

PLATO, PRAGMATISM AND DEMOCRACY: A RESPONSE TO THE GUARDIANSHIP ARGUMENT

PLATÃO, PRAGMATISMO E DEMOCRACIA: UMA RESPOSTA AO ARGUMENTO DO GUARDIÃO

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Resumo: O trabalho propõe-se a refutar a argumentação platônica, caracterizada por um elitismo político que resulta num autoritarismo epistêmico, apresentando uma proposta mais viável democraticamente, e que se baseia na busca de soluções políticas por meio da deliberação pública, ou seja, por uma postura pragmático-deliberativista que visa a uma forma de “revitalização democrática”. Para tanto, oferece uma análise contrapondo a proposta política de Platão e as posturas pragmáticas e liberais a fim de demonstrar a viabilidade de uma democracia participativa.

Palavras-chave: Política, Autoritarismo, Pragmatismo, Democracia

Abstract: This paper aims at refuting the platonic argumentation, characterized by a political elitism which results in an “epistemic authoritarianism”, presenting a more democratically attainable proposal, based in the quest for political solutions via public deliberation, *i. e.*, by offering a pragmatic-deliberativist positioning aiming at a “democratic revitalization”. For that reason, a parallel analysis between the platonic and the pragmatic and liberal political proposals in order to demonstrate the viability of a participative democracy.

Keywords: Politics, Authoritarianism, Pragmatism, Democracy.

I shall begin with a provocation. Average citizens are too foolish to engage responsibly in self-government. Wisdom concerning political matters is not distributed equally across the population, but invested in a relatively small subset of individuals in any given society. Political wisdom enables the few who have it to discern the best political policies among the possible options, and hence to make the best political decisions. Therefore the democratic principle of distributing the power of political decision equally among all citizens is unreasonable. Moreover, when the commitment to the equal distribution of political influence is coupled with the majoritarian principle of

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decision, we see that democracy is unjust since it places the social good in the hands of those least able to discern it.

This line of reasoning will be familiar to anyone who has worked through Plato's **Republic**, and, indeed, it has exerted a profound influence over the history of political theorizing. Let us extend the appropriate credit to Plato and call the argument the "Guardianship Argument." Since it concludes that political influence should be distributed according to political wisdom, we may refer to the political order recommended by the Guardianship Argument as epistemic authoritarianism, what I shall call epistemarchy, that is, "rule of the knowers."²

In the following, I confront the Guardianship Argument. I take this argument to be among the most serious challenges the democratic theorist must face. I begin with a critique of two familiar strategies for dealing with the Guardianship Argument. I shall then sketch what I contend is a more viable response to the challenge.

AN INITIAL RESPONSE: "WEAK" PRAGMATISM

Let us begin with a response that seems at first to be thoroughly commonsensical. One may think that the proper reply to those who would distribute political power according to political expertise is that we would first have to determine who the experts are. In a paper developing a sophisticated form of this reply, David Estlund writes:

"Roughly, the problem [with epistemarchy] is, Who will know the knowers? No knower is knowable enough to be accepted by all reasonable citizens." (Estlund 1993, 71)

For reasons that will become clear in a moment, let us call this succinct reply to the Guardianship Argument "weak pragmatism." Before we can crown the Philosopher King, we first need to determine who the Philosopher King is, but the kind of wisdom needed to detect the Philosopher King is precisely what the Guardianship Argument denies we have; thus the argument is a muddle, and epistemarchy is practically unattainable. Despite its confident air, weak pragmatism is flawed in at least two crucial respects. Certainly, anyone posing the Guardianship Argument will respond that the knowers are entitled to rule whether they are accepted by all reasonable citizens

² More properly, "*legitimate* rule of the knowers." David Estlund, whose work is discussed below, employs the term "epistocracy" (1997, 183). As the issue concerns the legitimate rule of the knowers, and not simply their *power*, "epistemarchy" is the better term.

or not. Estlund employs the tacit premise that only those political arrangements that could be in principle “accepted by all reasonable citizens” would be viable. But this is simply to beg the question. Estlund evaluates epistemarchy by his own democratic criteria; but the aptness of those criteria is precisely what the Guardianship Argument calls into question.

