

Democratic Commitment

Emily Robertson
Syracuse University

It is an honor to respond to Richard Bernstein's essay. I've admired his work for many years. I became familiar with it in the early 1980s when I read *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, in which he explored a "practical," "historically situated," rationality, "involving choice, deliberation, and judgment," and he argued that rationality understood in this way does not entail relativism.¹ He reclaimed and clarified the "concepts and experiences of dialogue, debate, conversation, and communication."² A similar understanding and focus animates his essay here, and it is similarly timely, both as a theoretical position and also as a response to the close-minded claims to certainty that have pervaded our political life in recent years. Bernstein recently pursued this latter theme in *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11*. I've made use of that book, as well as the present essay, in constructing my comments.

Bernstein calls his address a "lay sermon," following Alan Ryan's characterization of some of John Dewey's work. That phrase led me to think about the appropriate response to a sermon. In the protestant religious tradition in which I grew up, the sermon was followed by an altar call inviting either an initial commitment to accepting God's gift of salvation or a rededication of those already saved. You will probably be relieved to know that I am not going to issue an altar call. Nevertheless, I do think there's something right about the suggestion that commitment is the appropriate response to Bernstein's lay sermon. So I will further explore the nature of that commitment, not primarily by way of criticism, but rather as a coparticipant in the inquiry Bernstein initiated.

The commitments Bernstein calls for combine "a vision of what constitutes a vital democratic ethos with a tough-minded pragmatic realism." He believes these commitments can be fruitfully reclaimed from Dewey's perspective. They are not arbitrarily combined, I think, but have an essential connection through Dewey's way of understanding democracy. Pragmatic realism is a stance toward the world that rejects the quest for certainty but also does not endorse relativism. It is committed to fallibilism, "the belief that any knowledge claim or, more generally, any validity claim — including moral and political claims — is open to ongoing examination, modification, and critique."³ The most effective way of testing beliefs is to open them to public criticism, Dewey thought. The mutual investigation of claims that affect a public constitutes a democratic ethos given the commitment that, as Bernstein puts it, all "citizens must judge and decide" and that each individual citizen "is capable of persistent responsibility and individual initiation." Such joint inquiry requires, Dewey argues in well-known passages in *Democracy and Education*, that there be no arbitrary barriers to the free flow of communication, so that each person's experience can be enlarged and enriched through the perceptions of others.⁴ Thus breaking down barriers of race and class and other forms of social injustice

constitutes an essential element in developing a more democratic ethos. A further condition of democratic inquiry is hope that the powers of intelligence so exercised can figure out how to reconstruct our institutions and practices in the interest of a more open and humane future.

These commitments create a rich agenda for democratic education, as Bernstein reminds us, since it must generate the required commitments themselves. Pragmatic fallibilism requires, for example, a willingness to submit claims and hypotheses to public testing by the community of inquirers. It means being willing to listen to others, show respect for their views, and revise one's claims when shown wrong. It requires tolerance for uncertainty and willingness to eschew absolutes. This is a hard way to live, as Bernstein notes.

I admire Bernstein's belief that we honor Dewey best by working out our own solutions to current problems in light of the above commitments rather than recovering or enacting Dewey's own solutions. In that spirit, I consider an issue that may yield to pragmatic realism democratically employed, but where I think we need to move beyond Dewey's solutions. Further, I think work in this area may move us away from the genre of the lay sermon and closer to the other possibilities Ryan indicated: in one direction, revising the legal framework of politics and creating democratic institutions; in the other direction, practical politics and political action.

The issue concerns the enduring reality of disagreement and how that reality is to be acknowledged in democratic politics. On the one hand, I think Dewey values diversity of perspective, giving it a positive function rather than treating it as a problem. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey says that "diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought."⁵ Encountering others who think, act, or feel differently from oneself can create problematic situations in which one's own or one's community's commitments can be rethought. Dewey's commitment to a broadly evolutionary perspective led him to value diversity as a source of future adaptations and hence as necessary for social viability. On the other hand, my sense is that Dewey's hope is that public inquiry will result in a local, temporary consensus on what to do. As Ryan remarks, "Dewey wrote as if he supposed that when intelligent analysis revealed how things were, it also revealed what we ought to do."⁶

