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Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes stock of a recent but growing movement within the field of deliberative democracy, which normatively argues for the epistemic dimension of democratic authority and positively defends the truth-tracking properties of democratic procedures. Authors within that movement call themselves epistemic democrats, hence the recognition by many of an ‘epistemic turn’ in democratic theory. The paper argues that this turn is a desirable direction in which the field ought to evolve, taking it beyond the ‘fact of disagreement’ that had previously blocked the conceptual road to acknowledging more than intrinsic properties to democratic decision procedures. The paper shows how two authors in particular – Joshua Cohen and David Estlund – have successfully lifted the Rawlsian requirement of epistemic abstinence and defends epistemic democrats and the implications of the epistemic turn in democratic theory against various misconceptions.

KEYWORDS

Epistemic democracy;
deliberation; disagreement;
truth; public reason

Deliberative democracy, an influential movement within democratic theory in the last thirty years, was founded on the recognition of a fact (arguably) central to modern liberal democracies. This fact – whose factual nature, as we shall see, is actually somewhat contentious – is referred to by various names: ‘the fact of pluralism’ (Rawls 1993a, 1993b), ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’ (Cohen 1993; Rawls 1993b, 36, fn 37), the ‘fact of disagreement’ (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Waldron 1999a, 1999b) or even ‘the fact of diversity’ (Knight and Johnson 2011). Loosely speaking, this fact refers to the reality that people in free societies are committed to different and conflicting – some would say incommensurable – beliefs, values, conceptions of social justice, conceptions of the good, and ways of life.

Most deliberative democrats have taken for granted that the fact of disagreement entails, if not a strong version of value pluralism (à la Isaiah Berlin), at least the Rawlsian epistemological position of agnosticism with respect to the truth-value of moral and political claims. This agnosticism is part of Rawls’s more general strategy of applying a ‘method of avoidance’ (Rawls 1999, 434) to controversial metaphysical issues he thought his ‘political, not metaphysical’ liberalism ought to steer clear of – a method of avoidance relabeled by others ‘epistemic abstinence’ (Raz 1990). I retain this label in what follows. The mainstream version of deliberative democracy as it has emerged since its beginnings in the late 1980s and early 1990s has been characterized by such epistemic abstinence. It is a model of democratic legitimacy in which free and equal citizens are supposed to resolve their disagreement through respectful exchange of arguments that refrain from appealing to the concept of truth, as the latter is seen as unnecessarily divisive and intolerant. Relatedly, deliberative democrats have assumed that the value of democratic procedures in resolving disagreement lies essentially in the values they

express (such as respect, equality, and reciprocity, among others), not explicitly or at all in their knowledge-aggregating, let alone truth-tracking, properties, or in their ability to produce 'better' outcomes.¹

This general stance of epistemic abstinence has become unsustainable in recent years, or so I will argue. First, the Habermasian branch of the deliberative democracy literature has become more and more explicit about its epistemic dimension over the years (see Habermas 2006; Jörke 2010; Buchstein and Jörke 2012; and Jörke in Fischer and Gottweis 2012, 277; see also Chambers 2017²). Second, Rawlsians themselves have started questioning the necessity for political liberalism of doing without the truth, any kind of truth, at all (e.g. Raz 1990; Estlund 1998; Cohen 2009). Other authors have similarly suggested that a complete justification for democracy, perhaps even a full legitimation of its authority, could not do without epistemic elements (Anderson 2006; Marti 2006; Landemore 2013) and a growing number of authors are defending the knowledge-aggregating and truth-tracking properties of various democratic procedures, or even of democracy as a cognitive system as a whole (Goodin and List 2001; Anderson 2006; Ober 2010; Farrell and Shalizi 2012, Landemore 2012, 2013).³ Meanwhile pragmatists like Misak and Talisse (2014) have put forward a Perceian defense of democracy as the only kind of socio-epistemic environment in which the constitutive norms of belief, including truth-aptness, can be satisfied.⁴ Even complex pragmatist accounts that claim to reject the epistemic label can be read as at least partially epistemic accounts of the value of democracy (Knight and Johnson 2011).⁵

What are we to make of what some now call 'an epistemic turn' in deliberative democracy (Jörke 2010; Palumbo 2012; Urbinati 2014, 103) and even treat as an established field of inquiry in democratic theory (e.g. Mansbridge et al. 2012, 10)? Does this turn consist in naively denying the empirical reality of the 'fact of disagreement'? What are the implications of such a turn? At what cost, if any, does it come for the purely procedural or intrinsic value of democracy? What does it mean for the field as a whole?

This paper takes a stab at some of these questions by proceeding as follows. Section 1 spends necessary time analyzing the main roadblock to the epistemic turn, namely the 'fact of disagreement' as first theorized by John Rawls and re-interpreted by deliberative democrats in the Rawlsian tradition. Section 2 turns to Rawls' attempt to substitute the concept of 'the reasonable' for that of 'truth' and argues, following Habermas, that even the reasonable should be interpreted as retaining a relation to the concept of truth, however indirect or oblique. Section 3 shows how some deliberative democrat pioneers, both of the epistemic (Estlund) and the non-epistemic (J. Cohen) type, have successfully demonstrated that epistemic abstinence is not required even within a Rawlsian paradigm, and that the concept of truth is, indeed, indispensable to our political vocabulary. Section 4 argues more generally that even if we want to bracket the concept of truth as too fraught historically, political objectivism and cognitivism of some kind are in fact unavoidable. Section 5 turns to three types of implications of the epistemic turn for democratic theory and some implications for the idea of public reason and the pursuit of deliberative consensus. Section 6, finally, answers the objection that with their emphasis on outcomes epistemic democrats jeopardize the intrinsic value of democracy and even risk disfiguring it.

1. The 'fact of disagreement'

In this section I argue that 'the fact of disagreement,' central to mainstream theories of deliberative democracy and most particularly those of a Rawlsian strand, has long functioned as an obstacle to epistemic concerns.⁶ In order to understand why frameworks built around this concept could not accommodate an interest in the epistemic performance of democratic procedures, specifically deliberation, it is necessary to spend time retracing its history, meaning, and related ambiguities.

The concept of the 'fact of disagreement' itself – a broad umbrella term I use for various ways to understand and theorize it – can be traced back to John Rawls' reformulation of some of his post-*Theory of Justice* ideas about justice and political justification. In an article entitled 'The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus' (Rawls 1993a [1989]), Rawls first tries to flesh out what a political, not metaphysical liberalism would look like, by specifying the sphere where truth-claims are seen as irrelevant and the quest for a rational consensus should be abandoned in favor of a merely 'overlapping' one.⁷ Unlike the early Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* (1971), the later Rawls proposes to seek a consensus

of merely 'reasonable' views, whose truth is neither to be asserted nor denied and is indeed left entirely out of the equation.

The reason for this move away from moral objectivism and cognitivism, and at any rate moral or normative truth-claims, is, in essence, what Rawls calls the 'fact of pluralism.' Rawls describes this fact as the first of the four (ultimately five) facts characteristic of political life in liberal democracies from which any political conception of justice must begin. In this early post-*Theory of Justice* text, the fact of pluralism is described as 'not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away [but] a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy' as well as a condition that 'will persist and may increase' (Rawls 1993a, 246, my emphasis). The fact of pluralism is – in this passage, at least – emphatically a *fact*, that is, an empirical, observable reality. As Rawls explicitly states, this fact, like the others, pertains to 'political sociology' and 'human psychology' (Rawls 1993a, 246). As a result, Rawls in this passage sounds like a social scientist describing the world as it is and making predictions about what will or might happen in the future of democratic societies.

