**Getting One’s Priorities Straight: Pragmatism, Diversity and the Role of Beliefs in Knight and Johnson’s *The Priority of Democracy*[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*ABSTRACT: Jack Knight and James Johnson argue in* The Priority of Democracy *that democracy should be theorized and justified pragmatically. Democratic deliberations should be given a central coordinating role in society not because they realize any particular abstract ideal, but because a fully inclusive political argument would evince the information needed to solve real-world problems. However, Knight and Johnson rely on a naïve economic understanding of knowledge that assumes implausibly that individuals know what they need to know and need only aggregate it rationally. It is precisely because we may not know what we need to know, however, that we need to continually test our ideas. Contra Knight and Johnson, moreover, we ought to accept that our ability to properly interpret social experiments is itself questionable. A pragmatic approach to social inquiry, therefore, ought to investigate what beliefs political actors actually bring to collective decisions rather than how theoretically perfect beliefs ought to be elicited.*

In *The Priority of Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2011), Jack Knight and James Johnson seek to remind political theorists that disagreement is the basis of politics. Specifically, political conflict arises as a result of the myriad material, ethical, and cultural differences found in “any imaginable human population” (1). We must cooperate as interdependent beings, but because the tools we use to cooperate cannot be neutral between our various commitments, politics arises as a power struggle over *how* to cooperate. Even as they draw us together, therefore, the vagaries of politics always threaten to push us apart. Accordingly, Knight and Johnson counsel theorists to show a greater awareness of the limits of their abstract pronouncements. There can be no theoretical, aprioristic solutions to the conflicts that pervade real-world societies, so we must learn by pragmatic experimentation how to manage them in a mutually beneficial fashion.

Knight and Johnson’s favored method for managing such conflicts follows closely in the wake of deliberative democracy. As in earlier essays (Knight and Johnson 1994, 1997, and 1999), however, they approach the deliberative paradigm with critical scrutiny even while affirming many of its most significant normative standards. More precisely, they seek to capture what is epistemically promising in deliberation, while avoiding the problems to which aprioristic deliberative theorizing is prone (many of which have been explored in these pages before; see Gunn 2013). Following John Dewey, they contend that the precise role democratic institutions should play in addressing shared problems is ultimately a pragmatic, empirical question, the answer to which depends on the experiences of real-world individuals. This conception of democracy is both consequentialist and minimalist; it leaves it to the people themselves to decide which aspects of our collective experiences merit political mediation, and stipulates that it is the contingent real-world knowledge mobilized by these decisions that facilitates democratic cooperation. The weakness of *a priori* theorizing exposed by ubiquitous real-world disagreements is thus shown in practice to be a potential epistemic strength. To capture this strength, Knight and Johnson argue, we should prioritize democratic institutions at the second-orderlevel, in order both to provide space for individuals to experiment with first-order institutional arrangements and to give them a mechanism to deliberate about the results of these experiments and monitor their fairness and inclusivity.

Knight and Johnson thus set out an important epistemological challenge for theorists who base their justification of various political ideals (such as justice or democracy) on the dominant and largely procedural understanding of deliberative rationality. As Hélène Landemore (2013, 238-39) has also observed, political arrangements cannot be justified without reference to the goods desired and problems faced by really existing societies. Once this is conceded, the question of how effective different democratic arrangements are at realizing desired outcomes looms large, requiring theorists to consider how democratic citizens and their governments can know (with reliable accuracy) how to pursue desired outcomes.

To this extent, *The Priority of Democracy* offers an important contribution to our understanding of the difficulties of trying to harness the circumstances of modern politics to deliver public benefits. Indeed, these difficulties are such that even Knight and Johnson fail to fully understand their implications. In particular, they too readily accept the naïve economic understanding of disagreement as a result of dispersed information, rather than conflicting beliefs. Accordingly, the focus on disagreement, which seemingly provides their argument with a refreshing sense of realism, devolves into the commonplace rational-choice assumption that politics is driven by conflicts of interest. Just as in the textbook economic account they draw from, Knight and Johnson's understanding of “managing” disagreements is thus essentially the same as *solving* them in an epistemic sense, so that the forging of decision rules that adjudicate disputes comes to be seen as equivalent to gains in knowledge. Despite drawing on Dewey’s concern with discovering an efficacious approach to experimentalism, Knight and Johnson’s pragmatism offers little to illuminate just what such experimentalism might involve.

As it is contended in this essay, this is a missed opportunity. Specifically, Knight and Johnson’s promising emphasis on the epistemic nature of disagreement is undermined by their disregard for the difficult question of how we interpret the world around us. After setting out this epistemic account, I will contend that Knight and Johnson’s argument for second-order democracy is defeated by our real-world uncertainties over which of our beliefs are accurate. Of course, Knight and Johnson would likely respond that second-order democratic experiments are necessary precisely to help resolve such uncertainties. But this position would only show how little they recognize the deep epistemic roots of our interpretive disagreements. Experiments cannot solve disagreement unless we have already agreed how to interpret experimental evidence—a measure of agreement that, *outside of abstract theory,* cannot be assumed in politics. Rather than tethering pragmatism to this theoretical omniscience, I conclude, we would better serve our social enquiries by investigating the political beliefs individuals *do* bring to social disagreements, to see when and where these disagreements may prove, in fact, to be epistemically fruitful.

*Institutions, Consequences, and Political Theory*

Knight and Johnson’s emphasis on disagreement leads them to prioritize the question of institutional choice. Institutions are vital, they suggest, because they comprise the basic social arrangements (both informal and formal) that enable us to coordinate our choices in “mutually beneficial ways” (1). The problem is that because of our “irreducible” diversity, no institutional arrangement satisfies all of our “competing demands and projects without leaving some remainder over which [we] still disagree” (ibid.). There are myriad possible institutional forms promising various social goods, and each one of these institutions might distribute costs and benefits in various ways. As a result, disagreement over our collective institutional choices is “unavoidable” (1, 18).