Hence weak pragmatism fails to engage the epistemarchist. This may not seem very troubling. The Rortyians and Posnerites among us will doubtless contend that it is a mistake on the part of a democrat to attempt to deal squarely with the epistemarchist. Philosophical conflict is no different from political conflict in that often what matters most is turf; democrats should stand firm on their commitments, conceding nothing to their opponents. This would make good tactical sense were it the case that the proposed reply were satisfactory from the democrat’s point of view. In fact, it is not, and this is the second, and more important, flaw in the position. To see that the “who will know the knowers?” response is problematic as a defense of democracy, consider that such a reply leaves the principal contentions of the Guardianship Argument entirely unchallenged. That is, the consideration that it will be difficult or impossible to identify the Philosopher King leaves in place the claims that political power ought to be distributed according to political wisdom, and that political wisdom is not equally distributed among citizens. The weak pragmatist response simply presses the point that the epistemarchist’s proposal is unattainable in practice; it hence tacitly concedes that epistemarchy, were it possible, might be superior to democracy. Hence we may think of the reply as proposing a variety of the defense of democracy made famous by Winston Churchill: democracy, even at its best, is a second-best, a “best-we-can-get.”

One may argue that a democratic and necessarily imperfect “best-we-can-get” is better than any political arrangement we cannot get, and that the impossibility of a Platonic utopia disqualifies it from serious consideration. I am of course sympathetic to this point, yet the weakly pragmatic defense invites a further and more difficult challenge. One may concede the pragmatic point about what is attainable, but still retain the antidemocratic core of the Guardianship Argument. The advocate of epistemarchy may concur that it is perhaps impossible to identify that small class of absolutely wise political experts in whom all political power should be invested. However, this concession is not enough to put all doubts to rest, since we certainly can identify among citizens those who are relatively wiser than most, and invest in them greater political influence without giving absolute political power to any. Hence the epistemarchist may revise her position from that of “epistemic monarchy” to

“epistemic aristocracy”; that is, the epistemarchist may soften her position to the kind of democratic elitism associated with Joseph Schumpeter and Walter Lippmann, among others. We thus no longer need to identify a supremely wise Philosopher King, we simply find the few wisest among us, and place in them a proportionally greater degree of political power.

It seems difficult to resist epistemic aristocracy. We most certainly *do* have reliable ways of discerning differences in political wisdom; moreover, we democrats in fact deny political power to some on epistemic grounds. The insane, the mentally disabled, and the immature cannot vote because they lack the requisite cognitive abilities to do so responsibly. Even the most fervent democrat accepts this arrangement as just. Ironically, it seems that the seeds of the Guardianship Argument lie at the heart of our democratic practice.

It is worth noting at this point that no less a defender of democracy as John Stuart Mill succumbed to a version of epistemarchy. In his **Considerations on Representative Government** Mill claims:

“No one but a fool, and a fool of a peculiar description, feels offended by the acknowledgement that there are others whose opinion, and even whose wish, is entitled to a greater amount of consideration than his. (Mill, 335)

Mill then proposes to give this principle political authority; he suggests that those who are “graduates of universities” and that “labour with their heads” should be given “two or more votes” at the polls (Mill, 336). He advocates public testing to determine the weight each individual’s political opinion should carry, resolving that “in this direction lies the true ideal of representative government” (Mill, 337). We are right to be disturbed by Mill’s proposal. The principle of giving to some “two or more votes” is tantamount to withholding the vote from those who, through accidents of birth and social injustice, did not enjoy the privilege of a university education and so do not “labour with their heads.” That Mill calls his proposal, which is in reality a recipe for perpetuating privilege, the “true ideal” of democracy is especially troubling. However, it is difficult to see how weak pragmatism can avoid moving in this direction. Unless we can point to some defect in the Guardianship Argument “beyond” the practical difficulties of implementing epistemarchy, we shall have no defense against epistemological aristocracy.

We must try to do better. Later in this paper I shall suggest that the way to a better defense against the Guardianship Argument lies within a more robust pragmatism. But before a strongly pragmatic response can be offered, we must consider a second, more sophisticated, strategy.