Rawls further traces the origin of this fact of pluralism to another fact, which he calls the 'burdens of judgment' (Rawls 1993a, 54–58) or the 'burdens of reason,' which are 'the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life' (Rawls 1993a, 248).⁸ According to Rawls, these sources of disagreement are inescapable for even the smartest human beings. As such, they're compatible with the full reasonableness of those judging' (Rawls 1993a, 248). Importantly, Rawls insists that acknowledging these factual limitations of the human mind does not imply abandoning the realm of ideal theory, where other empirical facts, like selfishness and other corrupted motivations, are assumed away.⁹

Against this double anchorage in factual constraints (the fact of pluralism as resulting from the burdens of reason), Rawlsians of the first hour were quick to argue that conceding so much to reality was dangerously leading in the direction of a compromise with the cultural norms of the time or, worse, a compromise with power. If we start from actual, existing disagreement, far from ending with an ideal 'overlapping consensus,' we will just end up with a *modus vivendi*. Joshua Cohen thus argued that what Rawls must have meant, or should have meant, was something quite different, namely 'the fact of *reasonable* pluralism' (Cohen 1993, 281, emphasis added), or 'the idea [...] that there are distinct understandings of value, each of which is fully reasonable' (Cohen 1993, 235–238). On his definition, '[a]n understanding of value is fully reasonable just in case its adherents are stably disposed to affirm it as they acquire new information and subject it to critical reflection' (Cohen 1993, 282). On Cohen's view, then, the only legitimate disagreements are those between people who can be assumed to be equals in terms of reasoning capacity as well as equally animated by the same selfless desire for figuring out the principles of justice (as opposed to promoting their self-interest). This double constraint on both epistemic competence and motivation means that the only relevant fact of disagreement is the disagreement among such 'reasonable' individuals.

Unlike the fact of pluralism, the fact of *reasonable* pluralism as formulated by Cohen should not be confused with actual, empirical disagreement.¹⁰ Cohen's re-interpretation of Rawls' fact of pluralism thus abstracts away from observable reality more than was suggested by Rawls' own terminology, a terminology that Cohen deems 'misleading' because '[the term] "fact" puts the emphasis in the wrong place' (1993, 281). Reasonable pluralism, on Cohen's view, is not so much a fact to be observed as one to be assumed [as it is 'suggested'] on the basis of an absence of reflexive convergence on issues of value, that is, one might say, on the basis of observed actual disagreement.

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls fully endorsed Cohen's criticism and reinterpretation and notoriously started using the phrase 'the fact of *reasonable* pluralism' (1993b, 36, fn 37). By doing so, Rawls explicitly moved reasonable pluralism from the status of a stubborn fact of modern societies to a normative expectation, at the level of ideal theory, as to what can be reasonably demanded of well-meaning individuals. Given the burdens of reasons, an idealized agreement or a perfectly rational consensus on normative issues is just too much to ask of people. If we can assume that some disagreement has only good sources (as opposed to selfishness or laziness), then reasonable pluralism is something we have to reconcile ourselves with, even at the level of ideal theory.

Despite Cohen's careful reconstruction and Rawls' later explicit endorsement of this reconstruction, however, an important part of the literature in deliberative democracy, at least that influenced by Rawls, has arguably taken a less subtle interpretation of the fact of pluralism and seemingly endorsed the view that one must surrender objectivity and cognitivism in politics to the empirical fact that people, including both 'reasonable' ones (in a Rawlsian sense) and non-reasonable ones inevitably disagree in the context of a free society.

Jeremy Waldron's views in this regard are characteristic. In *Law and Disagreement*, Waldron rephrases Rawls' concern about the fact of disagreement as one element of the 'circumstances of politics,' on a par with relative scarcity.

Whatever else we wish away in our elaboration of ideal models of civic republicanism and deliberative democracy, we should not wish away the fact that *we find ourselves living and acting alongside those with whom we do not share a view about justice, rights or political morality.* (Waldron 1999a, 105, my emphasis)

On Waldron's view, the fact of disagreement is symptomatically not reduced to the circle of *reasonable* people, a terminology that Waldron drops entirely.¹¹ It is, again, as in the early interpretation of that fact by Rawls, a mere fact. Relatedly, Waldron's main argument in favor of inclusive deliberation is not that it is likely to produce better, smarter, more informed, let alone true or just or right outcomes. Though he carefully studies Aristotle's argument from the wisdom of the multitude and briefly mentions the Condorcet Jury Theorem, he uses neither argument in support of democratic procedures. For him, including everyone's voice or vote is merely a form of 'respect' owed to equal citizens whose disagreements run deep (Waldron 1999b, 158).

A comparable displacement from reasonable to simple disagreement and a comparable lack of interest for the epistemic properties of democratic procedures are arguably present in other landmarks of the deliberative democracy literature, such as Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's *Democracy and Disagreement* and *Why Deliberative Democracy?*¹² In Gutmann and Thompson, the focus is on a broader category of disagreement than that strictly resulting from the burdens of reasons. While they occasionally acknowledge the compatibility of the epistemic argument for democracy and more intrinsic arguments (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 21–22), their interest is clearly in the latter. They formulate their defense of deliberation in terms that are strikingly non-epistemic, celebrating its ability to embody the principle of democratic reciprocity and to express respect toward the equal dignity of the participants (Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

One could easily find other examples of such interpretations and ambiguities (see also Estlund 2008, Chapter 5). While the correlation between a commitment to the fact of disagreement and a reluctance to refer to procedure-independent standards seems rather strong and may indicate causation, ambiguities toward procedure-independent standards can be noted even in authors like the early Habermas (see Estlund 2008, 88–90), or Cohen himself (Estlund 2008, 90–92), as well as other 'procedural' deliberative democrats like Seyla Benhabib (see Cooke 2000). Whatever the cause(s) of such anti- or a-cognitivist stances, it is striking how little was said by early deliberative democrats about the relation of deliberative outcomes to not just the 'truth' but any substantive notion of moral or political objectivity – call it correctness, rightness, the common good, or justice. With the exception of Estlund (1997, 2008), no one seemed primarily concerned with the epistemic properties of deliberation beyond its intrinsic or procedural value.¹³

As a likely result of overstating the centrality of disagreement to politics, most deliberative democrats have ended up not just avoiding using the concept of truth, as Rawls recommended, They have avoided any direct concern for substantive outcomes and independent standards of evaluation of democratic procedures. As we shall now see, this was never Rawls' intent, since he does see the 'reasonable' as a procedure-independent standard of correctness, albeit – problematically – one without epistemic meaning.

This reticence with regard to both the concept of a procedure-independent standard of correctness and the idea of calling such a standard 'truth' needs to be addressed. Does epistemic abstinence – agnosticism about the truth-value of one's claims and avoidance of the term truth altogether, understood

minimally as a procedure-independent standard of correctness with an epistemic dimension – really follow from the fact of reasonable disagreement, let alone the mere fact of disagreement?

In order to answer this question, I will turn to two authors who have, successfully in my view, carved out a path for epistemic approaches to democracy and for the return of truth in the political vocabulary from within a Rawlsian framework. In order to understand their approach and why they ultimately reject Rawls' epistemic abstinence, we first need to return to Rawls' notion of 'reasonable' as a replacement or substitute for the concept of truth.