This emphasis notwithstanding, Knight and Johnson do not attempt to theorize political disagreement, and neither do they explain how disagreements emerge from diversity (although, as we will see, they do assume that our conflictual behavior can be explained by rational-choice theory). Instead, their aim is simply to set out the appropriate theoretical response *to* disagreement, in order to orient political theory along what we might call more “realistic” lines. At this more general level, the principal issue is not the causes of conflicts, but rather the danger posed by those who would seek to resolve them either by “exiting” from the political process or by resorting to violence (3). For neither of these “solutions” is viable in the face of the ubiquity of our interactions and disagreements. Under conflictual circumstances, a viable and robust approach to politics must be principally concerned with explaining how we can allow contingent conflicts without requiring them to be somehow “solved.” Knight and Johnson’s laudable goal is to show how democracy might do this.

As will presently become clear, Knight and Johnson do not fully succeed in their endeavor. To see why, we will need to examine in more detail their rational-choice assumptions. For now, consider a separate but connected question: What can we expect the citizenry to know about its institutional choices, and how does this knowledgetranslate into political disagreement? After all, if Iam self-interested and know exactly how different institutions provide for each of the dimensions of my well-being, any circumstantial differences I have with other social actors are likely to lead to conflict—in principle. But in practice, self-interest is hardly the only basis of conflict. The individual’s own values are often inconsistent (Benhabib 2002), and different people’s attention is often heavily skewed by the particular values and/or interests they believe to be important (Haidt 2012). Another possibility is that different theories about institutional functioning will lead to disagreements about the concrete results of various institutional choices. Such disagreement drives a great deal of policy debate. Accordingly, disagreement might in fact arise from confusion about what is best for us and how we ought to pursue such goods politically. This would seem to support Knight and Johnson’s intuition about the contingency of disagreement, but it also implies that *diversity* may not be the rootcause of disagreement at all. Perhaps the problem is that some people think that an institution supported by others will fail to achieve its objective or will backfire.

The import of this point is easily missed because Knight and Johnson do seek to draw out the implications of ignorance and complexity for institutional choice. As they see it, the seemingly limitless variety of institutions that might conceivably manage our social interactions ensures that we cannot settle our political disputes theoretically (5). Instead, we must examine the *consequences* of different choices. Knowledge about institutions, that is, “will reliably emerge only from the cumulative experience of using for various purposes the various institutions at our disposal” (6). As Knight and Johnson (6-7) acknowledge, however, this is not a straightforward exercise. Institutions will function properly only under appropriate conditions, so our enquiries into the “effectiveness” of different institutions—by which Knight and Johnson presumably mean the causes and effectsof different institutional outcomes—must also attend to the conditions under which the institutions in question operate.

This focus on institutional outcomes has the welcome effect of opening up previously closed-off avenues in political theory. Thus, against Rawlsians, who assume away the question of implementation, Knight and Johnson contend that normative arguments must attend to the outcomes likely to result from the institutions they invoke. Whether we believe that our individual choices should be coordinated by democratic deliberation, by bargaining in markets, or whatever, we must “offer criteria for assessing institutional *performance*” (16, original italics). Otherwise we cannot be confident that the institutions our arguments rely upon to realize specific collective goods will function favorably under real-world conditions and for real-world individuals.

It is difficult to exaggerate the appeal of this skeptical consequentialism. For one thing, it offers a useful tool for examining some of the problems of deliberative democracy, the now-dominant tradition in political theory, at which Knight and Johnson’s book is largely directed. Critics such as Ilya Somin (2010) and Mark Pennington (2010 and 2011) have argued that deliberative democrats vastly overestimate the benefits of centralized, collective decisions. On the one hand, these critics maintain, deliberative democrats underestimate the sheer ignorance of real-world citizens who would, after all, be responsible for making collective decisions. On the other hand, the complexity of the social world is such that any learning that takes place may be only superficially related to the problems we face, and may thus be irrelevant to choices about how to match social institutions to collective ends.

Knight and Johnson’s argument suggests that deliberative theorists are vulnerable to these claims because they have neglected the question of how deliberative institutions function over time. The “standard argument for deliberation,” they argue, “presumes that parties to deliberation will, through the back-and-forth of offering and responding to reasons, minimally mitigate conflict and, at least ideally, approach if not actually attain agreement or consensus” (137). However, “to the extent that they base normative claims on the analytical task of identifying the mechanisms underlying political argument, common defenses of deliberation assume a very heavy burden of argument. It is a burden that, to be charitable, they very rarely meet” (138). Deliberative democrats such as John Dryzek, Amy Gutmann, and Dennis Thompson indeed suggest that we can attain a working agreement (if not consensus) through the exchange of reasons. For this to be true, there needs to be a mechanism that would generate such agreement. Two mechanisms are commonly invoked: the psychological tendency of individuals instrumentally using the language of public goods to learn to embrace the public good for its own sake, and the tendency of individuals to reflect on their beliefs after hearing the claims of others (138-142). As Knight and Johnson point out, however, simply identifying these mechanisms in deliberative practice is not the same as proving that they are the dominant force in deliberative decisions, and neither does it prove that their effects will be normatively attractive.

This is not necessarily a fatal argument against deliberative democracy, and it certainly doesn’t have the power Knight and Johnson attribute to it. Deliberative democrats, they suggest, must explain both “whether, as an empirical matter, political argument induces the necessary transformations of preference, belief or presupposition at the individual level” and “whether [such transformations] occur in the right way” (137-38). Granting these lacunae in deliberative-democratic theory, however, there remains the question of what, in fact, we *can* say about deliberative democracy.

First, if it is difficult to prove the case forthe effectiveness of deliberation, it is surely just as hard to prove the case *against* it. If, upon inspection, deliberation does not engender the right results, for instance, it is just as reasonable to assume that the cause is insufficient deliberation or insufficiently deliberative conditions as that deliberation is an inherently flawed procedure. Second, it is difficult to see what the “right way” of deliberating is, or why it matters. After all, any normative evaluation of the consequences of deliberative decisions will surely rest upon outcomes, not inputs. Insofar as Knight and Johnson (138) are concerned with whether deliberation is “normatively benign,” they seem to be worried about whether deliberators choose institutions with normatively acceptable consequences. If this is their concern, however, then the authors must surely face the same “burden of argument” (138) as the deliberative subjects of their critique: How can citizens using *any* procedure identify good reasons for a given institutional choice? In the final analysis, the goodness of such reasons will always turn on whether they embody an accurate understanding of the outcomes produced by social institutions, which is precisely the point of contention in many consequential questions.