We have seen that the difficulty that Estlund invites and that Mill faces arises from the fact that the weakly pragmatic view does not challenge the principal contentions of the Guardianship Argument about the unequal distribution of political wisdom and the justice of regimes designed to generate wise policies. It has occurred to many theorists that the proper response to Guardianship is to sever the presumed ties between political wisdom and political legitimacy. The history of liberalism— a tradition running from Locke and Kant through John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin— can be profitably read as an attempt to reject the philosophical claims presupposed by the Guardianship Argument. Of course, the tradition of liberalism is constituted by a wide variety of views, and I do not attempt here to engage all liberalisms in currency. Instead I shall focus upon what might be more precisely characterized as “rights-based liberalism”, and I deal primarily with I take to be two major streams within this category of contemporary liberal thought. Not incidentally, these two streams represent two distinct ways of responding to the Guardianship Argument.

The first stream of liberalism to consider denies that political power should be distributed in direct proportion to political wisdom. The more traditional varieties of liberal contractarianism, such as those proffered by the likes of Locke, the early Rawls, and David Gauthier are paradigmatic of this strategy. The idea of natural rights, which figures prominently in all contractarian views, establishes that political participation and influence is not contingent upon individual political wisdom. If it is true, as Rawls says, that each of us “possesses an inviolability ... that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override” (1999, 3), then political rights, which are the formal statements of this inviolability, are what Ronald Dworkin famously has called “trump cards” (1978, 198). If each person has rights, and if these rights entitle each person to equal treatment and consideration, then even the absolute wisdom of Socrates’ ideal Guardians does not justify epistemarchy; that is, even if there were Philosopher Kings and they could be identified, they would nonetheless not be entitled to rule.

The force of this response to the Guardianship Argument rests upon the strength of the philosophical account of the individual rights it presupposes. Yet the project of grounding liberal democratic politics in a philosophical theory of rights is fraught with difficulty. One of the basic commitments of liberalism is that the state should be neutral and impartial with regard to deep philosophical theories concerning human nature and the good life. However,

any robust philosophical account of individual rights will presuppose, imply, or favor some such theory. As communitarian critics such as Charles Taylor (1985) and Michael Sandel (1982) have shown, the conceptions of individuality and autonomy that lie at the core of liberal theory are not non-controversial; other critics such as Virginia Held (1993), Seyla Benhabib (1992), and Robert George (1999) have argued further that the principles at the core of liberal politics are positively biased against certain traditions of faith, community, and social relatedness. The liberal project of providing a philosophical theory to ground a politics that attempts to avoid philosophical commitments may be, as Benjamin Barber has said, an “oxymoronic conundrum” (1998, 3).

These difficulties have generated another stripe of liberal response. More recent liberalisms attack the very idea of political wisdom by defending a thesis known as ‘pluralism’. The most influential of these recent theories is the political liberalism of John Rawls.³ At the center of Rawls’ later work is the idea of the “fact of reasonable pluralism” (1996, 4). If, as Rawls alleges, reasonable pluralism is a “permanent feature” any free society, then it is not the case that all rational roads lead to a single and specific doctrine about the moral and political good. It follows that nobody can *know* the truth about what is politically best. If nobody can *know* which political proposals are best, then nobody is politically wise in the sense in which the Guardianship Argument requires. The political liberal concludes that Plato’s Guardians cannot exist because even a fully rational human cannot have the kind of knowledge envisioned in the Guardianship Argument.

Yet the political liberal faces a difficult problem. The fact of reasonable pluralism is alleged to entail that political wisdom is unattainable because the moral and political facts are underdetermined. However, the fact of reasonable pluralism seems itself to be the kind of normative political claim that Rawls is insisting cannot be known to be true and hence has no place in politics. In this way, political liberalism confronts the same kind of paradoxical difficulty as more traditional varieties of liberal theory. So the main varieties of liberal theory face serious philosophical difficulties. One might respond that politics does not live by theory alone and that democracy persists despite the above problems with liberalism. However, I think that in this case the difficulty at the level of theory gives rise to difficulty at the level of practice. By severing politics from epistemological and moral concerns, liberalism has

³ See also Gray 2000 and Galston 2002. For a full discussion of Rawls’s political liberalism, see R.Talisie 2001.

