertainty, instability, and indeterminacy of the world as one of the "generic traits" of experience, or of existence itself (Bernstein 1961; Gale 2002; Gardner 2000; Kennedy 1961; Myers 2004; Shook 2004; Stuhr 1992). In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey rejects the idea of a stable world and asserts that « *the world is a scene of risk ; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable* » (Dewey 1925: 41). For Dewey, « *the world of empirical things includes the uncertain, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and hazardous.* » (Dewey 1925: 42) and « *a feature of existence which is emphasized by cultural phenomena is the precarious and perilous.* » (Dewey 1925: 41).

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That said, John Dewey's approach, grounded in pragmatism and fallibilism, rejects any claim to universal, final, or immutable truths. Indeed, Dewey criticizes classical thinkers for freezing certain dimensions of experience (stability vs. precariousness) and assigning them excessive importance, thereby constructing a biased metaphysical vision (Dewey 1929). Yet, throughout his work, and particularly in *The Quest for Certainty* and *Experience and Nature*, Dewey remains equivocal about the ontological status of uncertainty. Critics have long pointed this out: does he not fall into the very trap he denounces when he claims that instability constitutes a fundamental trait of existence (Rorty 1977; Santayana 1925)?

Whilst these criticisms may be regarded as uncharitable towards Dewey's effort to avoid a definitive description of the world, they do highlight that certain structural commitments in his epistemology and democratic theory render the recognition of potential instability an inescapable feature of rational inquiry, even if Dewey himself would reject any metaphysical claim about the essential instability of reality. This proximity must be discussed in terms of its political and epistemological consequences.

In fact, whether Dewey truly defends an ontological status of uncertainty or intends something less metaphysical, one cannot deny that uncertainty occupies a central place in his work and in his proposals for reconstructing both philosophy and politics. This centrality stems from the fact that he associates uncertainty with the very interactions he seeks to revalorize. More precisely, Dewey develops two key ideas.

The first is that the uncertainty of the concrete world has repelled philosophers and enabled the construction of abstract and metaphysical idealities, of which Platonism is a prime example. The second is that these deficient philosophies, in Dewey's view, can be replaced by positions that embrace uncertainty and cultivate favorable attitudes toward it. For Dewey, the speculative philosophers had the right diagnosis: the world is indeed uncertain (which is precisely why they sought refuge outside of it). But their reaction was misguided. For the pragmatist, we must learn to love uncertainty rather than flee from it; in this lies our epistemic (and political) salvation.

I will argue that while maintaining a certain form of uncertainty, epistemic modesty, inquiry, critical engagement, and so on, can indeed be a source of epistemic, political, and social progress, its effectiveness paradoxically depends on being grounded in stable facts rather than on the mere rehabilitation of uncertainty itself. I will defend this claim on the basis that such grounding must be sought in what both Dewey and speculative philosophers defined as the realm of the uncertain. In other words, I hold that certainty is to be found primarily in the concrete world itself, the very world Dewey aimed to rehabilitate, yet he failed to redefine it without reproducing the presuppositions he sought to overcome

Finally, I will suggest that the quest for certainty is inevitable, deeply rooted in human psychology, and that any attempt to reform this aversion, through an anthropological reconstruction designed to make human beings more tolerant of uncertainty, is an infinite and perhaps impossible pursuit.

I will first examine the role of uncertainty in Dewey's work and the way he relates to it. Then I will show that the association between uncertainty and the concrete world is, in fact, a fallacious, and socially situated, idea. Finally, I will consider the harmful consequences of incorporating a favorable attitude toward uncertainty into a theory of democracy, as well as the potential benefits of returning to the concrete as a genuine source of certainty.

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## 2. A pervasive uncertainty

If one wishes to establish the theoretical status of a concept such as uncertainty in John Dewey's work, one must necessarily turn to the notion of inquiry. In short, inquiry is a set of behaviors aimed at resolving a problem. It is triggered by an incongruous, dissonant, incoherent, or discontinuous event that disrupts the interaction between an organism and its environment. This indeterminate state of interaction gives rise to doubt, which in turn motivates the organism to restore continuity and determination through the establishment of a solution (Dewey 1938).

In this sense, Deweyan democracy revolves around inquiry. It stages community-based inquiries into public problems, and its effectiveness rests on inquiry understood as the scientific method applied to human experience (Bohman 1999). Within this framework, uncertainty arises from the very "way of life" that deweyan democracy aspires to be. It is necessary to maintain a certain degree of uncertainty, to grow accustomed to it, and even to revalue it, for democracy to be possible. Uncertainty allows for the pluralism of perspectives, which serves as the driving force of social innovation and as a safeguard against dogmatism (Dewey 1927). It prevents the authoritarian drift of systems in which individuals merely follow dogmas without being able to question them.

Dewey's ethics likewise seeks to democratize inquiry in order to guard against moral dogmatism. Moral judgments do not refer to fixed principles (whether rational or theological), but emerge from concrete, uncertain situations (Dewey and Tuft 1908). Uncertainty thus ensures in morality the same anti-dogmatism found in Dewey's political theory.