The import of this point for Knight and Johnson’s own theory of democracy will become clear presently. For now, it is sufficient to note the challenge posed by their recognition of the importance of institutional mechanisms to normative theory sui generis. Deliberation, for instance, is not problematic because it is obviously morally deficient, but rather because we cannot judge it normatively absent a theory of how democratic citizens will understand the choices in front of them.[[2]](#endnote-1) More broadly, as Knight and Johnson (15-16) astutely note, *any* political ideal may be obstructed or distorted in practice by unanticipated systemic qua epistemic obstacles. Rawls’s elegant theory of justice (in *A Theory of Justice*), for instance, would in practice require so many institutional adjustments, innovations, and straightforward guesses in the face of unpredictable human behavior that the most important question is not whether Rawlsian justice is desirable, but whether it is *possible*.[[3]](#endnote-2) Like deliberative democracy, Rawls’s normative theory requires a political epistemology of how real-world citizens come to understand their social institutions well enough to point them towards, rather than away, from the requirements of justice.

The general problem here, as Deborah Stone (2012) illustrates, is that our ideals and theories are analogues for the broad-brush stories we tell about social causes and outcomes. Whether I support Rawlsian justice, deliberative democracy, or Obamacare (see Stone 2012, 116-117), my support will tend to rest on theories about what causes given social problems and which corrective measures will address these causes. The crucial issue is that such broad theories are contentious, and a political theorist standing above political choices based on these theories cannot decide that one or another choice will produce good consequences without taking positions on one or another social theory. Yet in that case political theory collapses into everyday political disagreement, and in such disagreements political theorists do not have any special insights to offer. This suggests that political theorists must, to the extent that they are interested in epistemological questions, become social theorists who explore the workings of institutional mechanisms in a more systematic fashion than can be done by citizens and politicians engaged in everyday political discussion.

Knight and Johnson’s effort to focus our attention on political mechanisms (and the analytical assumptions we make about them) is therefore a welcome contribution to political theory. While we shall see that there are reasons to doubt whether they are able to answer their own challenge, their argument demonstrates that in many cases normative theorists offer a false kind of certainty by simply assuming—or neglecting—knowledge they don’t actually possess. Knight and Johnson’s consequentialist argument suggests that we may begin to amass this knowledge only by assessing how different institutions work in practice.

*Pragmatism and Institutional Order*

To develop their own theory of efficacious social experimentation, Knight and Johnson draw heavily on Dewey’s single book-length foray into political theory, *The Public and Its Problems*. Dewey’s point of departure is that “every serious political dispute turns upon the question whether a given political act is socially beneficial or harmful” (Dewey 1927, 15). The practice of politics is thus the result of concerted efforts to achieve shared outcomes. When individuals go beyond their simplest needs to address shared goals, a “public” is created in which individual action is oriented according to fully *social* ideas. As Dewey (1927, 24) puts it, what marks a human society out from, say, a herd of sheep, is that human action is driven by people’s consideration of “the consequences of their behaviour upon that of others and that of others upon themselves.” It follows that social action is necessarily political action, and political questions are necessarily *social* questions.

Dewey's intention in setting out this argument was to rebut the challenge of realists such as Walter Lippmann ([1922] 2005), who suggested that the masses are unequipped to engage in the complicated stuff of democratic decision making. Like Lippmann, Dewey is critical of the way in which democratic politics is practiced, and he reserves special ire for the manner in which “public opinion” is manipulated and appeased. However, he emphasizes that these are not inescapable problems. Instead, the failures of democratic politics reflect modern challenges to the very existence of the public:

The machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and

complicated the indirect consequences [of conjoint and interacting

behavior], have [sic] formed such immense and consolidated unions in action,

on an impersonal rather than a community basis, that the resultant public cannot

identify and distinguish itself. (Dewey 1927, 126)

Under such conditions, replacing popular participation with a greater role for experts and elites, as Lippmann advocated, would merely compound the problem. For this would create an “oligarchy” of elites that would be necessarily ignorant of the needs of the masses (ibid., 208). In other words, there is no viable escape from the failures of democracy; all we can do is strengthen democracy. In this vein, Dewey counseled that the “Great Society” allowed by modernity must be transformed into the “Great Community” (ibid., 147). Educators, experts, and intellectuals must reverse the deleterious side effects of industrialization by motivating the populace to reflect on the social consequences of their choices and actions.

Knight and Johnson (42-44) recognize that this emphasis on inquiry and reason gives rise to a peculiarly epistemic understanding of democracy. If we follow Dewey’s understanding of “publics” as consisting of contingent responses to specific social problems, we must reject the supposedly foundational truths pertaining to human communities that have historically justified aristocratic, elitist, and democratic forms of control. Social institutions can be grounded only upon the shifting requirements of the problems we are seeking to solve. And if our problems are themselves itinerant, it follows that they should be as much an object of our enquiries as should their putative solutions. We are compelled, in other words, to embrace a thoroughly fallibilist approach to social organization, whereby we as members of concrete publics must all engage critically with democratic policies as experiments, in order to form beliefs about how we can cooperate to solve shared problems *and* discover which problems we should cooperate to solve.

Knight and Johnson’s specific contribution to this pragmatic project rests on their recognition of how much conflict these two imperatives give rise to. Like Dewey, Knight and Johnson see communities as collective responses to problems. “Informal communities, on this view, like more formal institutions and practices, are instrumental to our coordinated efforts to solve problems that emerge as we navigate the natural and social world” (39) As this passage indicates, however, Knight and Johnson see communities qua publics as more or less shaped by institutions and the conflicts surrounding them. Borrowing Charles Sanders Peirce’s idea of “communities of inquiry,” they remind us that citizens in democracies still “inhabit institutions of various sorts” which are “subject to . . . vagaries of disagreement and substandard performance” (40). Communal problem solving is thus politic*ized* rather than merely politic*al*, as Dewey would have it. Because of the difficulty of differentiating errors in our theories from errors in our institutions (a point suggested above regarding deliberative democracy), the results of social experiments may always be ambiguous.

