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INTRODUCTION: EPISTEMIC APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY

The papers published in this special issue can fairly be unified under the heading "Epistemic Democracy," but there is more variety among them than this might indicate. They exhibit the broad range of ways in which epistemological considerations are figuring in contemporary philosophical discussions of democracy. The authors range from young and promising to established and distinguished. I'd like to introduce a few of the issues that run through the papers, sprinkling references to the actual papers along the way.[1]

From the beginning, democratic forms of government have included discussion and debate. In real life the value of democracy can hardly be separated from the value of free public discussion, prior to voting, about the issues and candidates. This is not to say that either the discussion or the vote have always been inspiring, but whatever value democracy is thought to have, it seems inseparable from public political discussion. One way of accounting for the value of the discussion is to suppose that voters exchange reasons (not always cooperatively) about what to do. Even a quick look at the content of political debate seems to confirm that it is mostly about which decision would be best for the country or city whose laws or leaders are in question.

A theory that tries to account for the value of democracy (or the authority of the laws it produces or the permissibility of their enforcement) might sensibly try to vindicate this aspect of actual practice in which people seem to be trying to figure out what should be done. One way would be to account for democracy's value, at least partly, by reference to this epistemic aspect of political practice. Call any such theory an epistemic approach. One version might say that there are right answers and that democracy is the best way to get at them. Another version might say that there are right answers and there is value in trying collectively to get at them whether or not that is the most reliable way. Yet another: there are no right answers independent of the political process, but overall it is best conceived as a collective way of coming to know (and institute) what to do. There are others.

Epistemic approaches might make forays into epistemology, as that last variant seems to. It takes a stand about what constitutes a certain kind of knowledge. Some other views might make claims about how certain political practices are conducive to individual knowledge, or to collective decisions that tend to be good (or perhaps only better than individual decisions). Some of the great classic and contemporary political philosophers lie in the background of this literature, including Rousseau,

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Mill, Peirce, Dewey, Habermas, Rawls, and Rorty. These influences pervade this collection, although exegesis arises only intermittently.

There is a lot of variety here, and this special issue of the journal displays much of it. It is useful to collect this variety of epistemic approaches together if only to demonstrate that there is no single epistemic approach to democracy, and so no simple answer as to the value of such an approach. More than that, however, these papers push the limits of what we know about the prospects for various epistemic approaches to democracy. Here are several important themes in the diverse literature on epistemic approaches. I roughly map these issues onto the papers in order to give some sense of what this collection contains.

Jury Theorem

There is a fascinating mathematical fact, discovered by Condorcet in the eighteenth century, that has re-emerged to drive an important strand of the literature on epistemic democracy. Putting it very briefly and simply here, he showed that if the members of a group, faced with a binary choice (such as "yes/no" or "true/false") for which there is a correct or better answer, are individually more likely than chance to choose the right answer, then the group under majority rule can perform much better than any of the individuals. Large groups could be virtually infallible even if individuals are only slightly better than chance. There has been much discussion of the applicability of this result (which is not at all empirically contingent, but wholly mathematical) to normative thinking about democracy. Elizabeth Anderson discusses some of these issues in her book review. Franz Dietrich's paper is a detailed contribution to that literature, arguing that the result depends on two assumptions about voters that cannot both be met under the same conception of probability.

Epistemic value of discussion

On one hand, we all know contexts in which the fact that a group was present to discuss something introduced facts and considerations that would not have been noticed by any single person or by the group without discussion. On the other hand, we all know about groups being swept into illusion and error that no one would have encountered thinking alone. William Nelson's paper discusses some of these dangers. Epistemic approaches to democracy often appeal to the bright side of this coin. It's important to realize that the Jury Theorem's fascinating epistemic implications make no appeal to any communication between voters. It takes the competence of each individual voter as given – maybe after discussion, maybe not. This doesn't mean, however, that it avoids the threat from pathologies of group deliberation. Communication among voters is constantly occurring, and if the group is deliberating perversely, then that is likely to affect individual competences. One way in which the problems with group communication might be dodged by

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an epistemic theory would be to argue that there is no standard for a right decision other than what the group arrives at after deliberation and voting. Fabienne Peter argues for such a view (though not for this reason). However, if the process of deliberation is irrational in various ways, it may no longer be plausible to say that whatever it decides counts as right. So this kind of theory will normally identify the right answer with the decisions of *proper* deliberative procedures. Then the pathologies of many actual group deliberations must still be confronted.

Epistemics of democracy and science

The practice of science as a social enterprise offers some possible analogies with democratic deliberation. There can be diverse perspectives brought into engagement, there can be some division of epistemic labor, and so on. Michael Fuerstein makes some use of the analogy as he grapples with the fact that, taken together, the tasks facing any modern political government require far more expertise and inquiry than any citizen can possibly manage. He proposes to think of the relevant questions about political knowledge in terms of the social rather than the individual production of knowledge. This is probably the right way to think of science, and the analogy provides some insight in the context of democratic political decision-making. Philip Kitcher asks whether science can be adequately pursued and given its appropriate role in guiding policy while in modern democracies large numbers of citizens reject the settled conclusions of science. He discusses the case of the teaching of evolution in public schools as a pointed example. Cheryl Misak critically compares several versions of philosophical pragmatism (more below) and its implications for democracy. Along the way, analogies with science figure prominently.

Pragmatism

Philosophical pragmatism has recently undergone a resurgence. Philosophers such as Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty have led the way, and both take up the question whether pragmatism offers a sound account of the relation between democracy and knowledge. Misak's paper defends an epistemic approach to democracy inspired by the seminal ideas of C. S. Peirce, but also treats Dewey, Putnam, and Rorty along the way. It is worth noting that Habermas engages closely with pragmatist thought, and his work is enormously influential in the recent growth of theories of "deliberative democracy" generally, a broad movement that largely includes the new interest in epistemic approaches.

Liberalism

The political philosophy of John Rawls has been an important influence on deliberative and epistemic conceptions of democracy as well, even though he didn't say much directly about the problems in democratic theory. Robert Talisse's

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paper pursues questions about social epistemology in the context of the framework (which Talisse ultimately rejects) that Rawls so influentially developed and called "political liberalism." Talisse speaks more about liberal than about democratic institutions, but the issues are clearly important for any epistemic approach to democracy. Rawls's views have been best integrated into democratic theory in the work of Joshua Cohen, and so they are present in Nelson's discussion of Cohen.

Procedure and substance

The relation between political procedures and standards for evaluating their decision is an ever-present issue in normative democratic theory. Does the outcome have only the value of coming from the right kind of procedure (and what procedure is that)? Or are there standards for evaluating political decisions as right/wrong, correct/incorrect, better/worse in a way that allow, in principle, for even properly conducted political processes to perform poorly? Epistemic approaches can actually go either way here. Some views assume that political decisions can be better or worse according to moral standards that are independent of actual political procedures. (This assumption is prominent, for example, in Anderson's discussion of my work, and in Nelson's discussion of Joshua Cohen's writings.) But even if no independent standards are applied to decisions, we might specify certain features of the deliberative process in democracy sufficient to qualify the conclusions as a social form of knowledge. Some pragmatist views take this form, as we see in Misak's paper. The view that Peter defends also takes this form.

These are a few ideas that come up often in this issue, and in epistemic treatments of democracy generally, although this conveys very little about the approaches, aims, and arguments of the authors. For that, they can speak for themselves.

NOTE

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