Finally, in *Art as Experience*, the same dynamic underlies both moral and aesthetic experience (Dewey 1934). The artwork does not immediately reveal its meaning; it requires exploration and active participation. The uncertainty it provokes is not an obstacle but a driving force: it arouses emotion, stimulates judgment, and guides the perceiver toward the unified meaning of the work. Thus, whether political, moral, or aesthetic, inquiry everywhere exhibits the same fundamental structure: uncertainty as the condition of possibility of human experience.

Nevertheless, if inquiry is so deeply embedded in our interaction with the world, are there not moments when our interaction seems "at rest," that is, stable and determined? Are there not episodes of non-inquiry, moments of certainty? Some commentators have addressed this question directly, arguing that such moments of "rest" do not exist. According to their interpretation of Dewey, even automatic behaviors (as perception) are to be understood as « proto-inquiries » (Burke 1998; Gale 2010; Martela 2015). Since the human being constantly adapts to a perpetually changing world, they are always modifying their behavior in response.

This interpretation seems necessary to preserve the coherence of the Deweyan model. Indeed, according to Dewey's own definition (Dewey 1938), inquiry restores stability and determination to an unstable and indeterminate situation. Yet once this point is reached, we are not entitled to rest content, for doing so would amount to an epistemic fault, exchanging knowledge for dogmatism or propaganda. The idea of proto-inquiries thus ensures a continuous movement which enables Dewey's epistemic ideal: never to limit inquiry.

To summarize briefly, for Dewey, uncertainty is both descriptive and normative: if there is inquiry, there is doubt, but doubt must also persist (Dewey 1938). For us to conclude that if inquiry is therefore insatiable and continuous, then the world must indeed be unstable and uncertain.

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That said, we must be clear: the interpretation could be quite different. Indeed, Dewey's idea may not be that inquiry is an unstopped process, but rather an unstoppable one. Thus, on an individual level, we might be able to end our inquiries and move through a world that is genuinely determined and stable. First, if a situation may in fact be fully determinate, yet our epistemic access to that determinacy is always partial. Inquiry is not a neutral gaze but an intervention: by acting upon the world, we inevitably modify its conditions, just as a thermometer subtly affects the temperature it records. Second, and much more crucially, the problem is that if stableness is possible, if proto-inquiries do not exist precisely because moments of complete adaptation between an individual and their environment can occur (as is the case when Dewey speaks of habit), then there would be no reason for speculative philosophies to try to escape from a world that already offers stability and certainty. And yet, it is precisely this explanation that John Dewey provides in *The Quest for Certainty*: according to him, this very quest has misdirected intellectual energies and diverted them away from the study of the concrete world.

There are, then, two possibilities. Either there is in Dewey a tropism toward defining the world as uncertain, the world must be primarily, or at least predominantly, uncertain for his explanation of the quest for certainty to make sense. Or, alternatively, there is a gap in his account of the rise of speculative philosophies: why would these philosophies sought certainty outside the world, even though concrete interaction already offered it?

This second option seems to open a path toward defending the idea of a concrete world as a source of certainty, and toward providing a sociological rather than epistemic explanation for the speculative philosophies' flight from it (a path Dewey himself had already hinted at in his own work on the sociology of ideas).

In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey diagnoses the historical tendency of idealist metaphysics, and of the broader dominant philosophical tradition, to seek refuge in theoretical contemplation as a way of escaping the instability of the world. In doing so, he explains the enduring appeal of philosophy for fixed ideas and absolute knowledge (Dewey 1929). He writes:

> « Hence the quest for certainty has always been an effort to transcend belief. Now since, as we have already noted, all matters of practical action involve an element of uncertainty, we can ascend from belief to knowledge only by isolating the latter from practical doing and making. » (Dewey 1929: 26)

By association, speculative philosophies sought to rid themselves of uncertainty by elevating the abstract and the speculative, that is, by distancing themselves both from the concrete and from labor. According to Dewey, this detachment from the concrete stems from an epistemic motivation, an explanation we have seen is in fact difficult to sustain. The aversion to labor, on the other hand, finds its explanation in sociological reasoning. Dewey argues that the dominant philosophy, that of the ruling classes (Bourdieu 2007), turns away from material realities. Through its abstract pursuits, it comes to devalue the habitus and labor of the socially dominated, who are compelled to navigate the precariousness of the concrete world.

It is in this way that Dewey's descriptive work underpins a normative and political stance. The idea is to restore credibility to the *ethos* of the working and dominated classes (the banausic *ethos*) by reaffirming the value of the world they confront. Thus, beyond merely highlighting the role of uncertainty in the world, at the heart of Dewey's project lies a critical effort to redefine it. Uncertainty should no longer be seen as a deficiency, a lack, or a problem to be avoided.

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Against these speculative philosophies, the overarching movement of Deweyan pragmatist thought seeks to rehabilitate doubt and uncertainty, exonerating the concrete, the body, and action. Yet the central position of uncertainty in his philosophy also shows that Dewey, in a sense, agrees with the speculative philosophers that condemn the concrete world to uncertainty. Yes, the world is uncertain. But Dewey goes a step further than the philosophers he critiques. Instead of seeking refuge in the abstract, he grants uncertainty a normative status. Uncertainty lies at the center of our experience, and *it is good that it does*.