The connection between diversity and disagreement, as far as Knight and Johnson are concerned, is now a little clearer. Imagine an evaluation of Rawls’s theory of justice. Rawls ([1971] 1999, 3) famously says that “[j]ustice is the first virtue of social institutions,” specifically those institutions that manifest the “basic structure of society” (which include courts, regulatory bureaucracies, and markets). In Dewey’s vision of pragmatic enquiry, the proof of Rawls’s two principles of justice would lie in their observable consequences. Is a society that organizes its basic institutions according to the demands of justice observably more just as a result? For Knight and Johnson, however, we cannot hope that simply looking at institutional consequences will satisfactorily solve our disagreements. As they put it, “pragmatists understand that despite our best efforts to establish and maintain the appropriate conditions to make the process trustworthy and scientific, the experimental process remains, on some dimensions, inherently political—even when successful” (46). Contra Dewey, Knight and Johnson thus imply that the facts of the matter cannot resolve our political differences. Rather, our diverse viewpoints and goals will continue to exert an independent effect on our political positions even after our experiments have been run.

How could our viewpoints be fact-independent in this way? In the preceding section, it was suggested that we may have limited knowledge of what is possible and of what we should desire. These two issues are fact dependent, as they concern the range of possible institutional forms and the ends to which these institutions can be directed. They therefore correspond roughly with what Knight and Johnson call “analytical” and “normative” challenges and to the imperatives they identify in Dewey’s pragmatism. In contrast, Knight and Johnson’s significant (if small) departure from Dewey seems to track a third, “explanatory” challenge, one that concerns how institutions “emerge and change.” As Knight and Johnson assert, *if* communities of inquiry are “the more or less arbitrary products of power relations,” *then* “pragmatists should not presume that communities partition knowledge or structure disagreement in ways that are neutral, efficient, or otherwise collectively beneficial” (41). At first sight this is a puzzling claim, as the process by which institutions emerge and evolve is simply irrelevant if the real issue is the participants’ possible ignorance of *facts* about those institutions (i.e., the effects that they produce), resulting in their endorsement of counterproductive structures. For this latter issue is purely epistemological, and relates to the ways in which we understand the social world. For instance, if differently situated individuals have different perspectives, as Knight and Johnson suggest (46-47), then the danger (such as it is) is that they will draw competing but equally firm and seemingly self-evident conclusions from their “observations” of institutions. Alternatively, they may collectively believe that social causality is so straightforward that they fail to notice the ambiguity of institutional outcomes altogether, with the result that numerous justifiable conflicts among the individuals fail to materialize. In both of these cases, there is no way of separating Knight and Johnson’s aforementioned “criteria of institutional choice” from the interpretive processes at work *within* institutions. Indeed, the question of institutional choice can only supersede the epistemic question of how we understand our institutions’ effects when the facts are *actually* self-evident (at least to a select few), such that powerful actors can knowingly design institutions so as to shape the interpretations of institutional participants in the future.

Thus, Knight and Johnson’s emphasis on the question of origins suggests that they see politics as driven by fully informed and thus irresolvable *conflicts of real interests* played out prior to our social inquiries, rather than by disagreements about interests or misunderstandings of them that arise during these inquiries. Just such an interpretation is evident in their requirement for a second order of democratic deliberation to mitigate the effects of power asymmetries at the first order. For, contra Dewey, they contend that it is not enough for citizens simply to focus on the results of first-order institutions (such as the Rawlsian basic institutions). Rather, they must also ensure that the democratic process itself is “free and equal” (23, see also 41-42, 222), such that political disagreements are resolved by reason rather than force.

*Hayek and Market Liberalism*

The implications of this approach, and of Knight and Johnson’s pragmatic rationale for second-order democracy, are exemplified by their consideration of the market-liberal alternative. Their efforts here are worth exploring in some depth, because as they see it, market liberalism poses the principal challenge to those seeking to justify and elaborate the primacy of democracy. The thrust of this challenge, they suggest, comes from the divisive Friedrich Hayek, who provided the “theoretical basis for most contemporary arguments about the priority of decentralization” in his famous essay “The Use of Knowledge in Society” (Hayek 1945). As a result, Knight and Johnson's argument for the second-order priority of democracy is largely framed in response to Hayek's claims and the preferences for markets to which they suspect that these claims led.

Hayek (1945, 520) was concerned with “the problem of the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality.” This problem was central to the debate Hayek had been engaged in with market socialists such as Oskar Lange, who argued that consumer markets could serve a first-order function within a system governed by socialist planning at the second-order level (Lavoie 1985, ch. 5). Market socialists, Hayek (1945, 521) contended, fail to appreciate that the knowledge needed for any kind of planningis dispersed throughout the minds of the populace in the form of individuals’ “knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place.” Moreover, these circumstances change continuously, often in an uneven and unpredictable way, so that dispersed knowledge is dynamic rather than static. The central problem of economics—which, Hayek asserts, the supporters of planning do not quite understand—is therefore to explain how the relevant information about circumstantial change is communicated to those individuals for whom such changes matter.

Hayek’s (1945, 524) response to this problem is that only decentralization can “ensure that the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place will be promptly used.” As Knight and Johnson note (54), “the argument here is that decentralized decision-making offers the best way of aggregating all of the local knowledge necessary to achieve an effective societal response to the problem.” On Knight and Johnson’s reading, Hayek’s argument rests on the benefits of allowing individuals to concentrate on those decisions they are best placed to make while ensuring that they remain responsible for their choices, so that they will “take the time and resources necessary to get the[ir] decisions right.”[[4]](#endnote-3) The mechanism at work here is the money price. The prospect of capturing the difference between market prices and the income that may be fetched by putting resources to more valuable uses motivates arbitrageurs to identify such uses, with the result that efficiency in the market as a whole is increased (Hayek 1945, 521-22). Stark examples of this process occur after natural disasters, when the demand for (and price of) simple goods such as water and ice rise, leading local “entrepreneurs” to seek them out where they are still cheap, transport them to where the price is high, and reap the profits (Zwolinski 2008).