2. The Reasonable Versus the Truth

What does the 'reasonable' mean? Rawls' definition is surprisingly hard to pin down and indeed the beginning of *Political Liberalism* (1993b) proceeds without one. The definition emerges mostly by contrast with competing concepts. When it comes to providing a definition of the reasonable against the rational, Rawls' method is thus rather circuitous. 'Rather than define the reasonable directly, I specify two of its basic aspects as virtues of persons' (Rawls 1993b, 48). The first virtue is a disposition 'to offer principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation' and the other virtue is 'to abide by [such principles] willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so' (Rawls 1993b, 48). The reasonable, unlike the rational, is thus an intersubjective notion involving reciprocity and the willingness to justify one's reasons to others. Later, in a reply to Habermas, Rawls will add another element to the definition of a reasonable person, namely 'their willingness to recognize the burdens of judgment and accept the consequences thereof' (Rawls 1995, 149).

As to the relationship of the reasonable to the truth, which is of greatest interest to us, it is most clearly expounded in a passage from *Political Liberalism* where Rawls contrasts his own theory of political constructivism, on which political liberalism depends for a criterion of objectivity, with what he characterizes as 'rational intuitionism', a form of moral realism found in the English tradition in Clarke and Price, and Sidgwick and Ross (Rawls 1993b, 91). By embracing political constructivism, it is worth emphasizing, Rawls, unlike some of the deliberative democrats mentioned above, explicitly endorses the idea of a procedure-independent standard of objectivity. Reflecting on the scope of political constructivism, Rawls thus remarks that: '*reasonableness is [the] standard of correctness [of political constructivism]*.' Rawls thus embraces a role for the 'reasonable' similar to that of 'truth' in other realms or for other doctrines and philosophies (Rawls 1993b, 127, my emphasis).

Yet, Rawls insists that 'the reasonable' has nothing to do with truth. He specifically argues that unlike rational intuitionism, political constructivism neither uses nor denies the concept of truth, 'nor could it say that the concept of the concept of truth and its idea of the reasonable are the same' (Rawls 1999, 94). For Rawls, the function of 'reasonableness' does not require going beyond abstaining from criticizing comprehensive accounts of the truth (including religious, philosophical and metaphysical). Asking himself: 'Should we think that any of the reasonable doctrines present in society are true, or approximately so, even in the long run?'; his answer is an unambiguous, intentional, and fully assumed dodge:

The political conception itself does not speak to this question. It aims to work out a political conception of justice that citizens as reasonable and rational can endorse on due reflection [...]. With that done, the political conception is a reasonable basis of public reason and *that suffices*. (*Political Liberalism* 1993b, 128, my emphasis)

Having exhausted Rawls' willingness to say more on the topic, let us now turn to an important commentator, who represents the other main root of deliberative democracy and himself never advocated any form of epistemic abstinence: Jürgen Habermas. In his 1995 'Remarks on John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*', Habermas offers two possible interpretations of the concept of the 'reasonable':

Either we understand 'reasonable' in the sense of practical reason as synonymous with 'morally true' that is, as a validity concept analogous to truth and on the same plane as propositional truth [...] Or we understand 'reasonable' in more or less the same sense as 'thoughtfulness' in dealing with debatable views whose truth is for the present undecided. (Habermas 1995, 123–124)

The first option is the one favored by Habermas, and indeed it is the one that most resembles his own position on the status of moral claims versus truth claims. The reasonable is analogous to the true, but

it applies to different objects and it describes a different type of relation between these concepts and reality.

The second option, however, is that favored by Rawls, and one that Habermas has difficulty making sense of. The reasonable for Rawls would be some kind of provisional status for views that have not yet been proven wrong and may or may not be proven true in an indeterminate future. Further, reasonable views are characterized by the type of people holding them – to wit, people who are willing to put up with the undecidedness of such views. The reasonable is thus ‘a higher-level predicate concerned more with “reasonable disagreements,” and hence with the fallibilistic consciousness and civil demeanor of persons, than with the validity of their assertions’ (Habermas 1995, 124). This fallibilistic dimension of the reasonable applies in particular to claims about the demands of justice. For Habermas, though, Rawls cannot entirely give up on the epistemic content of the reasonable. On Habermas’ interpretation, therefore, ‘a reasonable conception of justice preserves *an oblique relation to a truth claim projected into the future*’ (Habermas 1995, 125, my emphasis). It is because access to this future truth is forever postponed in a world characterized by deep disagreement about values that we have to fall back on tolerance toward worldviews that are not themselves patently unreasonable. When push comes to shove, then, for Habermas, ‘not patently untrue’ or ‘expected to be true at some later point’ forms a possible content of the Rawlsian notion of reasonable.

Rawls’s answer to Habermas confirms only the partial accuracy of Habermas’ second interpretation. In his reply, Rawls repeats that the reasonable, unlike the true, is a concept that recognizes the burdens of judgment and fosters liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. Thus, ‘the reasonable does, of course, express a reflective attitude to toleration’ (Rawls 1995, 150, referring to Rawls 1993b, 54–61). The reasonable, however, is not the equivalent of a truth-like claim in the moral sphere. Rawls thus reiterates the specificity of reasonableness as a standard of objective validity or correctness without epistemic meaning (Rawls 1995, 149). A standard of objective validity without epistemic meaning is, arguably, a puzzling conceptual beast but to objectors like Habermas (and others such as Raz or Cohen) who insist that political liberalism cannot avoid the question of truth, Rawls’s answer is deceptively simple: ‘I do not see why not’ (Rawls 1995, 150). The only point that Rawls seems willing to concede is that ‘the idea of the reasonable needs a more thorough examination than *Political Liberalism* offers.’ He also suspects that ‘people will continue to raise questions of truth [...] and to tax political liberalism with not discussing them.’ However, he concludes, ‘in the absence of particulars, these complaints fall short of objections’ (Rawls 1995, 150).

Why is Rawls so adamant that the reasonable cannot be seen as having any connection to the truth, even only probably, obliquely, or as a long-term expectation, as Habermas invites him to grant? Mostly, it seems to come down for Rawls to the history of intolerance associated with the concept of truth as well as the connotations of uniqueness that come with it. He thus writes in *Political Liberalism*:

The advantage of staying within the reasonable is that *there can be but one true comprehensive doctrine, though as we have seen, many reasonable ones.* [...] Holding a political conception as true, and for that reason alone the only suitable basis of public reason, is *exclusive, even sectarian, and so likely to foster political division.* (Rawls 1993b, 129, my emphasis throughout)¹⁴

For Rawls, truth is not just a standard of correctness with an epistemic dimension. It is a thicker concept, implying uniqueness and exclusivity of the true answer as well as an empirically documented tendency to entail exclusionary and sectarian behaviors. Though he does not say it in so many words, it is this thicker, historically tainted concept of truth that Rawls finds unsuitable to a world characterized by a plurality of reasonable worldviews.

Recent work by Rawlsian scholars themselves, however, has questioned Rawls’s understanding of the truth and purported to provide the ‘particulars’ Rawls says are missing from complaints that liberalism does not take the truth seriously. I focus below specifically on Joshua Cohen and David Estlund’s analyses.

3. Reintroducing the Truth in Political Liberalism

Two¹⁵ Rawlsian authors have pushed back against Rawls' strategy of avoidance. Joshua Cohen argues that a minimal, 'political' concept of truth is immune to the objections Rawls raises against a thick or more metaphysical conception of truth. David Estlund, for his part, reclaims for politics not just a minimal, non-metaphysical, or otherwise partial conception of truth, but 'the whole truth' by distinguishing between a context of justification and a context of legitimation.