promoted what Jane Mansbridge (1980) has aptly characterized as an “adversarial” conception of democracy. According to the adversarial view, democracy is simply an efficient procedure for aggregating incompatible individual preferences across a population. However, as civic republican critics of liberalism have argued, a strictly procedural or aggregative conception of democratic politics cannot articulate compelling accounts of citizenship, civic duty, and social responsibility. A polity unconcerned with such matters will, as Michael Sandel has argued “generate its own disenchantment” (1996, 24) in the form of the dwindling political participation, eroding civility, and dissolving trust that is currently evident in the United States and elsewhere.⁴

An alternative response to Guardianship is needed. A successful reply must avoid both the Millian difficulty of elitism and the tendency of liberalism to impoverish the democratic process by reducing it to a merely aggregative procedure among adversaries. I count myself among a growing band of theorists promoting a deliberativist account of democracy as a viable alternative to the traditional conceptions. I think also that deliberativism supplies a powerful response to the Guardianship Argument, especially when formulated within the context of what I call a *strong pragmatism*. In the next section, I shall launch a strongly pragmatic critique of the Guardianship Argument, and suggest how this critique can be developed into a positive account of deliberative democracy.

A PRAGMATIST CRITIQUE OF THE GUARDIANSHIP ARGUMENT

Let’s go back to Plato for a moment. The Guardianship Argument was originally framed within the context of an entire metaphysical and epistemological system which we shall call, for lack of a better term, “Platonism.” Socrates understood the politically wise person, the philosopher king, to be one who has knowledge of the Form of the Good. On the basis of this knowledge, the politically wise person could design public policy to realize particular goods in the political realm (500c-e). Although the politically wise person approaches knowledge of The Good through the practice of *dialektiké* (533b-d), it is actually attained in an act of *theoría*, and intellectual grasping or beholding akin to the way in which one becomes aware of the Sun (508b-c). As the object of knowledge cannot change (477ff.), The Good is fixed and immutable, and once knowledge of it is attained, it is possessed in its entirety once and for all. Since few people are capable of grasping The Good, and

⁴ See, for example, the essays collected in Pharr and Putnam, eds. 2000.

since knowledge of The Good is necessary for legitimate political rule, few persons are fit for political rule. Consequently, the constitution that places political rule in the hands of the few who know The Good is the most just; hence Socrates' most infamous assertion:

“Until philosophers rule as kinds or those who are now called kings... genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide... cities will have no rest from evils... nor, I think, will the human race. (473d)

Although few today explicitly accept Platonism as a viable philosophical option, the attempts to respond to the Guardianship Argument we have surveyed tacitly, and perhaps unwittingly, accept Platonist epistemological notions. Both Mill's democratic elitism and the varieties of rights-based liberalism we have encountered all leave in place the idea that what is politically good or wise can be seen by appropriately situated individuals. Recall that for Mill these individuals are the “graduates of universities.” By contrast, the rights-based liberal reduces the political good to individual interests or “preferences” and thus maintains that each mature and sane adult may apprehend the good by introspection. In this way, these theorists have conceded a crucial element of Socrates' case against democracy. I contend that this is a mistake; the epistemological assumptions of Platonism are highly dubious, especially within social and political contexts.

Accordingly, the critique I shall deploy targets the idea that The Good is an independent entity, knowledge of which can be grasped in an individual act of apprehension and then applied to particular cases. In place of this conception, I shall propose a political epistemology that ties political wisdom and the social good to the *praxis* of properly conducted public deliberation. To head directly into the fray, I pose two considerations against the kind of political epistemology presupposed by the Guardianship Argument. The first consideration against Platonism is the simple fact that we today have at our disposal an alternative model of knowledge in the methods of the sciences. What the sciences suggest is that the enterprise of attaining knowledge is not an individual affair, but requires the presence of and participation in a socially organized body, the “scientific community.” That is, the pursuit of knowledge in the sciences requires that results, ideas, theories, and proposals of individual inquirers be continually corroborated, verified, challenged, responded to, refined, and checked by members of a community committed to common methods of inquiry, a common view of experimentation, and common standards of evidence. Moreover, the scientific enterprise is aimed primarily

at the resolution of specific problems and challenges within human experience; scientific theories and speculation arise out of the practical affair of confronting difficulties and trying to deal with them.