In this sense, Deweyan philosophy consists in a "reconstruction" of the attitudes and predispositions of organisms toward uncertainty. The goal is to transform our aversion into a form of appropriation, to turn what is initially threatening into a source of engagement and agency.

Since it is impossible to escape uncertainty, it must be embraced in order to renew our epistemological, moral, and democratic theories (Lake 2020). By replacing the speculative, abstract, and idealist method with what he calls the "scientific" method, Dewey seeks to promote a culture in which uncertainty is no longer perceived as a threat. Allowing individuals to retain an aversion to uncertainty would risk their relapse into dogmatic methods, inadequate both epistemologically and politically. It is for this reason that we must learn to love uncertainty, in order to escape the false dilemma between, on the one hand, the laziness of thought paralyzed by doubt, and on the other, the epistemic dead-end promised by speculative philosophy.

> « Here is where ordinary thinking and thinking that is scrupulous diverge from each other. The natural man is impatient with doubt and suspense: he impatiently hurries to be shut of it. A disciplined mind takes delight in the problematic, andcherishes it until a way out is found that approves itself upon examination … The scientific attitude may almost be defined as that which is capable of enjoying the doubtful scientific method is, in one aspect, a technique for making a productive use of doubt by converting it into operations of definite inquiry. No one gets far intellectually who does not "love to think," and no one loves to think who does not have an interest in problems as such. » (Dewey 1929: 228)

In short, John Dewey indeed asserts that uncertainty lies at the heart of the interaction between organism and environment, but as such, it must be accepted in order to renew our epistemic practices along a scientific path. This perspective is twofold: (1) it allows us to critique speculative and socially dominant philosophies that believe they can escape uncertainty; and (2) it restores a voice and dignity to the weak, to workers, and to those "condemned" to use their bodies or to interact with the concrete world.

The aim of this work is to show that the problem is likewise double-barreled: (1) we cannot treat the concrete world and our interactions with it as inherently uncertain, certainty emerges precisely through concrete interaction, not in the abstract world; and (2) rehabilitating uncertainty as a new realm to embrace can in no way provide a solid foundation for defending a democratic political system that protects people that are the most dominated. Indeed, defending democracy and the dominated people implies identifying counterforces to the power of the dominant. These counterforces are to be found in the certainty of the concrete world, in facts, rather than in the supposed instability of a Heraclitean world or in a falsely certain speculative world.

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## 3. The certainty of banausic knowledge

The first point to establish is that the apparent uncertainty and precariousness of the world are, in fact, a false intuition, likely constructed over millennia of disregard for action, the concrete, matter, and labor (Dewey 1929; Veblen 1899). Paradoxically, our best ally in addressing this is Deweyan pragmatism. It is one of – if not the – philosophical work that has most vigorously defended a conception of knowledge as inseparable from action, and therefore from the body, matter, and manual labor.

The paradox, however, lies in the fact that it never fully frees itself from a form of abstract condescension toward the concrete world, seen as multiple and chaotic. Without delving into the details of a well-established position, we may cite *Democracy and Education*:

> « If the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator. » (Dewey 1916: 393)

What may be even more fundamental is that Dewey's defense of knowledge as the outcome of scientific inquiry failed to explore the impact of manual labor on the history of science and on the very constitution of the scientific method. Indeed, it was arguably the banausic or "craftsmanlike" epistemic attitude, combined with the logical knowledge of the upper classes, who were thereby confined to an abstract world and inclined to distrust the concrete one, that made possible the emergence of modern science as a method aimed at testing theories against experience, and thereby transforming their-uncertainty (Conner 2005; Smith 2004).

This thesis was first defended by Edgar Zilsel (1891–1944). For the Austrian historian and philosopher of science, the rise of modern science was made possible by the convergence between the theoretical knowledge of bourgeois intellectuals and the empirical practices of artisans. The latter introduced a new space for the validation of ideas: concrete experimentation. Whereas the humanist and scholastic scholars « despised manual labor and looked down upon the craftsmen as inferior » (Zilsel et al. 2003: 7), artisans, by contrast, worked directly with matter, invented instruments, and tested their hypotheses through technical operations. This practical knowledge, until then socially disqualified (Veblen 1899), became a cognitive resource that allowed rational speculation to be grounded in experience. Experimentation thus emerged as an epistemological third space, making it possible to arbitrate between abstract and conflicting theories. This rupture may be summarized as follows: « Authorities and syllogisms had been beaten by experience; a new, empirically minded type of man went out to conquer the world» (Zilsel et al. 2003: 172).

What is important to understand is that the experimental devices developed by artisans were not conceived as stemming from a positive attitude toward uncertainty, one that would embrace or cultivate it, and thus cannot be said to explain their scientific success in such terms. The artisans were not sages who welcomed uncertainty with a peculiar joy. Rather, these devices, by adding empirical certainties and thereby expressing an aversion to uncertainty, made it possible to dissolve speculative controversies and to produce new criteria of truth grounded in reality. By constructing testing methods and rendering their hypotheses manipulable, they transformed

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experience into a stable, reproducible procedure of validation, one that could be opposed to metaphysical speculation.