Cohen first developed the concept of epistemic democracy in a 1986 seminal article entitled 'An epistemic conception of democracy,' in which he defines epistemic democracy as one type of 'reasonable populism' characterized by three assumptions: (1) a procedure-independent standard of correctness; (2) a cognitive approach to voting; and (3) a Bayesian process of belief adjustment (Cohen 1986). Though Cohen does not recognize himself as an epistemic democrat, he defends assumptions that are part of the epistemic democracy model, such as tenet number (1), which characterizes all kinds of non-epistemic reasonable populisms as well. He also supports the view that truth is a relevant political concept for political discussion, if not about daily politics, at least about fundamental debates concerning the principles of social justice. This belief that reasonable populism is a viable philosophical position and that constitutional issues can be framed in the vocabulary of truth puts him at odds not just with William Riker (the main adversary in his original article) but with Rawls himself.

In his 2009 essay 'Truth and public reason,' Cohen's approach to the conundrum raised by Rawls' rejection of the concept of truth consists in reinterpreting him as saying something like this:

There is no available conception of truth that would be so minimal as to ensure overlapping consensus or, if there is, it is not the one that people will intuitively associate with the concept of truth. So let's just not use the concept of truth altogether.

To this Cohen's reply is that there is such a minimal conception of truth and that is the one people should associate with the concept of truth, which is necessary to our thinking about justice at all. This minimal conception is a *political* conception of truth, which we can develop on the model that Rawls himself gave us of a *political* conception of justice.¹⁶

For Cohen, Rawls' mistake was in thinking that one could avoid the divisiveness induced by truth-claims by replacing truth with the apparently more modest concept of the 'reasonable.' Yet, at some point in the deliberation, we will have to make claims about which of the competing reasonable conceptions of justice put forward is the 'most reasonable' as well. According to Cohen, truth is not the not the divisive factor in our political disagreements. Truth merely 'expresses the disagreement that we [already] have' (Cohen 2009, 31). Whether or not we express our claims as true or reasonable, we are still going to disagree. What we can do is lighten the concept of truth to make it less metaphysical than the term commonly suggests and retain it as the necessary standard of beliefs and judgments, including in the sphere of public reason.

Estlund's take on the problem is different. While he shares Cohen's view that political liberalism cannot do without the truth, his solution consists in distinguishing between (a) the task of justifying to each other the superiority of a given law or principle of justice, which he argues we cannot but do in terms of truth-claims, and (b) the task of justifying the imposition on others of the law or principle each of us deems true (or truest). The first task (justification *per se*) requires letting in 'the whole truth' – that is, appeals to comprehensive doctrines – as opposed to a partial 'political' truth, which Estlund thinks is just an ersatz of truth and thus no truth at all.

The second task (legitimation), however, shifts the justificatory burden to a procedure acceptable to all reasonable (or qualified) points of view. This procedure is, for Estlund, the very deliberation process through which we exchange truth-claims, to the extent that this deliberation is capable of producing a single consensual outcome. In Estlund's words:

[T]he right procedural justification might refer to a procedure [e.g. deliberation] in which participants address the truth, in the comprehensive sense, about justice. If this procedural justification is itself acceptable to all reasonable points of view, then the Rawlsian principle of justification would be fully respected. (Estlund 2012, 270)

Estlund's reconstruction of the relation between truth and democracy can afford to do entirely without the political conception of truth proposed by Cohen, because political truth is not enough for the first task (the justification of a view or policy), and it is unnecessary for the second (the justification for imposing it on others, or legitimation). Whatever deliberation (or some other collective decision-procedure) ends up producing as an outcome need not be true, but it will be accepted as reasonable by all qualified points of view.

Cohen offers a satisfying way out of Rawlsian ambiguities without betraying the reasons behind Rawls' epistemic abstinence, although his solution comes at the cost of saying that Rawls was wrong on the necessity of doing without the truth and heavily depends on the viability of Rawls's claim that it is possible for a concept to be 'political, not metaphysical.' Estlund's solution, by contrast, seems to reproduce, on the legitimation side, the same problem that Cohen diagnoses in Rawls' approach: the notion of 'the reasonable' will not solve disagreements allegedly caused by appeals to the notion of truth, it will simply express them differently. What is interesting in Estlund's approach, though, is that it allows for the reintroduction of fully comprehensive doctrines in the public debate, as opposed to the 'lite' truth-claims Cohen allows. Reintroducing comprehensive doctrines is possible because, on Estlund's two-pronged interpretation, the legitimation of a given law or principle will not be performed by the comprehensive doctrine supporting that law or principle but by the fact that it has survived the impartial deliberative process that pits truth-claims against each other. Deliberation may ideally produce a law or principle that meets the Rawlsian standard of public reason, but this is not decided at the outset by limiting what enters the discussion at the gate.¹⁷

In any case, what these two influential authors show is that, whichever solution one favors, not only is epistemic abstinence not required but it actually fails to keep truth outside the framework of politics. The correct instinct behind Rawls' move to epistemic abstinence was to encourage epistemic humility and modesty toward citizens' own truth-claims, as well as epistemic skepticism toward other people's truth-claims. This can be achieved, however, without giving up on truth. The ground is thus clear for epistemic approaches to democracy that reject epistemic abstinence.

4. The Unavoidability of Political Objectivism and Cognitivism

I have so far established that even from within a Rawlsian framework epistemic abstinence as a 'method of avoidance' of the truth is not required, at least on a lean understanding of truth as a standard of validity for beliefs or a procedure-independent standard of validity with an epistemic dimension rather than as a concept encumbered with assumptions of unicity and layers of sectarian and intolerant connotations. But what about non-Rawlsian deliberative democrats? It could of course be the case that even though Rawls's framework couldn't quite keep truth out of the equation, political objectivism – the view that there must be some kind of procedure-independent standard of correctness in politics – and political cognitivism – the related view that this standard can be known – are nevertheless false. Just because you can't go from the fact of disagreement, not even the fact of reasonable disagreement, to the claim that the concept of political truth makes no sense does not mean you can establish the contrary claims that there are political truths and that they can be known. In other words, an objector could easily point out that the fact that epistemic abstinence does not follow from the fact of disagreement is not in itself the proof that political objectivism and cognitivism are validated.

Against this objection, the Habermasian tradition offers a very simple yet powerful argument. It is, roughly, this: the intuition that there are better and worse answers and that those can be known is already validated by the fact that there would be no point in reasoning about politics if it wasn't the case. The existence of a procedure-independent standard and the possibility of knowing it are inscribed in, and presupposed by, the very nature of our discursive exchanges and, specifically, our ways of engaging each other's reason in political arguments. This is, roughly, the transcendent-pragmatic move made in *Communicative Action*, where Habermas goes back to the conditions of possibility of a certain type of human speech as a commitment to various norms of rational communication. In so-called 'communicative action,' Habermas argues, the speakers' orientation toward mutual understanding commits them

to certain presuppositions, such as the belief that all motives other than the cooperative search for truth have been excluded and the only operative force is that of the 'better argument' (Habermas 1990, 89–90). Any other presupposition, for example that my interlocutors are in fact lying or attempting to manipulate me, or that physical coercion is a legitimate way to end the debate, would violate the very meaning and possibility of communicative action.