The lesson Knight and Johnson seem to take from Hayek’s argument is that markets are efficient because (and as long as) they are perfectly competitive. This interpretation is evident in the “textbook” account of economics they identify with Hayek's famous article (55-61). According to the fundamental theorems of welfare economics, free exchanges between autonomous and utility-maximizing individuals under appropriately competitive conditions shouldcoordinate individual choices in such a way that no adjustment could increase overall welfare. The economic ideal, in other words, is a competitive and efficient market, in which individuals are *free and equal* to influence economic decisions (58-59). In Knight and Johnson’s view, it is this freedom and equality that both unites Hayek’s view with the economic orthodoxy and provides its pragmatic appeal. For if prices work because they mobilize our “equally divided knowledge”, as Hayek (1945, 528, quoted in Knight and Johnson 2011, 54) asserts, then it must be our equal opportunity to affect the money price that enables the market to “coordinate” our choices optimally.

The problem with this textbook account of the role of prices, according to Knight and Johnson, is that the “explanatory” question of whether or not freedom and equality actually pertain in the market can be answered only by reference to background institutions. As Knight and Johnson (170) see it, markets work because participants are indifferent to anything other than their own payoffs. Equality cannot be a product of markets, but must be produced by market-supporting legal and political institutions, about which economists have little to say. If we want to assess whether there is equal agency within the market, we therefore need to look to the origins of the concomitant political institutions to see whether or not they arose in a manner that would *provide* for equal outcomes. In short, we must take the question of power seriously. For even market institutions are likely to have arisen through a “contest among actors to establish rules that structure outcomes to those equilibria most favorable for them. . . . [where] asymmetries in resource ownership affect the willingness of rational self-interested actors to accept the bargaining demands of others” (67).

The implication here is that while markets use dispersed knowledge, other institutions might use it better to achieve morally acceptable results (73-78). Thus, we need to step back and evaluate the market’s merits by way of a broad, imaginative and inclusive critique of its performance relative to how *else* our problems might be solved. What sets Knight and Johnson’s second-order conception of democracy apart here is its promise to harness social diversity to provide just this kind of imaginative challenge to our institutions, but without losing sight of Hayek’s caveat concerning our dispersed knowledge. Indeed, for Knight and Johnson it is precisely because we are rational and self-interested (as economics textbooks assert) that a centralized democracy in which all are free and equally able to participate should reflexively monitor itself, as different groups continually challenge one another in their jostle for advantage (163). Thus, such a democracy would not only attend to whether or not, say, markets and the various Rawlsian primary institutions were appropriate to the task of ensuring justice. It would also attend to whether the democratic evaluation of these institutions represented the full diversity of interests in society (159-163). Any instance in which the citizenry as a whole failed to see important implications of their experiences should lead to an escalation of challenges from those disadvantaged by current institutions until these challenges encompass the very terms in which those experiences are understood. Disagreement, in other words, should act as a kind of “alarm” alerting us to any failures of our imaginations (cf. McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). As Knight and Johnson’s examination of markets is intended to show, not even the self-interest of arbitrageurs can replicate this fail-safe.

*Interpretation and Disagreement*

It may seem odd to associate Hayek with the theory of rational choice. After all, he developed his conception of the economic “knowledge problem” precisely because of the deficiencies he identified in mainstream economics (Hayek 1948a). Taken alone, however, “The Use of Knowledge in Society” does seem strangely mechanistic. In particular, Hayek fails to explain how individuals communicating their localized knowledge through consumption and production decisions come to understand the “facts” of their local situations in the first place (Friedman 2013, 287). Pricing alone does not solve this problem, for prices can convey information about what sellers are asking for in return for their various goods, amounts that recent buyers have proved willing to pay (Evans and Friedman 2011, 89). What these prices “mean,” and how other potential sellers or producers think they should act in response to them, is not “knowledge” but opinion; it may or may not turn out to be correct. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Hayek developed his theory of knowledge significantly in his later writings, where he emphasized the fallibility of individual beliefs and the need to learn from our mistakes by observing others (Hayek 1948b; 1978a; and 1978b).

Once considered in this fashion, however, the “knowledge problem” does not have the straightforward implications suggested by “The Use of Knowledge in Society.” Since our minds and the world in which we act are separate, our beliefs are necessarily based upon our *interpretations* of the world, which are likely to be culturally as well as physically mediated (Friedman 2013, 283). Hayek seems to recognize this at various points himself; rather than each of us drawing upon incontrovertible inner truths, he argues that we collectively construct interpersonal ideas that help us to navigate society and to discern what is expected of us (Hayek 1948c). For Hayek, however, these ideas will tend to be constituted by rules and customs that, because they originate as the unintended consequences of individual decisions, cannot be fully understood (Hayek 1982 and 1988).

Whether or not this is a persuasive statement of our social circumstances, it would seem to offer few concrete normative implications. In particular, Hayek offers no reason to think that collective learning from mistakes will be inferior to individual learning. Yet his continued commitment to free markets rests on the tacit assumption of this inferiority. Even though he moved away from his early assumption that individual market participants were, in effect, omniscient about the implications of local circumstances for their marketplace actions, he continued to treat their aggregate individual knowledge as superior, implicitly, to collective knowledge. What is lacking in his work is a balanced consideration of the drawbacks and advantages of collective and individual decision making.

However, Knight and Johnson also fail to make this type of balanced comparison. Since they are preoccupied with the question of power, as opposed to Dewey’s more straightforward concern with the accuracy of our beliefs, they too readily accept Hayek’s naïve assumption that the dispersed “information” held by individuals is accurate. For if, as Hayek (1945, 526) suggests, the (quasi-)efficient market response to change is explained by the coordination of market participants’ dispersed knowledge (as opposed to their fallible opinions), it seems natural to worry that similarly, in constructingmarkets, participants must have *known* how to shape them to capture future gains for themselves. Institutional development, in other words, looks like a (very unequal) coordination game, in which knowledge is given and outcomes are explained simply by the structure of incentives. So it comes as no surprise that it is in these game-theoretic terms that Knight and Johnson (61-71) do, in fact, discuss institutional genesis. As with game theory, so with (naïve Hayekian) markets: in the absence of a mechanism directing the efficacious genesis of such institutions, only exploitation and inefficiency can ensue.

Once we take the problem of how to interpret our situations seriously, however, it is not clear that either a game-theoretic account of the origins of markets or the second-order account of democracy to which the game-theoretic account gives rise offer much in elucidating the nature of political disagreements. With the question of equality settled, Knight and Johnson envisage their second-level democratic citizens as participating in politics so as to contribute the knowledge gained from their personal experiences, much as Hayek's arbitrageurs act upon their local knowledge:

In the process of contributing their knowledge, individuals test the merits of

their own ideas and beliefs as well as the ideas and beliefs of others. . . .

