

3

Joint Flourishing

In the final months of World War I, Walter Lippmann was recruited to serve as a propagandist for the U.S. Army. Not yet 30, he was already a well-known journalist and a major voice in American public affairs. Now his mission was to put words together in such a way that they would induce German soldiers to become willing prisoners. Lippmann authored leaflets that were dropped behind enemy lines. They suggested that life as a P.O.W. wasn't in fact so bad: "Do not worry about me. I am out of the war. I am well fed. The American Army gives its prisoners the same rations it gives its own soldiers: beef, white bread, potatoes, prunes, coffee, milk, butter."¹

After the war, Lippmann's experience with the dark arts of manipulation contributed to deepening doubts about democracy. He observed that, like the German soldiers' perception of the American military, the public's understanding of society was mediated by unreliable representations, distorted both by opinion leaders and their own internal biases. How could the public govern a world that it knew nothing about? In two consecutive books—*Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*—Lippmann delivered an acid indictment of democracy:

The private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery out there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake. He

¹ The biographical facts are from Steel (1980), which is also the source of the quotation (147–48).

knows he is somehow affected by what is going on. Rules and regulations continually, taxes annually and wars occasionally remind him that he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstance. . . . The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs.²

Lippmann's portrayal of "the compounding of individual ignorances" echoes worries about democracy going back at least to Plato. It also anticipates despair about democracy's recent Trumpian turn (I address contemporary populism in Chapter 8). Like some contemporary skeptics of democracy, Lippmann saw greater technocratic oversight as the antidote to democratic failure. This suggestion became a vital provocation to John Dewey, and Dewey's major work in political theory—*The Public and Its Problems*—was in part the result.

Against Lippmann, Dewey called for a reinvigorated democratic public, one engaged in a wider and deeper exchange of ideas and information. In that respect, Dewey's arguments anticipate key ideas in deliberative democracy. Yet Dewey also picks up a second critical theme, one totally absent in our discussion up to this point. Thus, he defends the striking view that "regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself."³ At first blush, this is a surprising and somewhat puzzling response: how could "community" help remedy mass ignorance? And why must the response

² Lippmann 1927, 29.

³ Dewey 1954, 12–13.

to democratic failure involve such an apparently all-consuming ambition?

Dewey's response to Lippmann links the repair of democracy to a broader vision of social progress, to a particular idea of what a good society looks like. As I noted in Chapter 1, this book is not aimed primarily at interpreting Dewey or any other thinker. But Dewey offers us an answer to a question that is critical for our purposes: What do we—or should we—mean by “social progress” in the context of democracy? Beyond the generic thought that democratic societies can make moral improvements, what sort of social progress is it that democracy is well suited to promote? This framing of the question is important. As I noted in Chapter 1, “social progress” undoubtedly encompasses many things, and no substantive account can capture it all. Instead, the idea is to propose a notion of social progress that is consistent with generic liberalism, and that helps us to make sense of democracy's distinctive features.

As regulative ideals, theories of democracy link a particular set of values or social goods to a body of institutional or practical prescriptions in the political domain. Lippmann's expert-guided democracy seems to aim at something like efficient management, and technocratic “intelligence bureaus” were the institutional device for that objective. Deliberative theories of democracy hold that politics is about equal respect for autonomy, and therefore recommend an inclusive exchange of reasons. Polyarchy aims at a fair balance of competing interests and therefore recommends checks and balances.

“Community life” reflects a different way of understanding the aspirations of our political institutions. Here, the core objective of democratic governance involves responding to one another as human beings, sympathetically adjusting our desires and pursuits in relation to others who are affected by them. It seems to require not just greater rationality or more accurate representations of reality, but also a measure of care and common identity. And the

institutional response to that challenge looks quite different from Lippmann's intelligence bureaus or deliberative mini-publics.

Below, I propose a particular interpretation of Dewey's notion of community—what I will call “joint flourishing”—and I suggest that it offers an attractive regulative ideal of democracy. The proposal is this: Joint flourishing provides an idealized standard against which to gauge social progress. And democracy is a set of institutional and social practices organized to promote success by that standard. My defense of this proposal unfolds over the rest of the book. In this chapter the goal is to introduce the joint flourishing account, explain its distinctive features, and address some immediate potential objections. Two aspects of the account emerge as important: First, it deeply integrates social maps and emotions into our moral psychology. It thus accommodates the empirical research surveyed in Chapter 2 and has a clear advantage in this respect over deliberative and power-sharing models. Second, it models the social contingency of progress. That is, it holds that the nature of progress varies with the particular desires of different moral communities confronting different sets of challenges. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this fact helps us to understand some important historical examples of progress and, likewise, helps explain democracy's important role in these cases.

Two caveats before moving ahead: Although the discussion below engages carefully with Dewey's texts and ideas, I seek a theory that prevails on its own merits rather than perfect fidelity to any particular great thinker. So if my analysis differs on some points from the most plausible understanding of what Dewey believed or said, then so be it. Second, I should note that, along with Chapter 7, this chapter is more abstract and more purely theoretical than the others. Readers less inclined to that sort of thing may prefer to read Chapter 4 first, which centers on the concrete discussion of same-sex marriage, returning afterward to the theoretical issues discussed below.

3.1. Democracy as “Communal Life Itself”

For Dewey, the central problem in democracy is the social intersection of disparate individual ends.⁴ Broadly speaking, the overarching objective of social institutions is to promote the well-being of all under conditions in which our objectives are frequently in tension:

[T]he effect of acts upon the common welfare, the general well-being, is the criterion for judging the moral worth of personal acts and dispositions. The presumption is that the same criterion holds with respect to social institutions and in projecting plans of social change. The idea of common good, general welfare, needed, however, careful interpretation. We may say of welfare what was said of the kindred idea of happiness, that we must beware of giving it fixed meaning. Since it includes the harmonious fulfillment of all capacities, it grows as new potentialities are disclosed; it develops as social changes present new opportunities.⁵

Dewey does not speak directly to democracy here, but he proposes that social ethics is about promoting the “common welfare.” On the one hand, he emphasizes that we shouldn’t give it a “fixed meaning.” In other words, it encompasses different goods and priorities depending on the circumstances. In that respect he wants to differentiate his view from a utilitarian approach that adopts a singular metric of happiness or pleasure (more on this point a bit later on). He also says that “the idea of common good . . . includes the harmonious fulfillment of all capacities,” which sounds both utopian and vaguely illiberal. He continues:

Such terms as “general” and “common” need, perhaps, even more careful interpretation. The words come easily to the tongue and

⁴ Dewey 1954.