This move, initially made by Habermas in the moral realm, has been re-used in many versions by epistemic democrats of all kinds in the specific context of political discourse. José Luis Martí illustrates this most clearly when he derives both political objectivism and cognitivism from the very practise of deliberation at the heart of the deliberative democracy ideal:

As a discursive process based on reason, deliberation assumes ... both *the existence of rightness* (or impartiality, or some other equivalent) in political decisions and *the possibility of knowing which is the right* (or impartial) decision... To argue in favour of decision A means, briefly, to show that decision A is *the right* decision, or at least, that A is *better in terms of rightness* than other decisions being compared. (Martí 2006, 29, emphasis in original)

In other words, deliberation assumes both the existence of a procedure-independent standard of correctness and the possibility of knowing it in some way.¹⁸ It is worth clarifying that while Martí, like Habermas, prefers the vocabulary of rightness over that of truth, the distinction is purely semantic. For them, rightness is the functional equivalent of truth in the moral sphere. Different vocabularies are thus fully compatible with an endorsement of a standard of objectivity with epistemic meaning in the moral sphere. In a similar vein, Misak and Talisse (2014) defend a position they call 'pragmatist cognitivism' on the basis of the Perceian pragmatism at the root of Habermas' theory of communicative action. On their view, the orientation to truth or 'truth-aptness' is a necessary characteristic of our beliefs, including our moral and political beliefs, to the extent that they are propositions responsive to reasons and vulnerable to rational scrutiny (Misak and Talisse 2014, 3).¹⁹ Unlike Rawls, all these authors accept that the procedure-independent standard of correctness in the moral sphere can have an epistemic or cognitive dimension. On such views, therefore, 'truth' (whether it is called that or something else) thus forms the unavoidable normative horizon of human discursive exchanges. It is a concept without which we could not make sense of ourselves as dialogical and rational creatures.

Even critics of the epistemic turn recognize this much. Thus, Sean Ingham, just before he proceeds to show how epistemic justifications of democracy run afoul, in his view, of a number of widely shared democratic assumptions (such as what he calls the 'non-convergence assumption,' which is yet another version of the fact of reasonable pluralism or the fact that we don't expect people to agree on what the relevant standards for policy assessments are) is nonetheless keen to admit that:

What makes epistemic justifications problematic is *not* that they presuppose the existence of procedure-independent standards for evaluating collective decisions. Anyone who forms a judgment about the merits of a decision before learning its political fate concedes as much. (Ingham 2013, 139)²⁰

Since any meta-ethical theory of politics has to accommodate this kind of conclusion, then the political relativism, even nihilism, that is often the background assumption of political scientists and theorists (for historical and disciplinary reasons that we don't need to get into) is conceptually confused. More importantly, so is the unnecessarily cautious stance of epistemic abstinence, which, as we have seen, tries to remain non-committal toward the truth but does not succeed. One may deny that political standards of objectivity or truth are comparable to empirical facts (the moral realism that Rawls rejects, for example, in the guise of rational intuitionism); one may worry, as Rawls does, about the legacy of 'truth' in its historical association with intolerant, sectarian, and even totalitarian movements (see also Arendt 1993, Chapter 7); one may want to put forward a pluralized concept of truth, by which truth would mean different things depending on the domain of application (morality as opposed to science, say) (Lynch 2009). But it seems impossible to resist that there is something of an objective, epistemic nature that we aim to figure out when we vote or deliberate with each other about politics. As Cohen forcefully put it, the concept of 'truth' itself, regardless of how we understand it, is not what causes our disagreements in the first place and, short of better objections than its past co-optation by intolerant political movements, should be welcomed back, in a fallible, tolerant, and pluralized understanding, in our theorizing about politics.

5. Implications of the Epistemic Turn

The epistemic turn in deliberative democracy, which signals the return of truth-concerns in politics, has many positive implications, three of which I will now highlight. The first concerns the implications of the epistemic turn in terms of the internal coherence and clarity of the deliberative democracy paradigm. The second concerns the implications of the epistemic turn in terms of the new theoretical and empirical research agenda that it opens up. The third one has to do with the way epistemic arguments can affect the justification of democracy and perhaps the understanding of its legitimacy and authority. I also consider the ways in which the epistemic turn leaves political liberalism and generally democratic politics pretty much as they already are.

First, the epistemic turn makes deliberative democracy more coherent with its own premises by making explicit an assumption left implicit in much of the early literature: that deliberation, to be motivated, must have some kind of epistemic properties. In other words, deliberation must have some ability to track a procedure-independent standard of correctness. As a result, the epistemic turn corrects a common misunderstanding about the proper role of the concept of truth in political argument and the limits of what can be deduced from the 'fact of disagreement.' It helps combat some of the moral relativism and sometimes downright nihilism of certain views of politics, for which there is no such thing as right and wrong and no meaningful judgment can ever be passed on the objective quality of political decisions.

Second, in addition to correcting inconsistencies at the level of the theory, the epistemic turn expands the theoretical and empirical research agenda of deliberative democrats. It makes it possible to take seriously and explore important epistemic properties of democratic procedures and institutions, which could not be properly conceptualized and investigated before. Empirical research on deliberation was not until recently framed in explicitly epistemic terms and to that extent has yet to fully answer questions such as: Under what conditions do democratic procedures tend to produce better decisions? How do we measure high quality deliberation?²¹ Are democratically produced solutions and policies 'validated' by the outside world, i.e. actual empirical success? And how would we know?

By rehabilitating instrumental, consequentialist, and 'best outcomes' arguments for democracy, epistemic democracy makes it possible to ask such questions and others. In this respect, an important advantage of the epistemic turn is that it can potentially generate a (re)connection of political theory with the empirical sciences (particularly political science and economics) by making sense of attempts to trace causal relationships between democratic procedures (deliberation but not only) and certain types of outcomes (e.g. growth, peace, or some other welfare or happiness indicator, or even levels of democracy). In the same vein, the epistemic turn would seem to legitimize policy-makers' growing concern for policy impact assessment.²²

Last but not least, the epistemic turn allows advocates of democracy to make the justification and perhaps legitimacy and authority of democracy depend on something else, and something arguably more concrete and tangible, than just its intrinsic and expressive qualities. Whereas a number of democratic theorists would like to rest the normative desirability of democracy solely on the ability of democratic procedures to best express our commitment to political equality or, sometimes, autonomy (e.g. Urbinati and Saffon 2013; Urbinati 2014), epistemic democrats allow the conversation to include considerations for the kind of outcomes generated by democratic procedures, as well. David Estlund, most notoriously and against purely procedural democrats, has introduced minimal epistemic performance as a threshold constraint on the normative authority of democracy (Estlund 2008). On his view, which he calls epistemic proceduralism, democracy can only have normative authority if it can reliably be expected to perform better, epistemically speaking, than a coin flip.

Whether one is interested in the justification of democracy or its legitimation,²³ a conversation about the epistemic merits of democracy can engage even people who do not *prima facie* accept the principle of political equality as a good thing in and of itself and as a starting point to think about the best regime. Such people are more likely to be amenable to the *conclusion* that political equality – treating everyone with equal respect and giving them an equal voice in a collective decision process – is a good

idea after all, because and if such political equality turns out to have systematic epistemic advantages over less egalitarian regimes. This might prove essential in resisting contemporary advocates of various technocracies and expertocracies, at least when the debate is couched in purely instrumental terms.

There are also implications that the epistemic turn does not have. Practically speaking, the epistemic turn does not, importantly, fundamentally challenge the Rawlsian idea of public reason, especially not its liberal spirit of toleration. But it does require reinterpreting certain aspects of political liberalism in a non-orthodox Rawlsian fashion. First, the concept of truth no longer needs to be avoided and becomes available again to deliberators engaged in the exercise of public reasoning, on condition that it is not used in the sectarian and exclusionary manner often associated with it but in the inclusive and fallibilist manner suitable to a plural society.

Second, the notion of the reasonable, of which such deliberators can still avail themselves if they so desire, perhaps because it sounds like a more ecumenical way of characterizing one's and others' views, is now explicitly reconnected with the concept of truth, for example in the 'oblique' and future-oriented way suggested by Habermas. Truth now forms a legitimate horizon on which the exchange of arguments can take place, as the sort of necessary transcendent-pragmatic postulate theorized by Habermas.