It is clear that the conception of knowledge suggested by scientific practice differs greatly from that offered by Platonism. On the scientific view, knowledge is a continuing enterprise of participation and cooperation among members of a community, not the immediate apprehension of the Truth by an individual mind. Moreover, since the Platonist view places theory prior to practice, it confronts the difficulty of explaining how knowledge of ideal objects can be applied to actual human problems.⁵ On the scientific view, by contrast, theories, speculations, predictions, and the like are “products” of practice; accordingly, scientific knowledge is not a matter of the detached contemplation of an other-worldly ideal, but is always rooted in the vicissitudes of human experiences and human problems. Further, whereas the Platonist view promotes the idea that knowledge is always knowledge of eternal and changeless entities, the scientific model construes knowledge as essentially connected to experimentation; hence knowledge is in the first instance the ability to predict, affect, direct, and control changing conditions. Lastly, the Platonist understands knowledge as the achieving of certainty; accordingly, once one has apprehended The Good, intellectual activity ceases and knowledge is once and for all attained. On the scientific view, however, knowledge is a continuing endeavor in which no result, claim, or theory is once and for all established; that is, scientific knowledge never rises above the status of hypothesis. In order to qualify as scientific, claims and theories must be subjected to continuing test and possible revision and correction against new experimental results. Science rejects certainty as a mark of knowledge and adopts fallibilism and experimentalism in its stead; the claim or theory most worthy of acceptance is the one which is best supported by the currently available evidence, the one which can command the assent of the community of inquirers.

Although the case is sometimes made by Peircean and Deweyan pragmatists that knowledge in all its forms is best understood in terms of the kind of participatory and continuing social undertaking which characterizes

⁵ It is worth mentioning here that Socrates concedes that knowledge of The Good is insufficient for just rule. The *kallipolis* of the **Republic** dissolves because the philosopher kings err in applying their knowledge of The Good to specific political conditions (546a-e).

⁶ See Peirce 1868; Peirce 1877; Peirce 1878; Dewey 1939, ch. 6; Dewey 1938; Dewey 1929; and Dewey 1927, chs. 5 and 6. See also Quine 1968, and Hilary Putnam 1990. See Talisse 2000 for a fuller treatment of Dewey’s epistemology.

scientific inquiry, I need not here press this more general point.⁶ Whatever one might want to say about knowledge in general, and the relation of scientific knowledge to knowledge of other sorts, the concept of knowledge with respect to *political* matters lends itself easily to the kind of pragmatic, anti-Platonist analysis I am promoting. Here, then, is the source of my second consideration against Platonism. Political wisdom is concerned with political phenomena. The phenomena of politics are complex; they include individual and group interests, current distributions of social goods and resources, established institutions and their histories, power relations, laws, policies, economic arrangements, technological capabilities, cultural factors, social traditions, and the like. These complex phenomena are interrelated and dynamic, prone to fluctuation, disorder, and conflict. Borrowing a term from Dewey, let us call an instance of disturbance among the various political phenomena a “problem.”⁷ Accordingly, political problems need not always be “conflicts” between competing interests, although such conflicts do of course comprise one kind of problem. Political problems are instead multiform, and are not always reducible to Hobbesian analyses.

When a problem arises, decisions must be made with regard to how it may be dealt with, responded to, and resolved; resources must be reallocated, new policies introduced, old institutions revised and corrected, legislation must be drafted, committees must be formed. In short, when a political problem arises, something must be “done” in response to it. Given the complexity and dynamic nature of political phenomena, it is rarely the case that one can know in advance of acting whether a particular course of action will be satisfactorily effective; proposals for dealing with political problems are thus hypothesis generated from political-social-economic conceptions which are themselves products of prior attempts to deal with political problems. Like hypotheses in scientific inquiry, proposals for dealing with political problems are to be tested in experience; they are to be brought to bear on the problem at hand and judged according to their results. Simplifying a bit, we can say that a proposed response to a political problem can either (1) fail to actually address the problem, leaving it as it was, or (2) address to the problem, but exacerbate it, creating a further or worse problem which was otherwise avoidable, or (3) address to the problem and resolve it, but generate a new problem elsewhere, or (4) address the problem and resolve it, restoring relative integration among the various political phenomena previously

⁷ It is not uncommon to associate democratic processes with problem-solving; for example, see Cohen 1989; Bohman 1996; Cunningham 2002; and Young 2000, 27.

disordered. Responses of the last kind are preferable to the former three, and are the aim of political decision-making.