⁵ Dewey and Tufts 2008, 345.

too readily give a wrong impression. They do *not* mean a sacrifice of individuality; it would be a poor kind of society whose members were personally undeveloped. It does not mean the submergence of what is distinctive, unique, in different human beings; such submergence would produce an impoverishment of the social whole. The positive import of “common good” is suggested by the idea of sharing, participating—an idea involved in the very idea of *community*. Sharing a good or value in a way which makes it social in quality . . . involves diversification, not sameness and repetition. . . . Each contributes something distinctive from his own store of knowledge, ability, taste, while receiving at the same time elements of value contributed by others.⁶

There are two important points here. First, Dewey notes that achieving a common good requires individual development. So it’s not just about the total sum of whatever is good. It involves distributing the good so that all can “share” in it. Second, Dewey notes that achieving a common good does not require collapsing individual diversity. Each contributes “something distinctive” to the community, while benefiting from the distinctiveness of others: “He is morally equal when his values with respect to his own possibilities of growth, whatever they are, are reckoned with in the social organization as scrupulously as those of every other.”⁷

Still, while Dewey does very clearly emphasize the importance of individuality in these passages, he also attaches importance to the broader group(s) of which individuals are a part. For him, moral life, and especially political life, involves participation in collective identities, and this is a pronounced theme in his democratic theory:

⁶ Dewey and Tufts 2008, 345.

⁷ Dewey and Tufts 2008, 346.

Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.⁸

In democracy, a common good reflects shared aims that emerge from a sense of *community*—positive identification with a group that supports an ethos of egalitarian reciprocity and mutual care. Yet respect for individuality is essential because our desires and capacities take diverse forms. And so, at its best, democracy enables us to thrive given the particular projects that make us who we are, in a context of sympathetic relationships and mutual regard.

3.2. The “Jointness” of Joint Flourishing

We can think of this balance between the social and individual dimensions of value as an ideal of joint flourishing. A political community *flourishes jointly* when (a) all flourish (in a particular sense to be explained below) as a consequence of (b) continually adjusting (“meshing”) their goals in a spirit of egalitarian reciprocity. The “joint” aspect of this is relatively straightforward to explain, while the “flourishing” bit is more ambitious. So let’s start with the former.

Joint action has been the focus of a large and technical body of philosophical work.⁹ For present purposes, however, the following definition should suffice. People *act jointly* when they act with what Michael Bratman calls a “shared intention”: they all

⁸ Dewey 1954, 149.

⁹ Bratman 2014; Gilbert 2014; Tuomela 2007.

intend to accomplish something together, and to do so by continually “meshing” (as Bratman puts it), or reciprocally adjusting, their activities along the way.¹⁰ Bratman’s central example involves two people painting a house. If they are painting the house together, then each will form and adjust their plans about what part of the house to paint, when to paint it, and what color to use, etc., based on the plans of the other. You can only explain this continual “meshing” of “sub-plans” because they are acting with a shared intention.

In contexts like house painting, joint action targets a narrow set of objectives given by the demands of the task at hand. In such cases, it often requires little more than a shared interest in accomplishing the task itself. By contrast, in a (healthy) family, joint action is a matter of deep interpersonal commitment. (Many) spouses comprehensively adjust their plans of life out of love and because their family identity is central to who they are. In a political context, effective joint intention falls somewhere between these two cases. Unlike spouses, the members of a political community need not reconcile every aspect of their lives to one another. But they are stuck making important decisions together about characteristically public concerns: foreign policy, the police and criminal justice system, environmental problems, the welfare state, the rules governing private property, the educational system, and health-care, for example. At the same time, the members of a polity do not need love or the kind of deep affection that defines close personal relationships. Indeed, democracies are structurally designed to enable citizens to coordinate their goals through legislation, even when they are indifferent or hostile toward one another. Such cases involve joint action because the coordination of people’s behavior—paying taxes, participating in elections, following the

¹⁰ The complete definition as stated by Bratman is considerably more complicated than this, but I don’t think that spelling out all of the particulars is going to be helpful in this context. For the full account, see Bratman (2014).

rules for trash collection, etc.—is (normally) explained by a shared intention to participate in the political order.

What sort of bonds, exactly, do political communities need for joint action? I pursue this question further below. For now I'll note that, as the stakes of decision-making go up, mere legislative or procedural coordination is often inadequate. The clearest example of this is probably wartime solidarity, when the sense of nationhood can induce people to make mortal sacrifices that would not otherwise be possible. The highly politicized American response to the COVID crisis, likewise, illustrates the difficulties of joint action when a society loses a sense of mutual care. As I will argue, shared identity is also particularly important in thinking about cases of moral progress.

When joint action is motivated by attitudes of mutual care, it reduces the zero-sum quality of trade-offs. If my own priorities are shaped by my desire for you to achieve your priorities, then your success will contribute in part to my own good. And vice versa. And that is why the notion of joint flourishing provides a plausible way of thinking about the ideal of community. Communities are collections of individuals for whom group identity is a salient and motivating factor. This enables them to reciprocally adjust their goals with the aim of flourishing together.

3.3. Flourishing in the Deweyan Sense

I move on now to explain and motivate the Deweyan idea of flourishing. Here is the punch line: *flourishing* means living our lives in a way that we can experience, upon informed and socially engaged reflection, as satisfactory.¹¹

¹¹ In the Deweyan idiolect, the preferred term for this is probably “growth” rather than flourishing, particularly in his work on education. See Dewey (1997), for example. I prefer the term “flourishing,” however, both because it fits more intuitively with conventional usage and because I want to emphasize the distinction between my own development of Dewey’s ideas and what he actually said or believed.