In *Abuse of Evil* Bernstein notes that the significance of difference has become especially acute. His argument for an engaged pluralism that does not hold that we are imprisoned within our own frameworks and takes "a *critical* fallibilistic attitude" toward differences in perspective is welcome.⁷ But I also respect John Rawls's arguments about the "burdens of judgment," and agree with him that at the end of the day, without anyone being ill-informed, there will be disagreements based on differences in life experiences and the different ordering we may give to goods we all seek.⁸ As Joseph Schwartz argues, even in a much more radically egalitarian society than we now have, we cannot transcend politics, understood as the mediation of conflicting interests. He argues that radical democratic theorists have underestimated the persistence of conflict and have supposed that politics as the mediation of conflicting interests could be eliminated in a truly just and egalitarian society.⁹

I've come to think that the public inquiry favored by Dewey and contemporary deliberative democrats, while vitally important, can take us only so far. Thus, what is a democratic way of dealing with persistent disagreement about what to do? Bernstein says rightly that we have to work out fair procedures for deciding. But that points toward revising the legal framework of politics and crafting democratic institutions, an area Dewey had little to say about. Iris Marion Young is, I think, an example of someone who worked on developing a theory of democratic political institutions that would properly acknowledge difference.¹⁰

Second, I believe that the ethos of democratic politics depends not only on the ability to debate and discuss and the willingness to be open to others and revise one's views, but also on other forms of political action. One possibility is marches, protests, and social movements that challenge assumptions built into the framework of current contexts for dialogue. The worry is that democratic conversations often take place in contexts whose structure favors those in power. These structural social injustices thus limit what can be achieved through dialogue. To some extent, this issue may turn on whether one considers radical action as a precondition of effective dialogue or a possible move within its framework. Dewey, commenting on the burning of railroad cars during the Pullman strike, said, "I think the few freight cars burned up a pretty cheap price to pay — it was the stimulus necessary to direct attention, and it might easily have taken more to get the social organism thinking."¹¹

Another possibility for alternative forms of political action is negotiation and bargaining. Dewey's conception of public inquiry seems more oriented toward figuring out the best thing to do than toward negotiating differences. Ryan claims that Dewey, although clearly a friend of the union movement, "had no clue about...the extent to which labor relations were relations of bargaining power."¹²

The oppositional politics in the U.S. Congress has been in part a deliberate strategy by conservative Republicans who believed they could not enact their agenda by compromising with Democrats. Rush Limbaugh recently chided John McCain for not learning this lesson: "The lesson is liberals are to be defeated. You cannot walk across the aisle with them. You cannot reach across the aisle. You cannot welcome their media members on your bus and get all cozy with them and expect eternal love from them."¹³ Barack Obama has pledged to change this form of politics, and he has stirred a responsive chord in many. It remains to be seen if disagreements can be transcended and agreements reached through dialogue, or if Obama expects to form a new progressive coalition that will outvote the opposition or forge compromise positions amid persisting disagreements in perspective, or — as I think likely — all of the above.

The twin commitments to pragmatic realism and a democratic ethos may prove useful in revising our political framework and democratic institutions and in forging new alliances among people with conflicting interests and perspectives. This has not been an argument to reject Dewey's (and Bernstein's) fundamental commitments, but rather an observation that they will need to be supplemented to form new solutions in areas where Dewey did not concretely point the way. And, thinking back

to Ryan's opposition between the lay sermon and "a concentration on the legal framework of politics or a narrow focus on policy," the inquiries that I've suggested do take us beyond the lay sermon to the legal framework of politics and to, if not public policy, at least political practice.

1. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), xiv.

2. *Ibid.*, xv.

3. Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2005), 28.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 86–7.

5. *Ibid.*, 85.

6. Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 300.

7. Bernstein, *Abuse of Evil*, 34 (emphasis in original).

8. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 54–8.

9. Joseph M. Schwartz, *The Permanence of the Political: A Democratic Critique of the Radical Impulse to Transcend Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 19.

10. Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

11. As cited in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 88.

12. Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 294. Contemporary deliberative democrats express squeamishness about bargaining. For example, see Amy Gutmann, "Afterword: Democratic Disagreement and Civic Education," in *The Public Schools*, eds. Susan Fuhrman and Marvin Lazerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 347–59. Gutmann writes that bargaining is "self-interested or group-interested" — a "politics of manipulation and coercion," rather than "a politics of reasoning and persuasion" (354). And she notes: "Without the capacity to deliberate, there would be no escaping from power politics — which give power priority over both justice and deliberation — which all moral conceptions of democracy are intent on avoiding" (353).

13. As cited in Elizabeth Bumiller, "McCain Disputes that Aides Warned Him About Ties to Lobbyist," *New York Times*, February 22, 2008, A20.