Such institutionalized testing produces a collective understanding that is

superior to that previously held by any individual member of the group. With

this superior knowledge base, better solutions to collective problems become

possible. The outcome may be better goods and services, better political

representation, better policies, better ideas, and so forth . . . but the process of

achieving it is very much the same (159).

Knight and Johnson’s account of collective decision-making here is as invidious as Hayek’s but in the other direction. Just as the early Hayek attributed unproblematic knowledge to individuals, and just as he later attributed *relatively* unproblematic knowledge to individuals’ learning from their mistakes, Knight and Johnson presuppose that *as citizens*, individuals when engaged in collective deliberation possess, or can identify, accurate interpretations of society-wide realities. Only this would allow them to react intelligently to each other’s observations about their experiences when deliberating about them. Otherwise, just as Hayek's arbitrageurs may erroneously *think* that they’ve spotted a profit opportunity, and consequently move prices in the wrong direction, Knight and Johnson's citizens may *think* that they have spotted a “better solution” to a collective problem only to cause more harm than the problem itself.

This isn’t to say that democratic competition has no good consequences. But Knight and Johnson cannot reasonably claim that rational democratic choices will tend to produce collective goods rather than collective bads unless they fairly compare the cognitive resources of individuals with those of groups. To be sure, if knowledge were simply additive—a misconception to which “The Use of Knowledge in Society” may have contributed—then groups would be epistemically superior to individuals as long as individuals in groups found a way to communicate their knowledge to each other. But if problem-solving knowledge is interpretive and holistic rather than additive, then in the absence of a fair empirical comparison of the sort that Hayek, too, failed to provide, Knight and Johnson’s position is akin to the assumption that individuals can simply recognize the superiority of the best interpretation when it is presented to them by an epistemic “oracle.”[[5]](#endnote-4)

If one considers this assumption untenable—at least without an empirically realistic theory that would justify it—then to ground a properly pragmatic process of experimentation, we should instead immerse ourselves in the question of how interpretations of societal institutions’ effects originate and can be compared with each other through collective deliberation. Once we do this, it becomes clear that Knight and Johnson's defense of democracy is implausible.

*Pragmatism or Epistemic Utopianism?*

Knight and Johnson might reasonably question the claim that their theory of democratic pragmatism has no answer to the problem of interpretation. After all, they prioritize freedom and equality at the second-order level precisely because they are concerned that inequalities of power may distort our interpretations of the world around us (232). If the customs and institutions that manifest exclusion and inequality cannot be challenged because those who *would* challenge them are not able to do so, then we will struggle to arrive at standards by which to judge institutions that do not themselves blindly reproduce these customs and exclusions. Contrastingly, when citizens are free and equal (by which, following Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, Knight and Johnson mean equivalent in terms of cognitive and practical capacities), they will be able tocontribute effectively to democratic interpretations and to judge institutions against those interpretations (252-255, see also 267 and 273-274).

The mechanism driving this argument is epistemic diversity. Diverse viewpoints drive first-order institutional experimentalism by providing both a variety of proposals to be tested and a variety of objections against which these proposals and their consequences can be measured (43). More generally, Knight and Johnson (260-161) suggest that democratic learning facilitates “big-N” deliberative discussions in which, in contrast to the “small-N” discussions of decentralized set-ups, we can learn of the effects of institutions of which we happen to have no first-hand knowledge.

Rather than Hayekian markets, then, Knight and Johnson's epistemic account might more charitably be described as something akin to Hélène Landemore’s (2013, 102) appropriation of the “diversity trumps ability” theorem, which suggests that cognitively diverse groups are superior problem-solvers relative to even their most knowledgeable individual members.[[6]](#endnote-5) In Landemore's view, the variety and complexity of our problems ensures that no individual will be expert enough to address them all. As such, the presence of diverse ideas and perspectives will always be useful in problem-solving situations, for these will tend to indicate when the prevailing knowledge is no longer appropriate and will tend to provide alternatives. Knight and Johnson's argument against aggregative, “small-N” approaches rests upon the same logic. Since each ideational contribution to “big-N” deliberations should be appraised and amended according to the weight of counter-hypotheses and contrary evidence, such collective decisions should, epistemically, be worth *more* than the sum of their contributions.

The difficulty with this approach is that individuals in collective discussions have to knowthat a belief is defective in order to have good epistemic reason to reject it. Even on questions of fact, the mere instance of someone rebutting my belief is not, in itself, sufficient for me to change it. Consider, for example, my belief concerning the number of illegal immigrants in the United States. To update this belief (that is, to recognize when it is incorrect and when it ought to be changed), I need to know either that it is unreliable (perhaps because it is based on a mere guess) or that those who disagree with me have credentials more trustworthy than mine (maybe I am contradicted by an expert on immigration statistics). If I *know* that a belief is unreliable, however, it is not clear why I would hold it in the first place. Yet if I hold the belief to be more reliable than a guess, I may well reject the credentials of the so-called experts since their conclusions, in departing from mine, would seem to be false. And we have not yet gotten to the much more difficult question of how I can reliably screen others’ *interpretive* arguments, e.g., the claim that illegal immigrants “take jobs away from Americans.”

One need not resort to psychology to see the problem here. In general terms it is a simple matter of vicious circularity. For Knight and Johnson, diversity is supposed to drive the process of learning from experiments qua real-world experiences. Yet the diverse viewpoints we encounter can be understood only within the terms of our own interpretive frameworks.[[7]](#endnote-6) In short, to spot a better interpretation than one already has, one would have to be able to step outside the interpretive framework one already has.[[8]](#endnote-7)

This may appear to be too strong an assertion. People are often skeptical of new ideas, and yet they can nevertheless be persuaded by them—especially when confronted with new empirical evidence. However, new evidence can overturn old beliefs only by appealing to the rest of one’s existing “web of beliefs” (Friedman, forthcoming, ch. 5)—not by overturning the entire web or interpretive framework. The difficulty with Knight and Johnson’s case, then, is not their assumption that deliberating citizens will change their minds, but that they will change them in the right direction. The direction of change will be governed by how one already interprets the world, and it is hard to see how this can be reversed without rewinding one’s entire lifetime of experiential, evidentiary and argumentative inputs and starting with a blank slate (ibid., ch. 3). Knight and Johnson do not imagine anything so utopian. But taking people as they are—with the interpretive schemas they already have—Knight and Johnson do not justify their confidence that, exposed to a barrage of diverse experiences and interpretations coming from everyone who could possibly have an opinion about the institutional structure of society, the collective decision makers are likely to pick out the best interpretations.