Experience is a major theme in Dewey's work across disparate topics, and so it is no surprise that it figures centrally in his democratic thought. Dewey sees ideas—both ethical and otherwise—as a particular sort of thought device that enables us to solve problems (that's the pragmatist dimension of his thought). And the ultimate test of whether they work in solving those problems lies in experience. So the key to Dewey's democratic thought is his notion of experience and its role in “testing” moral claims. There are, in particular, three key dimensions of Dewey's views to explain: (a) the integration of affect and intellect, (b) the role of group identity in moral cognition, and (c) the significance of habit in moral deliberation. Together, these explain how experience validates our moral objectives and, therefore, what it means to flourish from a Deweyan point of view.

3.3.1. The Integration of Affect and Intellect

For Dewey, values arise from the psychological conditions of human desire. Desires originate in an experience of a problem or “frustration,” and give expression to that frustration by specifying an object—an “end” or value—that might assuage it:

Apart from a condition of tension between a person and environing conditions there is, as we have seen, no occasion for evocation of desire for something else; there is nothing to induce the formation of an end, much less the formation of one end rather than any other out of the indefinite number of ends theoretically possible.¹²

The desire for food originates in hunger, a lack that eating would assuage. The desire for freedom originates in frustration

¹² Dewey 1988b, 231.

with constraints on action. The valuation of fairness or kindness arises from the hardship of injustice or cruelty. The experience of a problem in such cases gives rise to impulsive desire, ideally followed by “intelligent” assessment, meaning that we reflect on the full consequences of pursuing a given desire and the means required to achieve it. Goals that are impossible to achieve or that entail unacceptable costs to other things we care about are to be refined or abandoned. Valuation involves continually re-working our scheme of values in light of evolving practical dilemmas.¹³ And deliberation improves our projections of what scheme of values would enable a satisfactory way forward: “The ‘value’ of different ends that suggest themselves is estimated or measured by the capacity they exhibit to guide action in making good, *satisfying*, in its literal sense, existing lacks.”¹⁴

For this reason, Dewey often speaks of values as “hypotheses” to be tested via experience, and the goal suggested above is to “make satisfying” what was previously frustrating. We might think of these hypotheses as projections of the following basic form: “if I were to act in pursuit of value *x*, I would experience the result of doing so as *satisfactory*.”¹⁵ Experimentation with values emerges as a central theme in Dewey because it is through practice that we discover more relevant consequences and, relatedly, the particular quality of our own reactions to the world—what is and is not “satisfactory” to us. This point is essential to the pragmatist character of Dewey’s ethical thought. On the pragmatist approach, there can be no final theory of values such as justice or freedom; instead, the purpose of moral inquiry is to consider how we might better address particular frustrations within a particular practical context. I return to the theme of experimentation in the next chapter.

¹³ Dewey 2002, 253–54.

¹⁴ Dewey 1988b, 232.

¹⁵ I am indebted here to Elizabeth Anderson’s (2019) lucid exposition of Dewey.

On a first pass, Dewey's emphasis on "satisfactory" experience may suggest a form of utilitarianism: our deliberations about values are ways of figuring out how to achieve a certain kind of happiness. But in their emphasis on happiness, standard utilitarian approaches tend to prioritize our affective responses to the world. For Dewey, however, the satisfaction associated with successful valuation involves both intellectual and affective dimensions, and he sees the rigid divide between these two modes of cognition as a threat to successful inquiry:

The hard-and-fast impassable line which is supposed by some to exist between "emotive" and "scientific" language is a reflex of the gap which now exists between the intellectual and the emotional in human relations and activities. The split which exists in present social life between ideas and emotions, especially between ideas that have *scientific* warrant and uncontrolled emotions that dominate practice, the split between the affectional and the cognitive, is probably one of the chief sources of the maladjustments and unendurable strains from which the world is suffering. . . . The *practical* problem that has to be faced is the establishment of cultural conditions that will support the kinds of behavior in which emotions and ideas, desires and appraisals, are integrated.¹⁶

Here, Dewey echoes the critique of deliberative democracy in Chapter 2, where we noted that the traditional paradigm of "deliberation" tends to overlook the functional interdependence of emotion and reason. For Dewey, inquiry depends on "integrating" "desires and appraisals," that is, integrating our intellectual judgments with our affective responses. Seeing affective responses as mere feelings divorced from reason neglects the way that they are refined in the light of reason. Our affection for friends can be

¹⁶ Dewey 1988b, 249.

compromised by an intellectual appreciation of what fairness requires and how they may have violated its duties. The feeling of grief inspired by the death of a loved one is shaped by the awareness of facts about who they are and what they did.¹⁷ To choose a more morally salient example: the desire for equality of economic means must withstand a rational appraisal of what is required to bring about that objective. If the pursuit of material equality depends on impossible presumptions of institutional virtue or psychological motivation, then “intelligent” action requires modifying our interpretation of egalitarian objectives.

Dewey also argues, however, against the tendency to conceptualize reason independently of affect. Indeed, in some places, he goes so far as to define rationality in terms of desire: “Rationality, once more, is not a force to be evoked against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires.”¹⁸ Above, he says that our rationally supported ideas have “not as yet succeeded in acquiring the force that only emotional ardor provides.” They need such “ardor” because emotion plays an indispensable role in guiding reason itself, particularly where moral concerns are in play. Again, on Dewey’s view, moral questions arise when the activities of multiple individuals interact. The challenge in such cases is for agents to adjust their ends in light of a due regard for what matters to others. Affect is crucial in that respect:

A person of narrow sympathy is of necessity a person of confined outlook upon the scene of human good. The only truly *general* thought is the *generous* thought. It is sympathy which carries thought out beyond the self and which extends its scope till it approaches universal as its limit. It is sympathy which saves consideration of consequences from degenerating into mere

¹⁷ Nussbaum 2001b.