It should be noted that work in social psychology suggests that intolerance of uncertainty is modulated by social class. Individuals from lower social classes often exhibit a lower intolerance of uncertainty, not because they value uncertainty, but because they possess effective strategies for managing it (Kraus et al. 2012; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014). This empirical mode of adaptation fosters greater behavioral flexibility, cognitive adaptability, and reduced sensitivity to ambiguous situations. Richard Sennett (2008) interprets this competence as a form of craftsmanship intelligence, characterized by attentiveness, rigor, and the ability to adjust to the situation. This view converges with theories of situated cognition, according to which intelligence does not reside solely in abstract processes but in contextualized interactions with the material environment (Hutchins 1995). Working-class individuals thus develop a practical habitus, oriented toward immediate action and effectiveness in contexts that are often unstable or weakly codified (Bourdieu 2007).

Thus, the lower aversion to uncertainty observed among certain members of the working classes may not stem from a taste for risk, but rather from their actual ability to reduce uncertainty through a stable relationship with their environment, one instantiated in practical knowledge and mastered techniques. That said, and in line with Deweyan philosophy, the banausic epistemology is not alien to the same aversion to uncertainty from which the proponents of speculative philosophy have constructed their world of rational stability. Nevertheless, the uncertainty inherent in the concrete world, since it would be mistaken to deny it any share of uncertainty, did not lead artisans to adopt the bourgeois epistemic attitude, that is, an abstract and metaphysical stance.

Two possibilities arise: either artisans were prevented, by their very condition, from "rising" into abstraction, they could not afford to contemplate the world without confronting its materiality, since their financial survival depended on it; or else they found, in their commerce with the concrete, a form of certainty that was sufficiently satisfying. While the first hypothesis has undeniable explanatory power, we wish to emphasize the importance of the second: in our view, abstraction provides only the illusion of certainty and stability, whereas the concrete world asserts itself with an irreducible presence.

Indeed, it was precisely because artisans were confronted with a world resistant to their desires yet stable in its constraints that they were able to discern laws, regularities, and operational certainties, and thus to contribute to the construction of the scientific method. Concrete interaction offers as much risk as reassurance. In fact, Zilsel (1942) shows that the artist-engineers of the Renaissance employed quantitative empirical rules, the true ancestors of modern physical laws, and that the very notion of a scientific "law" draws upon a cultural tradition in which nature is perceived as ordered.

It is precisely because the philosophies denounced by Dewey were not confronted with an unruly world, but rather with the unrestrained license of their own imagination (or reason), that they failed to establish the most effective method of approximating truth we know, one that Dewey himself valued: modern science. Moreover, abstractions can not be treated as realities in their own right but as mere constructs of thought. Their apparent certainty then derive only from the stipulations that define them, rather than from any contact with the world. In this sense, abstract entities achieve stability not by tracking features of reality but by virtue of the conceptual conventions that generate them. Their strongness is therefore internal and formal, secured by definitional fiat, yet devoid of empirical certainty.

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In short, artisans had every reason in the world, firmly rooted in their aversion to uncertainty, to prefer the concrete to the abstract. Ultimately, the latter offers only a *façade* of certainty and reveals, through its plurality and freedom, as illustrated by the multitude of metaphysical systems that coexist, are studied, and contradict one another, an uncertainty that is almost consubstantial with its very existence. Thus, far from being possessors of some kind of "wisdom of uncertainty," artisans were the first to seek "decisive" facts, facts capable of settling theoretical disputes that had previously remained undecidable. This is why Zilsel maintains that the artisans « were the true forerunners of modern experimental science » (Zilsel et al. 2003: 173): they not only contributed technical knowledge, but also displaced the locus of legitimation of truth, from the ideal realm to the pragmatic one (Conner 2005; Smith 2004). Artisans complemented the logical capacities of the educated intellectuals not by simply adding the empirical world as such, as philosophers and metaphysicians did when they moved from observation to generalization and remained there, but by introducing their own mode of empirical verification: the test

Yet the certainty of the concrete world can be grasped through arguments other than those drawn from the history of science. In fact, the certainty inherent in banausic actions is precisely the reason why science could rise only once it acknowledged that the world resists and constrains the human mind. Indeed, knowledge (like education) rests on sustained attention to a world that resists us, corrects us, and teaches us (Crawford 2015). There is an external concreteness that obliges us, from which little uncertainty emanates. As Wittgenstein (1953) and Ryle (1991) emphasized, certain forms of self-knowledge do derive from the direct expression of lived experience. Hurting oneself while repairing a motorcycle and feeling pain is an irreducible and certain fact. Knowing that one cannot walk through walls by running headfirst into them is a certainty of an absolutely implacable kind. This line of argumentation alludes to the overarching issue of the Myth of the Given, and the manner in which pragmatism and Dewey should be evaluated in relation to this philosophical conundrum (Ralston 2013). The notion that foundational, pre-conceptual knowledge can exist independently of our conceptual capacities or commitments is a hypothesis that merits further investigation. Indeed, if there is an epistemic priority of the concrete over the abstract, then it is rational to regard certain aspects of experience as epistemically Given. However, the idea that reality can be apprehended in a way that is entirely free from conceptual mediation remains deeply contested and has been forcefully challenged by Sellars (1956). Our best ally in addressing this problem remains John Dewey. In fact, deweyism does not reject the existence of the Given, but criticizes the empiricist tendency to construe it as a static epistemic foundation detached from inquiry and action (Aikin 2009; Garrison 2019). On Dewey's view, experience is primarily a dynamic interaction of doing and undergoing; nevertheless, this experimental character of experience presupposes non-inferentially accessible experiential contents. Without such Givens, inquiry would lack any criterion for success or failure, since there would be no experiential resistance capable of correcting belief. The experience of pain, for instance, is not a piece of epistemic certainty in the mythic sense, but rather a concrete and immediate resistance encountered in the course of action. Its epistemic role is not grounded in infallibility, but in its function within inquiry as a constraint on belief and expectation.