Now, does this reintroduction of the concept of truth in politics mean that participants in public political debates should be free to say that they think that their political and moral views are true and argue for them as such? Here, two plausible paths are available. Following Cohen, one could argue that there is no longer any reason to ask people to refrain from expressing their convictions in the language of truth as long as truth is understood in a 'political, not metaphysical' way. This freedom to speak the political-not-metaphysical truth, so to speak, would apply equally to regular citizens and officials with power over others. Asking people to keep in mind that the truths put forward are only 'political', and that a suitably fallibilist and tolerant attitude is required of them at all times, might seem demanding, but it is conceptually sound.

Or one may want to follow Estlund's less Rawlsian solution in distinguishing between a justificatory context, in which appeals to the 'whole' (including metaphysical) truth are perfectly fine, and legitimizing contexts, for which procedural and mostly non-epistemic considerations seem paramount (though epistemic considerations do matter as a threshold constraint on normative authority). On that view, all participants should be able to make all kinds of truth-claims (including claims to doctrinal truth) in all forms of public decision-making or public discussion. But when it comes to the exercise of power over others and the imposition of rules, laws, and policies, truth-claims are no longer directly allowed.²⁴ Much work obviously remains to be done to clarify which of these paths, if any, is the more promising way to reinterpret the ideal of political liberalism after the epistemic turn.

A final question the epistemic turn may seem to raise is whether individuals engaged in deliberation with each other have now reasons to aim for a Habermasian rational consensus (where everyone agrees on the right or morally true conclusion for the same reasons) as opposed to a merely overlapping one, à la Rawls (where individuals simply converge on a reasonable outcome based on compatible but distinct reasons). I am not sure the epistemic turn has any implications in this respect. The answer might well depend instead on how serious one thinks the burdens of judgment really are as well as the kind of deliberation under consideration (whether it is one that needs to end in unanimity of some kind or whether it is one meant to precede a vote). One implication of the epistemic turn, however, might well be to narrow the conceptual gap between the concept of a rational consensus and that of a merely overlapping one in that both are now conceptualized as truth-oriented in some fashion. At any rate, it seems to me that under relatively ideal deliberative conditions rational consensus retains a great deal of normative appeal as the hoped-for by-product of a successfully conducted exchange of arguments, because, *pace* Rawls, it can serve as a signal that a form of probable truth has been reached (see also Landmore and Page 2015). But this is, again, an open question on the now full research agenda of epistemic democrats and not one this paper has any ambition of settling.

6. Objections

Let me finally briefly address two prominent objections to the epistemic turn. The first argues that reintroducing questions of truth and epistemic performance will ultimately pave the road for a defense of oligarchy or variants of ‘expert rule.’ This objection is well captured by David Estlund’s question: ‘Why not an epistocracy of the educated?’ (Estlund 2009, 206). Notorious advocates of one form or another of the rule of the knowers, from Plato to John Stuart Mill, typically start from the assumption that politics requires knowledge and are led from there to a defense of rule by philosophers or some scheme of plural voting that gives more votes to the learned.²⁵

The first thing to remark is that fear of the consequences of an argument does not amount to a good case against it. As political theorists, we should not shy away from inquiries just because they may question the foundations of our most cherished beliefs. This is especially true since pursuing epistemic explorations may well force us to produce better reasons for democracy and help us put it on a more secure footing than we currently have. More fundamentally, given the *de facto* rise of arguments against democracy (e.g. Caplan 2007; Brennan 2016) and in favor of various forms of expertocracies, including meritocracies, such as China and Singapore (e.g. Bell 2015), and given also the growing appeal of corporate rule as an example for politics (cf. the successive campaigns of recent Republican presidential candidates on the theme of their business expertise), it is arguably *necessary* today to make the case in favor of the competitiveness of democracies on the level of instrumental, epistemic efficiency as well.

Against the risk of epistocracy there already exist at least two argumentative counter-objections. Estlund thus argues, in Rawlsian fashion, that there is no claim to expertise that could satisfy all ‘qualified’ or ‘reasonable’ points of view (Estlund 1997, 2009). Estlund considers that because citizens should refuse to surrender their moral judgment on important matters to anyone, even if there is a standard of correctness and knowers of various degrees in politics, there will never be any moral basis for epistocracy. In other words, even if there were universal knowers in politics, they would never be able to obtain the political legitimacy required to make them ‘boss.’ Thus, he can argue that even though democracy is likely epistemically inferior to the rule of the wise, there is no danger of democracy losing its legitimacy to that form of rule.

Outside the Rawlsian framework Landemore (e.g. 2013, 2014a) offers a different challenge to epistocracy, one that does not concede the inferiority of democracy to the rule of the wise but argues, on the contrary, that, when it comes to matters of the common good, the group itself is the best and really the only knower. Instead of disqualifying the rule of the few as unreasonable from the get-go, Landemore thus argues that in a competition with less inclusive regimes democracy comes out on top on epistemic grounds. This is so, because democratic decision-procedures, characterized as inclusive deliberation followed by majority rule, are generally more able than oligarchies to tap the distributed collective intelligence of a given people.²⁶ By contrast, oligarchies tend to lose over time whatever (generally more limited) cognitive diversity they started from and, as a result, are more likely to err in the pursuit of the common good over the long term. If, as Landemore argues, the necessity to include everyone on an equal basis is due to the epistemic uncertainty faced by political agents in a complex world, political equality then finds itself anchored in something at least as robust as normative or even actual consent (Landemore 2014a).

In a different vein, critics of epistemic democracy argue that the epistemic approach ‘disfigures’ democracy (Urbinati and Saffon 2013; Urbinati 2014) by subordinating essential democratic values, such as political equality and freedom, to instrumental considerations for outcomes. The epistemic turn has thus been decried as a ‘democratic U-turn’ (Palumbo 2012), counterproductively placing the emphasis on the instrumental value of political participation as opposed to its intrinsic value.²⁷

Such critics often define their arguments for democracy as ‘procedural.’ By this they mean that the value of democracy is to be found in the principles it expresses rather than the outcomes it fosters. Similarly Muirhead (2014, 125) argues that our reason to value democracy is ‘not because as a regime we trust it to get things right – we value it rather because it *reflects* the equality of citizens’ and because it is ‘the most convincing way of recognizing the equality of citizens.’ Even Schwartzberg (2013, 116)’s

'weak epistemic' case for political equality turns out to be an ultimately intrinsic argument relying on the Rawlsian notion of the 'basis of self-respect' rather than genuinely instrumental considerations for epistemic outcomes.

The concern of procedural democrats with respect to epistemic democracy lies in the alleged subordination of political equality to the instrumental goal of epistemic performance. Write Urbinati and Saffon:

[i]n contrast with epistemic stances, for procedural democracy, the normative standard of equal political liberty is robust enough, and [...] should not be subordinated to other normative standards such as the political outcomes' proximity to truth. (Urbinati and Saffon 2013, 2)

The idea that epistemic democrats 'subordinate' equality to the value of outcomes is not an entirely fair description, as it suggests a radical demotion of the principle of political equality. A more charitable and accurate reading might be to say that, in epistemic arguments for democracy, political equality is, indeed, derivative of its ability to generate epistemic performance. On the epistemic approach, one good reason to posit that all citizens are political equals, for example, is that doing so ensures the aggregation of a diversity of equally weighed perspectives, which turns out to be key to the collective intelligence of the outcome (Landemore 2013, 2014a).

Notice though that saying that political equality can be justified on the basis of the epistemic performance it makes possible does not crowd out additional reasons we may have to value political equality, and more generally, democracy, for their intrinsic or expressive properties. The epistemic argument simply gives an additional, instrumental rationale as to why political equality is such a corner stone of the case for democracy. Epistemic democrats can be seen, in other words, as providing a functionalist justification of the value of political equality: we should posit political equality as an essential principle because it makes us better off as a society than inegalitarian principles.