¹⁸ Dewey 2002, 196.

calculation, by rendering vivid the interests of others and urging us to give them the same weight as those which touch our own honor, purse, and power. To put ourselves in the place of others, to see things from the standpoint of their purposes and values, to humble, contrariwise, our own pretensions and claims till they reach the level they would assume in the eye of an impartial sympathetic observer, is the surest way to attain objectivity of moral knowledge. Sympathy is the animating mold of moral judgment not because it dictates take precedence in action over those of other impulses (which they do not do), but because it furnishes the most efficacious *intellectual* standpoint. It is the tool, *par excellence*, for resolving complex situations.¹⁹

Here, Dewey sounds a lot like David Hume (or Adam Smith), characterizing the ideal vantage point in terms of an ideally impartial observer.²⁰ Unlike Humeans, however, Dewey insists that sentiment—the feeling of sympathy—does not “take precedence” over other “impulses.” Instead, he characterizes sympathy as furnishing an “efficacious *intellectual* [Dewey’s italics] standpoint.” It does this by “rendering vivid the interests of others” and “urging” us to give their interests the same weight as our own.

That is, sympathy guides reason by shaping the valence and significance of particular considerations in deliberation. And though in the passage above Dewey focuses on sympathy, the account is easily generalized to other emotions—like empathy, anger, resentment, shame, envy, fear, and solidarity—that mediate our perceptions of other people and their concerns. These are what I labeled “social emotions” in the previous chapter.

Whereas the utilitarian looks for outcomes that maximize subjective states of happiness, the Deweyan seeks practices that

¹⁹ Dewey and Tufts 2008, 270.

²⁰ For an interpretation of Dewey along these lines, see Kitcher (2005).

sustain intellectual endorsement upon reflection, guided by social emotions. Our sympathies with others allow us to gain pleasure in their welfare, but also help us to appreciate intellectually why/how their welfare is important. For the properly functioning Deweyan inquirer, our emotional experiences are shaped and refined by the operation of reason: a representation of relevant facts and the relationships among them. At the same time, reason is tutored by feelings that make relevant facts salient to our evaluations. Once again, this integrated picture puts Dewey's approach much more in line with the research surveyed in the previous chapter than rationalist models of democratic deliberation.

It also makes clearer what Dewey means when he talks about "satisfaction." Deweyan satisfaction encompasses affective and intellectual modes of cognition that achieve a mutually reinforcing, affirmative response. In affective terms, "satisfaction" involves what can be broadly described as a feeling of contentment. In intellectual terms, "satisfaction" involves a judgment of approval. The feeling of contentment follows closely from the intellectual judgment that things are as they ought to be, while the intellectual judgment depends on the absence of further frustrations indicating the need for further inquiry. Likewise, the "frustration" which spurs Deweyan agents to inquiry represents the union of a negative feeling that there is "something the matter"²¹ and an intellectual judgment that, all things considered, there is a defect in our present patterns of action. Values are properly appraised by considering whether acting on them supports (or would support) the durable experience of satisfaction under conditions of good information, careful reflection, and sympathy for others in the social environment. I will call this type of experience *deep satisfaction*. *Flourishing* means living in a way that engenders (or would engender) deep satisfaction.

²¹ Dewey 1988b, 221.

3.3.2. The Role of Group Identity in Moral Cognition

To fully understand how moral deliberation works, Dewey argues that we must appreciate the social nature of cognition. The point is not just that we need to be able to think about the perspective of others, but also that others' perspective is already integrated into our own as a normal part of psychological development:

The social environment may be as artificial as you please. But its action in response to ours is natural not artificial. In language and imagination we rehearse the response of others just as we dramatically enact other consequences. We foreknow how others will act, and the foreknowledge is the beginning of judgment passed on action. We know *with* them; there is conscience. An assembly is formed within our breast which discusses and appraises proposed and performed acts. The community without becomes a forum and tribunal within, a judgment-seat of charges, assessments and exculpations. Our thoughts of our own actions are saturated with the ideas that others entertain about them, ideas which have been expressed not only in explicit instruction but still more effectively in reaction to our acts.²²

For Dewey, questions of value are social because they are "saturated" with the perspective of the community in which we live. Indeed, he thinks we cannot understand the thoughts and behavior of individuals independently of their social environment: "The individual *par excellence* is moved and regulated by his associations with others; what he does and what the consequences of his behavior are, what his experience consists of, cannot even be described, much less accounted for, in isolation."²³

²² Dewey 2002, 315.

²³ Dewey 1954, 188.

Here, once again, Dewey's approach fits nicely with the empirical research surveyed in the previous chapter, where we noted that moral judgments depend on social maps—how we sort others and ourselves into social groups. Depending on the question in front of us, we may see ourselves as poor in relation to rich, White in relation to non-White, liberal in relation to conservative, Christian in relation to non-Christian, citizen in relation to foreigner, etc. These group-based identifications “saturate” our ideas in the sense that our judgments reflect the priorities and sympathies associated with a particular group identity. We are “moved and regulated” by our “association with others” in the sense that different group identifications make different intellectual and affective tendencies more active in our deliberations.

If this is right, then taking the good of others seriously depends not only on our rational commitment to values such as justice or freedom, but also on our underlying social map and the social emotions that accompany it. Racists may fail, intellectually, to see human equality as a priority. But they are also failing equality because of a disposition to “other” those of a different race. “Separate but equal” will not seem self-contradictory to White Americans who downgrade the indignities of separation by out-grouping African-Americans. Moral discernment here requires not only endorsing equality, but also the capacity to see inequality where it exists. For Dewey, therefore, moral intelligence depends on a sense of “community,” some sense of common identity that activates our sympathies and makes the concerns of others intellectually salient.