I trust these are noncontroversial, even mundane claims. But note that the best-ness of a political policy or proposal is to be in part assessed by its success “in practice”, by its ability to respond successfully to the problem at hand. To this, I add a principle emphasized by some deliberativist theorists that the effectiveness in practice of a political policy is in part determined by the public’s “perception” of that policy. The point is intuitive: citizens are better disposed to endorse and comply with a given political policy when they understand the reasons why it was implemented, what it aims to achieve, and what advantages it has over other policies that might have been implemented. A policy’s success, then, is in part constituted by the attitudes and perceptions of the citizens to whom it is applied.

The principal contention of my pragmatic-deliberativist conception of democracy is that processes of public deliberation, open discussion, debate, and criticism are generally the best available means for political decision. More specifically, I contend that if political decision is required when a political problem arises, and if political decision aims to derive a response to a particular problem that resolves the problem without generating additional or deeper problems, then the best way we have of making political decisions is ongoing open public deliberation. By “open public deliberation” I mean processes by which citizens share, compare, and contrast perspectives, information, and proposals; in deliberating, citizens engage one another in debate and participate in cooperative dialogue in such a way that individuals come to influence and be influenced by each other’s perspectives, reasons, and arguments. Through deliberation, citizens thus come to understand better the problem at hand, the merits of proposed solutions, and each other. The aim of these processes of collective reasoning is a two-fold objective which Dewey called “growth”: in the first place, democratic deliberation aims to develop a resolution of the problem and reintegrate relative stability into the political order; in the second place, democratic deliberation aims to maintain and strengthen the process of deliberation itself so that cooperative, collective deliberation may continue in the future. Through the continuing process of cooperative reasoning with regard to common problems, citizens become better deliberators, and thus better able to arrive at wise political decisions.

In short, the pragmatic-deliberativist view I am posing maintains that political wisdom arises from or emerges out of the processes of public deliberation. This view leaves in place the Millian intuition that politics must keep close company with concepts like the common good and the politically

wise; however, it avoids the elitist tendencies of Millianism by endorsing a view of public deliberation which accords to individuals the kind of protections and entitlements envisioned by traditional varieties of rights-based liberalism. More specifically, as it recognizes that individuals are the primary agents of deliberation and that certain conditions must prevail if proper deliberation is to commence, the pragmatic-deliberativist view can countenance a sufficiently strong sense of right and entitlement. But unlike traditional varieties of liberalism, the concept of individual rights does not presuppose or promote an adversarial politics of atomic and egoistic Hobbesian competitors; hence the pragmatic-deliberativist does not impoverish or render unintelligible concepts like citizenship, civic duty, and social obligation. On the view I am proposing, citizenship consists in “participation” in public deliberation through sharing viewpoints, offering criticisms, and sympathetically considering alternative positions with a view to arriving at the best political decisions possible.

So, I agree with the epistemarchist that the goal of political decision is wise policies, and I also maintain that political power should be distributed in proportion to political wisdom. I nonetheless remain a democrat because I reject the Platonist presupposition that political wisdom can reside within an individual mind. On the strongly pragmatic political epistemology I have promoted, political wisdom can be the possession only of a certain kind of community; in particular, political wisdom can belong only to a community of political deliberators. Democracy, as it is here understood, is the one form of political arrangement that is designed to place the power of political decision in the hands of the body that can achieve political wisdom, namely, the community of public deliberation. Hence the Guardianship Argument is defused. Of course, more must be said about what deliberation is, how it works, and how we might progress towards a more deliberative, engaged civil society. These are the tough questions for any theorist of deliberative democracy— there are no easy or short answers. I have undertaken here the more manageable, but no less essential, project of showing a way in which democrats can concede what is correct in the Guardianship Argument without thereby endorsing epistemarchy. In particular, I have sketched a way in which democrats can acknowledge that politics must keep close company with wisdom, truth, and goodness.

Indeed, I have suggested a view according to which the integration of democratic politics with concerns for political wisdom is essential for democratic revitalization.

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