As Aikin (2009) emphasizes, Dewey's pragmatism relocates the Given within a forward-looking, action-oriented framework: the Given is not what knowledge is built from in a foundationalist sense, but what inquiry works with and attempts to transform.

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Thus, far from endorsing the Myth of the Given as Sellars conceives it, a Deweyan account acknowledges experiential givenness as a necessary condition for justification and inquiry, while rejecting its elevation to an epistemically privileged, self-justifying foundation.

Thus, the certainty of an inquiry-related Given does not stem from dogmatism, since it is not propositional in nature (Wittgenstein 1969), but from pragmatic constancy. It stands in opposition to the radical instability of abstract systems, which can be endlessly reformed, yet it does not constrain inquiry; rather, it makes inquiry possible and effective, supporting deeper reflections imbued with the laudable uncertainty and attitudinal caution we discussed earlier. In fact, the form of healthy uncertainty practiced by science is made possible by empirical certainties. It is not the uncertainty of the world that grounds science, insofar as such uncertainty would be a definitional feature of the organism's relationship to its environment, but rather the emergent certainty of its intelligibility. This emerges from the artisans' positive stance, not toward uncertainty itself, but toward concrete facts.

Let us be clear. We do not, by any means, wish to claim that facts, tests, or observations constitute absolute certainties immune to misinterpretation or subjective influence. We are not advocating a naive empiricism that grants the body's certainty full authority over the mind's uncertainty. Rather, we wish to emphasize that the contribution of concrete experience to the development of the method added certainty, not uncertainty, to the intellectual work of the time. Nor do we wish to reject outright the value of abstraction in the scientific description of the world. Zilsel is clear about the importance of the encounter between the abstract (the bourgeois literati and scholars) and the concrete (the banausic world) in order to make the description of the world effective. Our view does not deny that abstraction can illuminate the why of banausic success; rather, it challenges the Aristotelian claim that such abstraction enjoys epistemic priority (Metaphysics 982b.5 & Physics 193b.7). On our account, practical success already embodies stable causal regularities, and abstraction merely systematizes patterns first disclosed in concrete interaction. The stability of craft does not derive from formal causes but from the material constraints and resistances encountered in action, which provide the very basis upon which explanatory generalization becomes possible. Hence, while abstraction enriches understanding, it does not ground the certainty we attribute to practical knowledge, nor can it serve as the primary foundation for democratic epistemology.

Dewey relies on uncertainty to explain the motivation behind an abstract philosophy, which, according to him, is a faulty method precisely because it fails to account for the real world. Yet it is difficult to claim that an entire tradition,the philosophical one,was mistaken in failing to provide a sufficiently strong motivation to commit this error on a massive scale. At the same time, Dewey denies the banausic epistemic attitude the same psychological explanation. Artisans, supposedly condemned to live in a world of uncertainty and distressing contingencies due to their social subordination, would allegedly lack the same aversion to uncertainty as idealist philosophers?

We contend that both social classes are assailed by the same psychological facts: first, as we have seen, an aversion to uncertainty; and second, the need for system justification. Yet on one side, this produces an idealist intellectual world, while on the other, it gives rise to a banausic proto-scientific world.

Indeed, Dewey adds a sociological explanation to the emergence of abstract philosophical systems: the marginalization and devaluation of banausic knowledge and thus, to some extent, of scientific knowledge. For Dewey, while the psychological diagnosis of

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human nature, generally inclined to flee from uncertainty, is relevant, he tends to base his sociological analysis on it. We propose to invert this causal relationship: it was not the aversion to uncertainty that drove philosophers to construct abstract systems, detached from concrete and artisanal life, and to foster a disdain for the material world. Otherwise, why would they have preferred the ideal and speculative, when the concrete world, as we have seen, also offers its share of certainty?

In reality, the bourgeois form of this aversion depends largely on the necessity, for each individual, to justify their own social position and legitimize the established order, a necessity all the more pressing for those from the dominant classes (Bourdieu 2001, 2003, 2007; Bourdieu and Passeron 1994; Jost 2020; Tajfel and Turner 2004; Thorisdottir et al. 2009). It is precisely because they abhorred the lower classes that their aversion produced abstract and speculative philosophical systems.