Consider our example of the Rawlsian primary institutions again. Imagine that we are confronted by claims that a given basic institution—the court system, say—is harming various groups' interests because it fails to recognize something significant about them. Iris Young (1990, 116) claims, against seemingly neutral theories of justice, that “the ideal of impartiality legitimizes hierarchical decision-making and allows the viewpoint of the privileged to appear as universal.” On this reasoning, one might imagine that many citizens would claim that the courts do notdistribute “the benefits and burdens of social life” in an appropriate and just fashion, as Rawls ([1971] 1999, 47) argues that they should. Perhaps they fail adequately to prosecute crimes against women, or perhaps they do not give minority claims a fair hearing.

Confronted with claims of oppression, we need to decide whether and how to change the court system in order to manifest the rightkind of recognition. Are the bad outcomes that we hear about evidence of a systemic failure in the courts, or are they isolated incidents? If the former, are they a result of problems elsewhere in society—in the family, the community, the criminal justice system, the police? And even if we can pinpoint the proximate cause of the problem, how can we arrive at a possible solution? We somehow need to identify in the claims presented to us (a) the nature and severity of the problem, (b) its causes, and (c) the changes necessary to solve it. Even if all of this information *is* present in the claims presented to us, it is clear that we nevertheless need an accurate interpretation of how social and political institutions “work” if we are to examine this information critically. And the more information we have to sift through, the more precise this interpretation needs to be (because the greater the possibility of error).

While Knight and Johnson are certainly not inured to the possibility of error here, their concern with free and equal big-N scrutiny suggests that the biggest epistemic danger facing deliberating citizens is that of false negatives; if they aren’t exposed to enough (or the right) information, they will fail to spot the relevant institutional problems. Now, this certainly is one difficulty. But it is not the only one, nor does the authors’ putative solution (the freedom and equality to make democratic claims) offer any real relief from it. For simply increasing the number of claims that deliberators must assess is beneficial only if, following Hayek, we naïvely assume that knowledge is not only equally distributed but also equally *accurate*, such that we will tend not to err in interpreting one another’s experiences and they will not tend to err in what they report.

In fact, we have good reason to believe that such errors are commonplace. Research on sociotropic voting (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979 and 1981; Sears and Funk 1990; Lewin 1991; Murakami 2010; Buturovic 2012) demonstrates that the citizens of Western societies are in fact highly attuned to the common welfare; disagreement, when it exists, tends to focus on how—not whether—governments should address social and economic problems. This research suggests that false positives are potentially as great a problem as false negatives. We may be inclined to accept as real a spurious or relatively insignificant social problem, directing limited resources away from more serious but less conspicuous problems. Then there is the fact that even having correctly identified a social or economic problem as significant, we must interpret its cause and the best way to address it. Since nobody has first-hand experience of any social problem across an entire society, it is unclear how claims about these problems can be sorted out except by comparing them to extant interpretations, which themselves would seem likely to be the products of doctrines taught and arguments heard rather than realities perceived.

*Politics, Pragmatism, and the Spirit of Inquiry*

Ultimately, Knight and Johnson miss an opportunity to demonstrate just how deeply pragmatism challenges basic assumptions in political theory. For their focus on experimentalism should remind us that for all of its focus on the big concepts of justice and fairness, political theory needs to be theoretical “all the way down.” We cannot know in advance how to govern our shared but fractious endeavors, so we must analyze and test our various ideas of community as theories positing that mechanism(s) x (through xn) leads to outcome y (through yn). Just as I buy a certain newspaper because I have a theory that it tells me the facts of the world more accurately than its competitors, I base my political opinions concerning, say, property rights on a theory of how property rights affect behavior and thus social circumstances. Our theories allow us to interpret the world, and this applies both to citizens and political theorists.

Knight and Johnson’s emphasis on political disagreement should thus entail a corresponding emphasis on the interpretive differences between individuals. If we all see the world differently—if, that is, we all draw different theories from the surfeit of data provided by the world and our experiences within it—then we cannot assume that experimental successes and failures will be instantly clear for all to see, and to see in the same way. In that case there is unlikely to be a “Eureka moment” (as Landemore and Page 2014 have it) whereby the facts of the world simply imprint themselves on us, for if this were possible we would not have needed “theories” in the first place (we would all have had more or less complete knowledge about the facts of the world—knowledge which, to be coherent, would need to include facts about its own limitations). The existence of political parties championing rival interpretive frameworks (Muirhead 2013), the importance of rhetoric and emotion in the construction of political reality (Finlayson and Martin 2008; Martin 2014), and the sheer existence of interpretive disagreement even afterwell-publicized events such as the financial crisis all demonstrate that even if the factsof the case are knowable, it is frightfully difficult to know when one knows how to interpret them correctly.

Somewhere in the journey between Deweyan pragmatism and their theory of second-order democracy, Knight and Johnson lose sight of this important epistemic point. They claim, for instance, that

one of the primary second-order tasks of democratic institutions would be

the monitoring, assessment, and maintenance of the conditions necessary

for effective institutional performance. This requires attention to the

conditions under which other institutions work effectively as well as the

conditions under which democratic institutions work effectively themselves.

This last task applies also to the process of institutional experimentation.

(188).