The truth is that, absent this epistemic rationale, political equality retains the flavor of a religious creed or a faith tenet.²⁸ None of the 'proceduralists' tell us why political equality is a principle we should endorse to begin with. They take it largely for granted, as an axiom from which all other democratic conclusions (specifically the defense of majority rule) ultimately follow. In their approach, as a result, political equality is not subordinated to anything but it is also vulnerable to the attacks of anti-democrats of all kinds (see also Landemore [2014b] for a (friendly) critique of proceduralist arguments, and Min [2016] for a more pointed one).

More to the point, I think that what critics of epistemic democracy misunderstand is that epistemic approaches never claimed to offer the whole story about democracy and therefore do not need, as critics claim, to 'abjure a proceduralist stance' (Urbinati and Saffon 2013, 2). For example, it is doubtful that David Estlund would recognize his view under this description. He characterizes his conception as 'epistemic proceduralism' precisely because it *combines* an intrinsic, consent-based account of democratic legitimacy with instrumental considerations for minimal epistemic performance, which are supposed to constrain, but not replace, consent (Estlund 2009). Landemore's epistemic approach, also targeted, does not fit the description either, in that it remains agnostic about the ultimate determinants of political legitimacy (Landemore 2013, 8), while emphasizing the compatibility of epistemic and proceduralist arguments for democracy. More plausible culprits here might be Knight and Johnson (2011), though in fairness, and to complicate matters, they themselves reject the label 'epistemic'. In any case there is no reason to think that epistemic accounts can't be reconciled with 'procedural' (i.e. intrinsic) ones, in the same way that, in Plato's *Republic*, the instrumental case for being just (it is more conducive to a happy life than being unjust) is reconciled with the intrinsic one (justice is its own reward).

Let me use the following analogy to illustrate the point. If one assumes that democracy is a multi-dimensional object (say a cube), what epistemic democrats do is look at one facet of that object, the epistemic facet. Obviously, by focusing on that single facet, and bracketing the facets that have to do with political equality, autonomy, or community, or recognition, they reduce this multi-dimensional object to a simple surface (a square). In this sense, the diagnosis that epistemic democracy 'disfigures' democracy is correct: epistemic democrats reduce democracy to one of its facets, which can thus be

explored thoroughly, independently of the others. This is arguably a fruitful analytical method if one is to understand the object at all. The epistemic facet was arguably long overdue for a focused exploration. Reducing the multi-dimensional object to a surface for the purpose of analysis, however, does not make the perspective wrong, but merely partial. Note that, conversely, 'proceduralist' democrats' approach is arguably similarly reductionist and 'disfiguring', to the extent that exclusive attention to political equality and autonomy leads them to ignore other possible dimensions of democracy.

Instead of pitting democratic theories against each other and trying to ascertain who has the 'right' justification, theory of legitimacy, or picture of democracy, I suggest that it would be more useful for democratic theorists to acknowledge explicitly the complexity of the object and unite in a constructive attempt at clarifying the relation between the various properties of democracy, whether intrinsic and instrumental (or procedural and epistemic). At any rate the moral condemnation implicit in the accusation of disfigurement – the idea that epistemic democrats irreparably damage, violate, deform, and corrupt some ideal democratic shape – is undeserved. Indeed, it fundamentally misunderstands the meaning of the epistemic turn.

7. Conclusion

This paper has questioned the deduction of the Rawlsian stance of epistemic abstinence from the 'fact of disagreement'. I argued that this deduction is in fact an argumentative leap that was never justified in the first place and has wrongly paralyzed the field. It has left the justification of democracy, even the legitimation of its authority, onto the arguably shaky ground of its intrinsic, expressive, or purely procedural value alone. It has also made it difficult to take seriously, let alone to explore, important epistemic properties of democratic procedures and institutions, thereby limiting the empirical agenda made possible by deliberative democracy. By contrast, the epistemic turn, which challenges this alleged inference and draws conclusions from the fact of disagreement and value pluralism that are compatible with the reintroduction of the vocabulary of truth in political affairs, is moving the field in the right direction (no pun intended). It rehabilitates instrumental, consequentialist, and 'best outcomes' arguments for democracy and makes it possible to base the value of democracy as a whole, and the legitimacy of its procedures, at least partly on its ability to generate good outcomes.

The epistemic turn in deliberative democracy does not amount to a naïve denial of the fact of disagreement, not even the fact of reasonable disagreement. It is a denial, however, that disagreement, even of the reasonable kind, refutes the claim that there are better and worse answers to at least some political questions and that those can be fallibly approximated through democratic procedures, such as deliberation. As we saw with Cohen's and Estlund's sophisticated defenses of the role of truth in politics, it is simply not possible to do without truth-claims and assumptions in politics, specifically in the deliberative context. That conclusion, it should be emphasized, no more justifies dogmatism and intolerance toward dissenting views on the part of the deliberators who make truth claims than it justifies imposing one's truth-claims on others through coercion. In other words, the epistemic turn leaves the contemporary normative view of democratic politics, including centrally Rawls' own political liberalism, *pretty much as it already is*, governed by the liberal norms of tolerance and fallibilism. The epistemic turn, however, invites us to no longer shy away from recognizing the fact that truth-claims are the necessary way through which we are going to express our disagreements.

The epistemic turn in democratic theory is thus taking the field beyond the fact of disagreement, not by denying its reality, but by showing that the fact of disagreement does not in itself defeat the plausibility of political objectivism and cognitivism. Epistemic abstinence, let alone fully blown moral and political relativism, cannot be deduced from the fact of disagreement. The very nature of our discursive practices in politics presupposes political objectivism and cognitivism of some kind. And so, it seems, we have to welcome in the 'truth' again.