3.3.3. The Significance of Habit

We must introduce one last psychological component of the Deweyan picture: the significance of habit. According to a traditional rationalist view, our deliberations involve explicit inference-making. Yet, as we have seen, our social maps and emotions are

at best only partially accessible to conscious reflection. When people engage in motivated reasoning that favors their own political group, engage in negative gender stereotyping, or feel fear in response to other ethnic groups, they frequently do so outside of conscious awareness, based on feelings and intuitions which—if brought to their attention—they would struggle to explain. Dewey uses the term “habit” to describe these kinds of unconscious tendencies:

We need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. Habit even in its ordinary usage comes nearer to denoting these facts than any other word.²⁴

For a rationalist, the ideal moral agent cultivates rational capacities to discern optimal moral ends. But, traditionally construed, “rational capacities” doesn’t properly capture all of the background, automatic, and largely unconscious tendencies that shape explicit inference-making. Indeed, Dewey appears to see reason itself as a particular kind of habit: “‘Reason’ is not an antecedent force which serves as a panacea. It is a laborious achievement of habit needing to be continually worked over.”²⁵ Habit is thus essential to progress:

To laud habit as conservative while praising thought as the main spring of progress is to take the surest course to making thought

²⁴ Dewey 2002, 40–41.

²⁵ Dewey 2002, 198.

abstruse and irrelevant and progress a matter of accident and catastrophe. . . . Thought which does not exist within ordinary habits of action lacks means of execution. In lacking application, it also lacks test, criterion.²⁶

This means that improving our value judgments also requires making interventions in the social practices that shape our habitual psychology:

In addition to the general psychology of habit—which *is* general not individual in any intelligible sense of the word—we need to find out just how different customs shape the desires, beliefs, purposes of those who are affected by them. The problem of social psychology is not how either individual or collective mind forms social groups and customs, but how different customs, established interacting arrangements, form and nurture different minds.²⁷

The idea has an Aristotelian flavor: if moral judgment depends on habit, and if habit is shaped through experience within a particular social environment, then good judgment depends on changes in social practices which, in turn, can reform habitual tendencies. Dewey's point is not that this makes us fundamentally irrational but, instead, that rationality is constituted, at least in part, by habitual patterns of cognition. Changing those patterns requires more than information, deliberation, or sympathy. It requires building up a new fund of experience that better attunes us to the perspective of other social groups.

²⁶ Dewey 2002, 67.

²⁷ Dewey 2002, 63.

3.4. Democracy as an Architecture for Joint Flourishing

We have now assembled the key ingredients of Deweyan flourishing. Flourishing means living in a way that engenders what I have called “deep satisfaction.” And moral inquiry therefore involves projecting both the consequences of pursuing our values, as well as our experience of those consequences. Because the challenges we confront are always evolving, there is no perfect end state to achieve. Flourishing requires ongoing inquiry and continual adjustment. Deep satisfaction, we have seen, integrates both affective and intellectual dimensions of cognition. It requires informed reflection: it must be sensitive to the best information about the full consequences of our activities. And it depends on social maps and emotions that enable us to represent the concerns of others as equals. Doing this is not as simple as committing to a principle of equality, or feeling sympathy. It depends on a complex of habitual cognitive dispositions that are cultivated through experience.

Dewey’s regulative ideal of democracy conjoins this ethical notion of flourishing to a social model of cooperation, and this is what I am calling *joint flourishing*: all flourish as a consequence of an intentional, ongoing, reciprocal adjustment of objectives. The Deweyan model of democracy treats this as the definitive (though not necessarily exclusive) aim of the democratic norms and institutions through which public decisions are made. It is critical to emphasize the regulative character of this ideal. It understands democracy as an institutional architecture that promotes improvements in an always-imperfect pursuit of joint flourishing. It does not assume that large, pluralistic societies can achieve perfect social harmony through democracy.

This view has two critical implications for our thinking about democracy and social progress. The first concerns the manner in which democracies drive social progress. A good regulative ideal helps us diagnose our current practices. Thus, for example,

deliberative democracy diagnoses social failures via breakdowns in the processes and institutions of social deliberation. The good of democracy is linked to the good of deliberation, and so improving our deliberative institutions is a democratic pathway to progress. And at the beginning of the chapter we heard from Walter Lippmann, who, like some contemporary critics, saw social failures as a deficit of knowledge, competence, and attention in decision-making. Thus, the remedy was to heighten technocratic oversight. The pathway to progress lies in a relative diminution of democracy. We will discuss the technocratic model further in Chapter 8.

By contrast, the joint flourishing model diagnoses social failures in terms of the complex of factors that structure moral judgment: information and rationality, yes, but also habit, social maps, and social emotions. And so the solution to a problem like structural racial injustice or religious persecution lies in a complex analysis, not only of the information that citizens have about others, but also of the disparate dimensions of thought which guide the way that this information is processed. Ultimately, in the case of such deeply embedded injustices, that analysis targets social patterns of experience that shape our response to others with different social identities. Improving the attitudes that perpetuate injustice is therefore likely to require not only better information and inference-making, but also structural social changes that support sympathy, connection, and a greater sense of shared identity across social categories. It is in this sense that Deweyan democracy represents an ideal of community. Repairing social failures requires improvements in community, and democracy, I will argue, has important virtues in this regard.

The joint flourishing model also has important implications for how we think about the nature of social progress itself. As I noted in Chapter 1, the idea of social progress is presently fraught. This is partly a function of its terrifying history, something we touched on briefly. But it also concerns some underlying metaphysical

puzzles: Is progress about “tracking” or “corresponding” to some kind of standard that exists independently of the beliefs, practices, and histories of particular communities? Does it presuppose that, as Jack Knight and James Johnson put it, “there is a fact of the matter waiting to be discovered” about how to order our lives together?²⁸ If not, then what role does social and historical contingency play in thinking about progress? And how should we think about the fact that progress seems to take very different forms in different times and places?