But how can we know whether our experiments are effective? In laboratory experiments, we know the parameters of the causal theories being tested, because we have a good idea of how the different variables at hand relate to one another. We know, for instance, that elements such as magnesium react to water and heat but not to symbolic gestures or changes in the interest rate, which ensures a measure of (if not full) scientific agreement around our experimental design. By contrast, political experiments command no such agreement, because our interpretive differences serve precisely to give us *different* understandings of how the variables in the case function and, indeed, of what counts as a “variable” at all. While we (perhaps) ought to be experimentalists, then, we should not be naïveexperimentalists. We must recognize that unlike the results of a laboratory experiment, any given social outcome (such as perceived injustices in the court system) could be the result of myriad interacting social processes, all of which could be understood and explained in myriad ways. If I interpret a social problem as being caused by X, then I am likely to be dissatisfied with any experiment that points toward Y, because until I see the results I expect I am likely to think that the experimental design simply didn’t test the issue in the right way. There are, after all, so many things going on in a modern society that spurious correlation, covariation, and confounding variables are ever-present possibilities, and experimental controls are lacking.

Knight and Johnson overlook this because their conflict-driven view of politics and diversity prioritizes self-interest and the “explanatory” question of institutional development to such an extent that there is no room left for the sheer difficulty of knowing how to interpret the results of institutional actions. The root of the problem here is Knight and Johnson’s peculiar commitment to rational-choice theory, which leads them to prioritize the question of interests over interpretations and, in turn, to focus on institutional genesis instead of the genesis of our ideas about institutional outcomes. But if markets have a realistic epistemic defense, it is not on the grounds that everyone’s dispersed “knowledge” needs an equal opportunity to be voiced through the price system. Similarly, if deliberative institutions do not improve the tendency of deliberation to achieve an accurate resolution, then it does not matter if they have egalitarian origins. What matters is whether there is reason to think that, whatever their origins, they help us to understand a complex world. Knight and Johnson’s promising synchronic question of whether institutions actually *work* is sidelined in favor of the diachronic question of how they evolved; the assumption seems to be that they would be *bound* to work so long as no one designed them to privilege certain epistemic inputs over others. But the equal ability to voice complaints about them, given that they did not evolve pristinely, does not help us figure out how to evaluate them or address them efficaciously. Equality of voice would only be sufficient if the evidence voiced were self-interpreting. A thoroughgoing democratic approach begs the question of how deliberators identify reasons to update their beliefs in response to one another’s voices.

I have deliberately steered away from illustrating the burdens of deliberation by pointing to cases in which the public has “obviously” erred for reasons that cannot be attributed to its members’ unequal voices. By doing so I would reduce the plausibility of my argument to whether the reader’s interpretation of a given political problem happens to match my own, even as I call into question my own ability, and the reader’s, to interpret such problems reliably well. But the problem of interpreting a complex world—and the irrelevance of self-interest to producing a sound interpretation—can be illustrated in another way. Deirdre McCloskey (2010) points out that self-interested industrial entrepreneurs created innovations that ended up undercutting their own dominance. Their understanding of industrial markets was simply too limited to spot the possibility of competitors using their own methods against them.

As with industrial markets, so, arguably, with modern politics. If we expect politics to produce good consequences under modern conditions, as Knight and Johnson do, we must ask how we are to know which institutions will do that and how. We must investigate, in other words, what individuals actually *believe*, how these beliefs are mobilized by political processes to create putative solutions to public problems, and whether or not these solutions turn out to be “correct.” (or “better than the alternatives,” or “good enough”). The corollary to Knight and Johnson’s pragmatism, then, would seem to be political epistemology[[9]](#endnote-8)—not a continuation of the age-old theorists’ preoccupation with the distribution of political power.

**Notes**

1. Paul Gunn, p.gunn@gold.ac.uk, Department of Politics, Goldsmiths, University of London, Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . I thank Jeffrey Friedman for clarifying this point to me. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. . This is a point adapted from Knight and Johnson 2011, 15-16; see also Pennington 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. 3. Hayek does not actually make an argument from incentives in “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” so this is a somewhat inaccurate characterization. Perhaps the closest thing to an incentives argument offered by Hayek (1945, 526) is that individuals need only be concerned with their own ends and how external events affect these ends to adjust their choices harmoniously with those of others. A close reading of Hayek suggests that this is an epistemological point that is provided to encourage Hayek’s colleagues in economics to consider the process that moves economies to equilibrium rather than the facets of equilibrium itself. Nonetheless, as my argument suggests, some sympathy ought to be extended to Knight and Johnson’s reading of Hayek, for if one assumes (as Hayek appears to do in 1945) that we already possess all the information we need, the only explanation left for whether or not we put that information to good use is whether or not we are motivated to do so. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. . See Landemore and Page 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. 5. Landemore follows Lu Hong and Scott Page (2004) in setting out the “diversity trumps ability” thesis. However Landemore adapts and develops the theorem enough for us to be able to reasonably restrict ourselves to her use of it (see Landemore 2013, 160-166). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. 6. It may be supposed here that one’s ability to absorb such contrary evidence is itself dependent upon the deliberative process, such that deliberation itself may make us more open-minded. This is of course an empirical claim. But there is good reason to think it is incorrect; the literature on public opinion, for instance, largely suggests that the more informed someone is, the more they tend to interpret new information in a way that confirms existing beliefs (see, for instance, Taber and Lodge 2006, Gaines et al. 2007, and Druckman 2012). The likely explanation for this effect has arguably been clear since Philip Converse's ([1964] 2006) classic study on public opinion: the more informed one becomes, the tighter and seemingly more coherent one’s opinions seem to be (Friedman 2006). As a result, it seems likely that in democratic deliberations, the more coherent discussions become, the less one might expect diversity to have an impact upon beliefs. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. 7. It may appear that I have given short shrift to the role of experts in this argument. When I talk to my physician, for instance, I learn things precisely because we are located in different epistemic networks. This is of course true, but to suggest that our different epistemic positions are the *cause* of my learning here is incorrect. I learn from my physician because, straightforwardly enough, she is a physician and I am not. I speak to my physician prepared to believe her because my web of beliefs tells me that she is well informed, and that I am ignorant, about the topics we are to discuss. Indeed, I am so well prepared to believe her that she could tell me a range of falsehoods and I would believe her. Similarly, I tend to believe other scholars when they tell me about their research, and (even!) journalists when they report the news. In none of these cases is diversity the cause of my “learning.” Rather, it is my prior belief that their credentials are credentials “worth listening to.” At the point at which I am no longer credulous (maybe I’ve done my own research), this learning process breaks down, and I need some other, non-diversity mechanism such as authority or charisma to change my beliefs.

   8. See Friedman 2014.

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9. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)