More generally, individuals structure their identity through their membership in social groups, and this membership profoundly shapes the way they perceive, judge, and interact with others (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). For instance, individuals are motivated by psychological dynamics such as ingroup favoritism (Fu et al. 2012). Beyond that, society itself constitutes a space for intellectual construction aimed at maintaining social hierarchies and justifying the position of dominant groups. This justification takes various forms: legitimizing myths (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), ideology (Marx and Engels 2008), ideological hegemony (Gramsci 1971), social representation (Moscovici 1981), or collective representation (Durkheim 1897).

In reality, the separation between knowledge and practice was imposed by elites eager to distinguish intellectual labor from manual labor, motivated by a desire to set themselves apart from manual workers. The adjective banausic was, in fact, originally pejorative (Lévy 1991). This was something John Dewey, drawing on Thorstein Veblen, had rightly observed. Yet he did not fully carry through his critique, failing to conceive of matter or action not only as socially defined (as uncertain, precarious, dangerous, or even ignoble), but also as socially *misdefined*.

As we have seen, the history of science allows us to strongly challenge the idea that a general feature of existence is uncertainty, or at least that there is no reason to definitively assume that the world and organism – environment interactions are by nature uncertain. This fact alone merits discussion, but it is, in fact, all the more fundamental, because this position has direct implications for Dewey's political theory of democracy.

## 4. Political consequences

Many contemporary theories of democracy, particularly those rooted in pragmatism (Frega 2019; Putnam 2011), recognize uncertainty as a structuring element in political life. Far from being an obstacle, uncertainty is understood as the very condition of a vibrant democracy. In this respect, these propositions are fully Deweyan. Indeed, if we accept that the world is by nature unstable, complex, and indeterminate, then no collective decision can claim definitive, or even stable, validity. This acknowledgment underpins a conception of democracy as a perpetual process of inquiry, experimentation, and revision of public choices. It legitimizes deliberation as the privileged mode for developing shared norms and values the reversibility of policies as a safeguard of prudence and justice.

From this perspective, uncertainty becomes a resource for cultivating a form of epistemic humility, both at the individual and social levels, in order to prevent dogmatic

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drift. It encourages democratic institutions to recognize the fallibility of their knowledge and to keep open the conditions for its rational contestation. In theory, this stance strengthens tolerance, pluralism, and inclusivity. If no single perspective can claim to exhaust the complexity of reality, then all experiences must be considered in the pursuit of the common good.

However, this philosophical valorization of uncertainty rests on an often-neglected implicit assumption: the existence of social, institutional, and cognitive conditions that allow uncertainty to be effectively transformed into collective inquiry rather than informational chaos. In contemporary democracies, these conditions are fragile. A weak ontological uncertainty, that is, an orientation emphasizing the precariousness of knowledge, when not mediated by robust epistemic structures, such as educational systems, quality media, and recognized scientific institutions, can produce the opposite effects: widespread distrust, cognitive relativism, and identity retreat. Strong ontological uncertainty, by contrast, will necessarily produce such outcomes. The difference between these two scenarios is that in the first, there remains the hope of discovering the truth (where pluralism is endured; Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 2005b), whereas in the second, pluralism is embraced without the expectation of transcending it through the attainment of truth (Rorty 1979, 1998).

We pursue the same aims as John Dewey, and it is crucial to understand that Dewey's effort to counter abstract and metaphysical philosophies was a way of epistemically stabilizing his political efforts in favor of an anti-dogmatic social world. Yet we argue that simply appealing to uncertainty does not necessarily curb authoritarian attitudes, as he hoped, nor does it automatically foster an effective and harmonious democratic society.

If we were indeed confined to an uncertain world, there would be two ways to reform our relationship with uncertainty: either through reforming the habits and psychology of individuals, or through reforming the broader social and political system. Dewey seeks to bring about both transformations by conceptualizing democracy as a "way of life" whose defining feature is a calm relation to the inevitability of uncertainty, enacted through the form of perpetual inquiry (Jackson 2014). He thus advocates an investigator's stance in all spheres of society, and it is through this stance that democracy could emerge (Dewey 1927).

Dewey calls for the full and complete integration of his position regarding uncertainty as the foundational principle of democracy. In doing so, he prevents experience, which, as we have shown, is the only source capable of providing certainties, from decisively adjudicating (not definitively, but assuredly) between multiple abstract options. This is to strip it of its power to limit human actions.

Here, we do not wish to evade potential criticism of our use of the word concrete and its epistemological priority, which we defend. It could be perfectly rational to states that what is tested in experience are ultimately our theoretical commitments and then that the uncertainty of the world does not threaten the reliability of experience, since certainty would arise from the coherence of our conceptual framework. This is a familiar holist move, but our argument is that such a view collapses the distinction between the abstract and the concrete. Concrete experience introduces constraints that are, in practice, insurmountable; this gives it a unique capacity to settle matters and provide a higher degree of certainty. By "insurmountable," we mean that there is no way for the organism to modify the situation so as to make the constraint disappear. If there is a three-ton stone blocking the road and I am alone and unequipped, I cannot take that road. The constraint is insurmountable. If the world is treated as universally uncertain,

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then all constraints become, in principle, surmountable, and we lose the ability to adjudicate between abstract claims. Thus, while the holist objection is understandable, it could overlooks the epistemic difference in degree, though not in kind, between abstract commitments and concrete constraints.