These questions raise some complicated issues to which I will return in Chapter 7. For now, I want to bring out some crucial implications of the Deweyan approach. If progress is about improvements in deep satisfaction, then this locates moral progress in the response of subjects to the world around them. In the Deweyan framework, remember, moral problems arise from frustrations with habitual action, and these frustrations reflect our particular identity: the goals that give us fulfillment in our own lives, the way we understand our social relationships, and the way that we represent others’ interests. All of these things are, in turn, shaped by the particularities of life experience, culture, and the challenges of a given historical moment. This means that the actions, institutions, and norms required to sustain deep satisfaction depend on the varying subjective reactions of different moral communities under different historical conditions. Call this the *social contingency of progress*.

Dewey uses the ideal of liberty as one illustration of the social contingency of progress.²⁹ In the United States, prevailing ideas of liberty reflect America’s historical experience with an overbearing monarchy. If government coercion is the primary concern, then “negative” conceptions of freedom—the freedom of not being interfered with by others—are apt. But as the relative coercive

²⁸ Knight and Johnson 2011, 154.

²⁹ See the discussions in Dewey (1954, 87–110; 1988a).

power of government declined, the significance of decentralized economic and technological forces in constraining American lives increased. In this latter context, merely limiting coercive power became less and less adequate to the frustrations that originally animated the desire for freedom. In this setting, the positive dimensions of freedom—the real ability to form and pursue valuable goals—need to be integrated into the ideal. So to identify a valid ideal of freedom, we need to examine the subjective reactions of people acting on that ideal, and we need to look closely at the social conditions that shape those reactions.

That is one illustration of the social contingency of progress. In the next few chapters we will develop this idea in relation to major episodes of social change. In these cases—same-sex marriage, school desegregation, and the expansion of women's workplace participation—the point is not just that people have trouble anticipating their experience of changes in the social order. The point is also that, in some sense, these changes transform the fundamental desires, commitments, and dispositions that so thoroughly shape our experience. In these cases it is difficult or impossible to know what will support deep satisfaction except through practical experimentation: living through social innovations.

Traditional models of social progress frame it in terms of a singular ideal that we approach over time. The joint flourishing view, by contrast, models progress as an improvement in the response to particular problems confronted by particular communities, with a particular distribution of subjective responses to the world. Thus, progress will take different forms for different moral communities at different points in time. The special virtue of democracy, from this point of view, is that it tailors decision-making to the problems and ambitions of particular societies while, at the same time, enabling a robust process of learning and error correction. Experimentation is critical in this regard. That is the view to be defended.

3.5. Is the Ideal Too Weak?

I have emphasized that joint flourishing varies with the intellectual commitments and affective dispositions of citizens. This raises an important worry: What about those with morally abhorrent attitudes and dispositions? Does the joint flourishing approach depend on satisfaction among racists, for example? Does it require putting the frustrations of racists with the social order on a par with, say, people who suffer from structural injustice? If so, then the ideal is too weak in the sense that it demands too little of (at least some) citizens.

Recall our definition: a political community *flourishes jointly* when (a) all flourish as a consequence of (b) continually adjusting (“meshing”) their goals in a spirit of egalitarian reciprocity. This is a normative ideal that entails significant constraints on the attitudes and dispositions of the members of a community. First, a spirit of “egalitarian reciprocity” requires that each endorses the equality of others. This means that, from the standpoint of political action, each believes the good of others to matter as much as their own. This does not mean that, in every aspect of their lives, subjects weight the good of others as their own. It means that, in the context of public decision-making, each recognizes that they deserve no special priority over others. Second, as I have emphasized, egalitarian reciprocity requires that, affectively, each is sympathetically attuned to the other; that is, the good of the others causes each of them to feel satisfaction. Third, satisfaction is only “deep” when it is attuned to the relevant facts, because you cannot successfully “mesh” your goals with others unless you have an accurate conception of their interests and the consequences of action.

Thus, racism certainly is not compatible with the joint flourishing ideal, because racism is premised on the false attribution of essential characteristics to racial groups, and/or a self-serving, inaccurate conception of their interests, and/or significant failures of sympathy. So any view that endorses or enacts moral hierarchy is

incompatible with the ideal, including most views normally lumped under the rubric of racism. Still, a skeptic might wonder: what entitles the Deweyan to take moral egalitarianism for granted when other values—such as liberty—are socially contingent?

In the *Public and Its Problems*, Dewey considers the standpoint of “a member of a robber band,” i.e., someone with a distinctly anti-social understanding of their own good:

A member of a robber band may express his powers in a way consonant with belonging to that group and be directed by the interest common to its members. But he does so only at the cost of repression of those of his potentialities which can be realized only through membership in other groups. The robber band cannot interact flexibly with other groups; it can act only through isolating itself. . . . But a good citizen finds his conduct as a member of a political group enriching and enriched by his participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations. There is a free give-and-take: fullness of integrated personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reinforce one another and their values accord.³⁰

Dewey suggests that the “member of the robber band” cannot flourish because he cannot realize “those of his potentialities” that derive from participating in other social groups. The implicit premise seems to be that deep satisfaction is incompatible with the narrow perspective that robber gangs, and racists for that matter, express.

Are racists inherently dissatisfied in some way that racial egalitarians are not? Perhaps, but it’s not immediately clear how to evaluate this premise. Dewey’s attempt here to defend the democratic ideal from egoists and would-be oppressors looks vulnerable. Still, it is telling that he does not condemn the thief by appealing

³⁰ Dewey 1954, 148.

to absolute moral rights (such as the right to private property). Instead, he makes an empirical claim: the thief will not be able to realize his full “potentialities.” Likewise, from a Deweyan point of view, the fundamental problem with racism concerns its effects on human experience. This is an empirical matter: a social order that systematically demeans and marginalizes some people because of their race will create durable frustration, anger, and conflict. By contrast, the Deweyan hypothesis is that some racially egalitarian social orders will—contrary to the expectations of diehard racists—offer the members of all racial groups a better possibility for a worthy and meaningful life.