Notes

1. The distinction between knowledge-aggregation and truth-tracking is that the ability of a procedure to aggregate knowledge does not strictly guarantee its ability to track the truth, though the two abilities are likely highly correlated. There is, also, a distinction between the property of tracking the truth (however defined) and the ability to produce good outcomes, empirically speaking (except perhaps on a pragmatist conception of the truth where the truth is defined as 'what works' and is thus deeply connected to a certain type of consequences in the world).
2. In this issue Chambers rightly emphasizes the often unappreciated epistemic (as well as systemic) dimension of Habermas's early work. I do not entirely follow her, however, when she more generally suggests that 'the core principle of deliberative democracy [is] that epistemic quality and equal participation are connected' (Chambers 2017, 5). To my mind the core principle of deliberative democracy is that the legitimacy of the law derives from having been the object of public deliberation among free equals. The distinct thesis about the relationship between equality and epistemic quality was not really made explicit, let alone argued for, until the work of epistemic democrats, starting with Estlund's (1997) seminal article. That this distinct thesis can now be claimed and endorsed by deliberative democrats as compatible with their core statement is of course an excellent thing.
3. Taking the epistemic framework for granted, some authors are now exploring the epistemic constraints on citizens' judgments, such as framing effects and other cognitive biases (Kelly 2011).
4. Building together on their separate work (e.g. Misak 2004; Talisse 2009).
5. That is how I read them anyway; see also MacGilvray (2014). In my view, Zerrilli's recent book (2016) also seems to tread into epistemic territory by emphasizing the objective, 'world-building' (if not quite truth-tracking) properties of democratic judgment over the radical subjectivism of earlier Arendtian interpretations.
6. This problem is less accurate in deliberative theories of a Habermasian vein, because they start not from the fact of pluralism as a feature of modern societies, but from the common structure and pragmatic conditions of possibility of human discursive exchanges. Even in Habermas and his followers, however, the epistemic dimension of deliberation, always latent, has only recently been made explicit (Habermas 2006; Buchstein and Jörke 2012; and Jörke in Fischer and Gottweis 2012, 277).
7. An overlapping consensus is one in which people simply come to support identical principles or conclusions on the basis of compatible but distinct, and more or less comprehensive views or premises. This is in contrast with a 'rational consensus' where individuals agree on all premises and conclusions. Note that the domain of applicability of Rawls' argument is rather limited – constitutional matters regarding the basic structure of society – but a lot of deliberative democrats apply the ideal of the overlapping consensus to debates about less fundamental legislation as well.
8. They include the conflicting, ambiguous, and complex nature of the evidence bearing on any interesting case; the differences in the weight people attribute to factors or considerations even when they agree on them; the vagueness of all our moral and political concepts; the diversity of our experiences, which shape our diverse perception and understanding of the world; the difficulty of making overall assessments about multi-dimensional problems; and the 'limited social space' for accommodating a diversity of values, which makes it necessary and yet impossible to agree on the right ranking.
9. The reason why Rawls thinks that human cognitive fallibility should be integrated into ideal theory, while moral fallibility should not, for example, is that one should expect of 'reasonable' human beings some self-control over their immoral or selfish impulses, while one cannot expect even reasonable beings to change the world or fix their psychological and neurological wiring.
10. In the passage cited above, reasonable pluralism was tellingly introduced as an 'idea.' Later Cohen presents this idea as a mere 'contention' that is '*suggested*' by the absence of convergence in reflection on [all sorts of] issues of value' (Cohen 1993, 282, my emphasis).
11. This choice is, naturally, fully conscious. It would run against Waldron's democratic commitments to endorse an a priori criterion of the 'reasonable' selecting at the gate of deliberation who and which views count as such.
12. For example, Gutmann and Thompson's characterization of some disagreements as 'deliberative' and other as 'not-deliberative' (and therefore not really acceptable) maps obviously and directly onto Rawls's reasonable pluralism as reconstructed by Cohen (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 3). Yet, some of the examples of significant moral disagreements they give do not bracket, as Rawls's ideal theory does, the possibility of self-interest, as in the conflict between 'the president and the reporter' about 'what fairness requires,' or that between 'the AT&T executive and the employee' about 'what justice in employment means, as well as about who should suffer its costs' (1996, 15). In fact, Gutmann and Thompson seem to accept disagreement that stems from other non-reasonable sources. For example, they count 'simple misunderstanding' as an illustration of the persistence of disagreement. Though it is not entirely clear in what a 'simple misunderstanding' consists, it would appear to be the kind that could be avoided with the extra attentiveness or focus that reasonable people in Rawls' story are assumed to provide.
13. Arguably, more empirically-minded deliberative democrats, like Jim Fishkin, always explicitly cared about the way a certain type of deliberation may remove or avoid the primary suspects for epistemically poor decisions, such as polarization, bad heuristics, and biases of all kinds (e.g. Fishkin 2009). This should have made them good candidates for seeing epistemic democracy as a framework with which to make sense of their questions about the impact of deliberation. At most though, Fishkin is willing to suggest that post-deliberative opinions are likely

- more 'informed' than pre-deliberative ones but he remains agnostic as to whether deliberation is likely to bring us closer to any kind of procedure-independent standard.
14. In an earlier text, Rawls had already resisted a similar claim that reaching a reflective agreement on a conception of justice should be 'sufficient grounds for regarding that conception as true, or at any rate *highly probable*'. As he forcefully put it then, 'we refrain from this further step: it is unnecessary and may interfere with the practical aim of finding an agreed public basis of justification' (Rawls 1987, 15, my emphasis).
 15. I rely here on the views expressed by Cohen and Estlund in two essays conjointly published (or in Cohen's case republished) in the recent edited volume by Norris and Elkins *Truth and Democracy* (2012) The references to Cohen are to the original (2009) publication. I leave Raz's (1990) famous critique outside of this paper because on my reading Raz ends up offering an external critique of Rawls, whereas Cohen and Estlund try as much as possible to rehabilitate truth from within the Rawlsian framework.
 16. See Cohen (2009, 26) for the details of this conception of justice, which is closest to, though importantly distinct from, the deflationist or so-called disquotational theory of truth, whereby the proposition that p is true if and only if p is true (Cohen 2009, 4).
 17. Estlund's solution may well be more epistemic than Estlund himself is willing to admit since, on his account, truth unavoidably sneaks through the back door not just at the level of the individual exchange of arguments but at the level of the legitimizing procedure as well. Democratic deliberation is not supposed to always produce the 'true' answer but it is legitimizing only as long as it is likely to produce truer answers, or true answers more often, than a random procedure. So it is not the case, even on Estlund's terms, that all we need at the level of the legitimizing procedure is the Rawlsian concept of the 'reasonable.' What we need, it seems to me, is the concept of truth.
 18. Landemore makes similar points (Landemore 2013, xvii–xviii, 213) and proposes a typology of political cognitivism, from the more absolute and universalist to the more culturally relative and minimalist (Landemore 2013, Chapter 8).
 19. As they put it: 'That we could not recognize our normative beliefs *except* as truth-aspiring and reason-responsive grounds a cognitive conception of moral and political discourse' (Misak and Talisse 2014, 3, their emphasis).
 20. Or as he also writes, 'One need not be any kind of Platonist in order to entertain epistemic justifications. All that is required is that there is some desired procedure-independent property, so that one can intelligibly ask whether a procedure tends to yield decisions with the desired property' (Ingham 2013, 139). What he disagrees with is the view that one may ever agree on the nature of the property at stake.
 21. Recent research has tried to codify the properties of good deliberation. See for example the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) developed by Steenbergen et al. (2003); the index of intersubjective consistency by Niemeyer and Dryzek (2007); the index of 'cognitive complexity' by Wyss, Beste, and Bächtiger (2015); the measure of adequate support for given conclusions by Schaffer and Friberg-Fernros (2017) or the consideration for validity and scope in Knops (2017).
 22. Impact assessment is a new policy trend that seems rather commonsensical, at least in some areas where outcomes lend themselves to empirical measurement.
 23. For the classic distinction between justification and legitimacy, see Simmons (2000). Among authors who take this distinction seriously, only David Estlund, however, seems to believe that epistemic considerations, usually considered meaningful for the context of justifying democracy, should also enter the question of its legitimacy (for skepticism on that front though, and why epistemic considerations may have an easier time justifying an institution's existence than justifying *legitimate* authority, see Viehoff [2016]).
 24. Truth remains present indirectly though, via the procedural pedigree of the laws that are being enforced (it is after all because people thought certain policies or laws were the correct ones that they voted for them and that they now can be legitimately enforced). Thank you to Daniel Viehoff for this point.
 25. See also on the risk of epistocracy: Føllesdal (2017), Santoro and Liveriero (2017), and Holst and Molander (2017).
 26. The central argument builds on the epistemic properties of inclusive deliberation as arguably captured by formal results such as Scott E. Page's Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem (Page 2007). Inclusive deliberation benefits from the cognitive diversity of the entire group, as well as the lesser but nonetheless important epistemic properties of judgment aggregation (which are themselves captured by results like the Condorcet Jury Theorem, the Miracle of Aggregation, or the Diversity Theorem). See Landemore (2013) for more details.
 27. See also Lafont (2014) for a similar point about the value of randomly selected 'mini-publics'.
 28. That is, I believe, what Knight and Johnson more radically suggest when they argue that political equality can only be justified on the grounds of the pragmatic benefits it yields (Knight and Johnson 2011).

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