That said, if we extend our conceptualization of the characteristics of concreteness to the context of defending democracy, preventing the virtuous counterbalance and provider of certainty that is concrete experience from mitigating the excesses of propaganda, misinformation, and post-truth politics facilitates the rise of authoritarian leaders who exploit precisely the uncertainty surrounding facts (Dunwoody et al. 2022; Pomerantsev 2019; Stanley 2018). Even if this extreme is not reached, we leave citizens with only the possibility of choosing between intellectual options based on arbitrary reasons, thereby plunging the social and political world further into uncertainty (Misak 2000, 2004; Talisse 2003, 2005, 2007).

An arbitrary reason is precisely what Dewey's philosophy abhors: an immutable and abstract principle such as "the king derives his power from God," "citizens cannot govern and be governed at the same time," "inequalities are natural," "politics consists in designating friends and enemies," or "human beings are good (or bad) by nature." True or false, such reasons are not supported scientifically, but only by a plausible intuition in the context of the individual who invokes them. The defining attribute of these propositions is their dogmatism, which led Dewey to argue that what falls within the domain of certainty must be avoided.

In reality, if we leave the door open to free and continuous discussion of the facts, we remove the only common foundation that allows people to enter into discussion and, in fact, to engage in inquiry. This is precisely John Rawls' (1996) diagnosis regarding reasonable pluralism. We cannot expect citizens to agree on a single philosophical doctrine or moral code by allowing only their reasoning and thought to debate among themselves (Talisse 2011). Yet, unwittingly, by undermining the stability of experience and facts, pro-uncertainty philosophies condemn citizens to rely solely on their reasoning. They condemn the political world to the very outcome they sought to denounce in the epistemic realm.

It is clear that postulating the uncertainty of experience will not prevent individuals or groups from reaching agreement on specific facts or problematic contexts. Nevertheless, attempting to rehabilitate uncertainty and promote a democratic way of life, in the sense of a lifestyle that experiences uncertainty not merely as a threat cannot escape the emergence of a politically polarized situation, in which, because uncertainty exists in the world, the abstract remains the primary refuge.

Thus, democracy cannot be founded on radical indeterminacy, in the sense of defending a system that welcomes all opinions merely to let them debate among themselves. On the contrary, democracy presupposes a common world, composed of shared resistances (or "truths"), which constrain our opinions and make discussion possible (Misak 2000). The pursuit of "this common currency" (Hampton 1989) of democracy does not seem attainable through perpetual inquiry, reason alone, or agreement on metaphysical principles, since all of these preserve the idea that our democratic and epistemic salvation will be found in abstract work rather than in concrete testing. The agreement presupposed by disagreement exists in the appreciation of common facts (Jeffrey 2018; Manor 2022; Stagnaro and Amsalem 2025).

The search for a "common currency" is also a conservative theme, but, in our view, it falls under the same problems we have pointed out: it relies on the need for universal consensus and is based on abstractions rather than the concrete. By its very nature, conservatism aims to preserve the status quo and ensure harmonious coexistence by

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respecting an existing social order, represented as this abstract "common currency" (shared rules, norms, and beliefs). Despite the fact that conservatives have been known to voice disapproval of a priori methods, and can be regarded as adherents of pragmatism to a certain extent (Vannatta 2014), their attachment to historical context is still based on arbitrary social propositions, just as abstract as the rational principles of the Enlightenment. In sum, a pragmatic conservatism would be productive when it combines respect for the past with concrete adaptation, but would be vulnerable when limited to imposed abstractions.

Thus, it is essential to distinguish the certainty of facts, which must serve as the foundation for discussion and is made possible by systematic and rigorous scientific observation (Hoyningen-Huene 2008), from the certainty of solutions, which constitutes a distortion that allows the dominant (who may be conservatives) to impose their answers to common problems. We need the certainty of facts to make the uncertain work of the inquiry community possible. The reverse is a logical and political dead end: starting from the uncertainty of facts to construct certain solutions is untenable.

In practice, the very principle that inquiry must be incessant to be valid can lead to perverse outcomes. Agnotology (Oreskes and Conway 2022; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008), understood as the study of the social and political mechanisms that produce ignorance, provides an essential critical perspective on the relationship between science and democracy. Departing from the epistemic idealism underlying the liberal notion of a "marketplace of ideas" (Mill 1859; Schumpeter 1976) or the conception of democracy as "spaces of reasons" (Lynch 2012), it demonstrates that the mere free circulation of opinions in no way guarantees the emergence of truth. On the contrary, in contexts where scientific, educational, and media institutions are weakened, this dynamic can foster the proliferation of pseudo-scientific, conspiratorial, or strategically fallacious discourse.