There are then a variety of questions to address about what form, exactly, racial egalitarianism should take, and how to handle the inevitable problems that arise. For instance, how much racial integration should we pursue, and what form should it take? I consider this question in Chapter 5. For now, I note that the consequences and experience of integration are highly dependent on a particular historical and social context. In the U.S., for one, the ideal of integration arose as an antidote to the harms of formalized segregation. But in multicultural societies with a different history, the goal of integration may be inapt or take a different form. For example, Québec was formed from the desire of Canadian Francophones for greater cultural autonomy amid the Anglophone majority. In this context, equality is being pursued through an active strategy of (partial) separation, not integration. The historical differences between Canada and the U.S. are what make “separate but equal” an ethically plausible model in one case but not the other.

Thus, the Deweyan takes moral egalitarianism, in its most basic form, as an unquestioned premise of moral thought. Hardcore racism is a non-starter. At the same time, Dewey’s suggestion is that the particularities of “equality,” taken as an ideal, are socially contingent and empirically sensitive. At best, speaking of an absolute right to racial equality tells us little about the particular contours of a healthy social order. What we call “racism” must be decomposed

into a variety of particular problems—discrimination, exclusive cultural norms, formal segregation, uneven representation, etc.—and evaluated through their effects on human flourishing in a particular historical setting.

In considering morally abhorrent attitudes, we might also consider the case of climate-change deniers, who present a somewhat different kind of case. The attitudes of many climate-change deniers reflect a basic disregard for the interests of vulnerable people—and especially future people—that is incompatible with shared intentions to flourish.³¹ In this respect, some versions of climate-denialism have a lot in common with racism. In other respects, though, the problem is different, mainly because the perspective of climate-change deniers is more directly tied to false scientific beliefs. Again, for Dewey, well-formed values are “intelligent” desires in the sense that they are carefully informed by reflection on the best available information. So joint flourishing is contingent, not only on the egalitarian quality of shared intentions, but also on the reliable integration of science into our judgments. Denial of the facts about climate change may enable some to sustain satisfaction with the status quo in the short term, but over time harmful changes in atmospheric chemistry will do their work. Thus, again, though joint flourishing depends on the contingent attitudes and desires of citizens, success also depends on the extent to which citizens’ experience reflects our best evidence about the facts.

So the Deweyan ideal can explain what is problematic about hateful or delusional worldviews. It is not too weak in that sense. But the explanation it offers does not appeal primarily to absolute or *a priori* rights. Instead, it treats hateful and delusional

³¹ Admittedly, because I have defined joint flourishing in relation to the democratic community, the global nature of climate change raises worries about its application to problems that transcend nation-states. Addressing those worries would bring me too far from the main thread. In brief, however, I will just say that there is nothing in principle which prevents expanding the basic joint flourishing idea to a global scale. But it is possible that in the international context we need a different approach.

worldviews as bad hypotheses, to be evaluated by considering their effects on human experience at scale, and the extent to which they can survive a genuine apprehension of facts.

3.6. Is the Ideal Too Strong?

It's worth pausing to mark the departure of Deweyan democracy from some of its conventional and theoretical alternatives. The pre-theoretical notion of democracy is probably something like "majority-" or "plurality-rule." And the animating ideal is, roughly, a fair and peaceful approach to collective decision-making given disagreement. Some theoretical accounts, such as "economic" democracy, likewise view democracy principally as an approach to politics given competing "preferences." Deliberative democracy calls for robust, inclusive, and informed deliberation about public affairs. It demands much more of citizens than many alternatives. And though the ideal encourages attention to the wider range of social institutions and practices that foster good deliberation, the deliberative ideal is focused principally on political decision-making.

By contrast, as an "idea of community life itself,"³² the joint flourishing model seems to mark no clear boundary between political and non-political domains. In this sense, the ideal may be too wide in its scope. And because it depends on social maps and emotions, it appears to implicate the deeper selves of citizens, not just the preferences or beliefs that they bring to politics. In this sense the ideal may be too deep.

In his recent book, *Overdoing Democracy*, the philosopher Robert Talisse offers a diagnosis of recent American democratic dysfunction that speaks to this worry. Drawing on a variety of empirical research and observations of recent American political and social life, Talisse argues that, as Americans have infused more and

³² Dewey 1954, 148.

more of their lives with political significance, they have as a result become more polarized and acrimonious. Democracy has consequently descended into dysfunction, and, likewise, the social fabric has frayed. Thus, whereas Dewey (quoting Jane Addams before him) suggested that the “cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy,”³³ Talisse argues that “the cure for some of democracy’s ills is to do *less*, not *more*, of democracy.”³⁴ By this, Talisse means principally that we should actively seek out social activities with a non-political valence, thereby fostering the kind of mutual respect that, in turn, supports a healthier political domain. As examples of such activities, Talisse cites bowling leagues, park cleanup efforts, group visits to the elderly, and cooking classes.³⁵ These activities enable potential political enemies to see one another in a more sympathetic, human light by creating opportunities for mutual, co-operative engagement.

It is notable, however, what Talisse does not prescribe. Talisse does not suggest that we should diminish opportunities for public input and oversight into government business. He does not suggest, with Lippmann, that we need to hand over more of our policy concerns to an enlightened technocracy. Nor does he propose shrinking the scope of government power, turning to private markets, perhaps, as an alternative. Talisse’s antidote to democratic failure is not, in fact, to do less democracy but instead to do more participation in community life. And his primary reasoning for this is that communal participation cultivates the kinds of social and psychological relations that enable cooperation among diverse equals. Thus, though Talisse cites Dewey (passingly) as a foil, his view has much in common with the Deweyan picture.

When Talisse makes a plea for “doing less democracy” he has in mind democratic politics in particular. By contrast, we have already

³³ Dewey 1954, 144.

³⁴ Talisse 2019, 21.

³⁵ Talisse 2019, 163.

noted that Dewey envisions democracy as a “way of life.” We should concede that Dewey’s sometimes grandiose rhetoric encourages the worry that he is prescribing a kind of “civic totalitarianism”³⁶ in which all aspects of our lives are subsumed by the project of shared governance. At the same time, his emphasis on community is tempered by the strong value of individuality: “The positive import of ‘common good’ is suggested by the idea of sharing, participating—an idea involved in the very idea of *community*. Sharing a good or value in a way which makes it social in quality . . . involves diversification, not sameness and repetition.”³⁷ So the notion of “growth” or flourishing is essentially tied to the diversity of individuals. And therefore our interest in flourishing—whatever exactly it involves for each individual—must be considered equally in social decision-making. Though Dewey speaks of the need for “shared values,” this is clearly incompatible with a requirement for convergence on substantive views of the good life.

But let us step away from what Dewey himself may have thought or meant. The point is this: the recognition that all flourish in their own way supports the protection of a substantial scope for activity outside the purview of state coercion or social sanction. We should protect a robust sphere of private activity because autonomy is essential to the creation and pursuit of the human good. We should also protect it because, as Mill recognized, individual diversity is a pre-condition for dissent and creativity, and therefore is an engine of progress. Democracy promotes joint flourishing, not by treating every private decision as a matter of public concern but, instead, by creating opportunities to contest and coordinate our objectives when they intersect in significant ways. This means that “social progress” involves moral questions about specifically public objectives, rather than comprehensive prescriptions for how to live. As both Talisse and Dewey recognize, however, our success in that

³⁶ Talisse (2011, 515), quoting Macedo (2000, 139).

³⁷ Dewey and Tufts 2008, 345.

kind of coordination depends on psychological and social links that sustain a sympathetic mutual regard. For this reason, democracy is a “way of life,” not in the sense that everything we do should be a matter of political dispute or a target of government policy but, rather, in the sense that our ability to handle shared challenges depends on a wide spectrum of social practices and institutions, including many that are not political.

This last point also speaks to the depth of the joint flourishing ideal. How strong, according to this ideal, do our social bonds need to be? Talisse argues that democracy depends on “civic friendship”:

Civic friends need not like each other, nor share a sense of each other’s good; they needn’t see the other’s good as a component of their own good. In fact, civic friends might even *dislike* each other as persons. Nonetheless their friendship consists in the mutual respect they show one another in regarding each other as sharers in a social enterprise, entitled to play an equal role in shaping and directing that enterprise.³⁸

Talisse’s version of civic friendship appears to be a weaker ideal than joint flourishing. For though civic friends have “mutual respect,” they “need not like each other, nor share a sense of each other’s good.” But what is it, exactly, that allows us to sustain this kind of mutual respect?

Dewey’s hypothesis is that, as a matter of psychological fact, our ability to respond to one another’s concerns as equals depends on the underlying social maps and emotions that constitute community. In Chapter 2, we considered the large body of contemporary empirical research supporting him on this point. Dewey’s hypothesis also provides the most plausible explanation of why participating in bowling leagues and such is so important to democracy. Non-political, cooperative social engagement helps

³⁸ Talisse 2019, 150.

break down social barriers and build mutual affection across social groups. And that is what enables us to act cooperatively when mutual self-interest or grudging deference to the political process is not enough.

So we may not need to like each other as individuals, but, on important social issues, joint flourishing depends on a repertoire of social and psychological dispositions that goes deeper than basic respect. How deep? As I noted earlier, joint flourishing within families typically requires particularly strong bonds of emotion and identity. This is because the objectives of family members intersect significantly on almost every important issue. But joint flourishing is not a totalizing demand of social life, because most of the goals that people have are, mostly, independent of most of the goals that other people have. The demands of joint action express themselves only when our activities intersect to create durable, significant forms of dissatisfaction. My neighbor and I don't need to mesh our respective goals of Zen Buddhist meditation and knitting (or whatever). But we probably do on many questions of school or environmental policy, for example, where our values are important and unavoidably interdependent. In these cases—the joint flourishing model proposes—a genuine sense of sympathy and solidarity with the people living near a toxic site, or the parents of children in an underperforming school, is what allows a society to attend adequately to the legitimate needs of all. And when questions of social justice are on the table, the need for community may go even deeper. Systemic discrimination by gender, sexual orientation, and race, for instance, all depend on patterns of psychological othering and negligent ignorance. Progress, as we shall see, therefore hinges on the construction of major new dispositions of care in previously dominant groups.

So joint flourishing does not presuppose a comprehensive sense of social solidarity or deep affection. As a regulative ideal, it also does not hold that a world without conflict or serious problems is possible. Instead, it offers a particular approach to diagnosing

and addressing those problems when they arise: when the stakes of social conflict are high, progress depends in part on building a better reservoir of sympathy and shared identity as equal members of a polity. And therefore it is not (only) a matter of creating better deliberative institutions, fairer procedures, or competent power-holders.

In later chapters, I will argue that this view is strongly supported by social history (Chapters 4 and 5), and that it helps explain the advantage of democracy over technocratic alternatives (Chapter 8).

3.7. Summing up the Deweyan Ideal

I have introduced several ideas that provide intellectual foundations for what follows. Let us pause for a recap. Drawing on Dewey, I proposed a view of democracy as a social architecture that aims at a regulative ideal of social progress: joint flourishing. Pursuing that ideal involves two things: first, a particular kind of reciprocal attention to one another, in which each of us strives to “mesh” (see Bratman) our goals with the goals of others and, second, as a result of this first condition, improvements in the ability of all citizens, given certain normative conditions, to experience the social order as satisfactory. This latter experience of satisfaction is what I have called “deep satisfaction.”

All of this is offered as an interpretation of Dewey’s take on democracy, though I have allowed myself some liberties in building upon his views. The joint flourishing approach builds, in particular, on Dewey’s psychological picture of moral judgment, and on his views about the significance of community for democracy. For Dewey, moral judgments involve projections of our own satisfaction, upon informed reflection, with the consequences of pursuing a particular set of aims. Such judgments require intellectual capacities, but are also heavily shaped by our social maps and emotions. And they depend on sub-conscious habitual

dispositions. Democracy, on Dewey's view, arises from the need to coordinate our often-conflicting objectives in a mutually satisfactory way. This kind of coordination depends, not only on fair decision procedures, but also on an active, sympathetic regard for one another's well-being. For this reason, democracy is an ideal of community.