Agnotology thus illuminates the epistemic mechanisms behind the phenomenon of post-truth (McIntyre 2018), characterized by the rise of relativism and the loss of trust in traditional authorities, including science. It further underscores that any democracy concerned with its cognitive viability must rely on robust epistemic counterpowers, institutions, norms, and verification practices, that ensure citizens have equitable access to reliable knowledge, a prerequisite for the informed exercise of political autonomy. Dewey was clearly aware of these counterpowers (Dewey 1927), operating under the principle that inquiry must never cease. However, by attaching the feature of essential uncertainty to them, the value of these counterpowers' outputs is necessarily diminished. Uncertainty protects counterpowers only so long as it is not applied concretely.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for example, constitutes a scientific counterpower. It is a United Nations body established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to assess the state of scientific knowledge on climate change. Importantly, the IPCC does not conduct original research; instead, it systematically reviews, evaluates, and synthesizes the existing scientific literature on climate change, its impacts, risks, mitigation, and adaptation. Thousands of scientists from around the world contribute to IPCC reports as authors and reviewers on a voluntary basis, selected for their expertise and geographical diversity. Draft reports undergo multiple rounds of expert and government review, and the Summary for Policymakers is approved line by line by representatives of the IPCC's member governments, ensuring both scientific rigor and policy relevance. The main output of the IPCC is a comprehensive Assessment Reports

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which play a central role in informing international climate negotiations, national climate policies, and public understanding of climate change.

Yet if the possibility of reaching certainties ("Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming"[1]) is denied, there is no reason to regard its report as more certain than any other. Even if it represents a statement validated by collaborative scientific inquiry, the paragon of logically valid inquiry according to Dewey, blocking the inquiry and treating the world as fundamentally uncertain undermines and will always undermine the epistemic stabilization efforts of the social world. The idea is to emphasize the fact that fallibilism can only be productive and scientific as long as it does not reject a form of « pragmatic foundationalism ». Basically, it is possible to conduct investigations (in the political world or elsewhere) as long as there are certain things underlying them (Talisse 2007). Dewey's experimentalism in ethics and politics is also an advocate for this kind of position. And that is why this work should be seen as a continuation of Deweyism or a Deweyan view of Dewey rather than as a full-blown critique.

Dewey was right to denounce the metaphysical flight toward fixed ideas. Yet he doesn't emphasize the idea enough that the certainty of abstract philosophies was, in fact, an illusion, and that their uncertainty was far greater than that of the concrete world. By leaving the (false) uncertainty of the world for the (real) uncertainty of abstraction, philosophers indeed abandoned matter, as their sociological disposition dictated, but in doing so they sank further into indeterminacy. Dewey failed to recognize this. In the end, Dewey takes uncertainty as a valid tool to oppose the certainty of speculative philosophy. In reality, he is letting us believe that uncertainty can cure uncertainty, instead of recognizing the strength of the concrete world's certainty to build democracy.

## 5. Conclusion

We do not advocate a return to dogmatism. Nor do we defend the notion that facts should never be questioned or that scientific discoveries should be exempt from scrutiny. Rather, we defend the idea of an evidence-based democracy, in which decisions are made not after a rational debate (in the sense of a debate that relies solely on reason) but, as in science, through empirical testing (Anderson 2006). By advocating a testable democracy, we do not promise a world of necessary peace and fraternity, but we prevent the situation we face today: an endless inquiry and skepticism that too often serve the interests of dominants or autocratic tendencies. A pragmatic return to the concrete world is needed, and the valorization of a pervasive uncertainty makes this work impossible.

Doubt, although it can foster reflection (Cortial et al. 2025, 2026; Dewey 1938), can also produce fragmentation, relativism, and democratic paralysis when it is abstract and synonymous with boundlessness. This epistemic soil is fertile for anti-democratic, fascist movements.

In sum, we argue that if we do not return to facts, which do not impede inquiry but provide a common ground, democracy becomes impossible. We also assert that a return to facts as a certain foundation for inquiry would promote a less polarized democracy, precisely because people would be able to enter into discussion (Stagnaro and Amsalem

[1]Headline A.1 of the IPCC's Headline Statements of the AR6 Synthesis Report. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/resources/spm-headline-statements.

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2025). Democracy should not be grounded in the supposed fundamental uncertainty of the world, nor in alleged certainties (whether abstract, metaphysical, or rational), but in the certainties that the concrete world makes accessible, in order to collectively construct responses to the questions it poses. We have argued that John Dewey's insistence on uncertainty as a fundamental trait of experience inadvertently reproduces a certain metaphysical idealism he claimed to overcome. More importantly, this insistence produces political consequences contrary to Deweyan perspectives. By returning to banausic knowledge derived from manual labor, to practical inquiry, and to the regularities of the material world, we propose relocating the foundation of democracy: no longer in indefinite openness to doubt, but in the shared affirmation of tangible, resistant facts. This reversal suggests that the task is not to reconcile humans with an uncertain world, but to recognize in the concrete that which constrains, illuminates, and structures our disagreements. To recognize that human beings are rendered human when an irreducible experience compels them, not in the freedom of their reason.

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**Cédric Cortial** holds a PhD in psychology and is a professor of philosophy in France. He seeks to establish a connection between these two fields by drawing upon the work of John Dewey. Its works questions the role of doubt and uncertainty as a driver of reasoning and as a structuring principle of social and democratic knowledge production. He explores the pragmatic, social, and political conditions under which knowledge is created, circulated, and acquires authority.

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