PRACTICE, JUDGMENT, AND THE CHALLENGE OF MORAL AND POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT. A PRAGMATIST ACCOUNT
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This book is a study in moral and political epistemology. Its aim is to clarify the function played within moral and political experience by what different philosophical traditions have termed “reason,” “reasonableness,” “rationality,” “thought,” “inquiry,” and “reflexivity.” This book draws inspiration directly (albeit not exclusively) from the pragmatist tradition. It emerges from a general dissatisfaction with the standard accounts that contemporary philosophy, with its increasing epistemic emphasis, has recently been giving of reason. It also emerges from an equal dissatisfaction with the anti-intellectualistic response these standard accounts have sparked.

From the vantage point of the pragmatist tradition, both currents give rise to serious philosophical doubts and call for a general reconsideration of the forms and functions of reasoning in moral and political experience. Faithful to the pragmatist tradition, this book strikes a middle ground between the excesses of rationalism and those of anti-intellectualism, arguing to this end that our trust in the efficacy of reasoning is best vindicated through a radical re-conceptualization of its nature and scope. This reframing of reason makes inquiry the essential frame of reference in seeking to understand the variety of forms of thought that agents rely on in dealing with moral disagreement and political controversy.

To tackle this broad issue, I focus on a specific dimension of practical reason: the way agents construct agreement by participating in collaborative processes of inquiry. This dimension is important not only owing to the increasing degree of conflict in our pluralist societies, but also because disagreement and controversy are distinctive and inevitable traits of a pluralistic world. This is acknowledged by a wide range of theoretical literature, and one can easily find that disagreement has become the central theoretical theme of most contemporary moral and political theory. Disagreement poses a twofold challenge: it is at once a natural condition of modernity and a permanent challenge to our rational powers.

It is my claim that by developing an original understanding of how human thought acquires natural and cultural meaning, pragmatism has devised some of the most promising ideas for dealing with these challenges. Pragmatism’s vantage point offers new ways to understand the place and scope of rationality within human agency and offers new solutions for dealing with rational disagreement along with new ways of conceiving the role of public reason.

As my argument unfolds, it will become clear that for the pragmatists rationality should be understood as a trait of agency: regularity of habits, stability of beliefs, and a capacity to face new and unexpected situations through the practice of judgment are some of its distinguishing traits. Through the reflective
functions of thought, belief may ( defeasibly) become “fixed,” and this empowers human agents to stabilize action, establish regular patterns of conduct, and find innovative solutions to specific problems. In these elements lie the cornerstones of a pragmatist theory of rationality at both individual and collective level. It is around this conceptual bundle that the pragmatist tradition, despite its variety, has developed a general framework for understanding the place and scope of reason within human experience. Pragmatism, especially the variants developed by Peirce and Dewey, articulates this new understanding of rationality as an immanent, evolutionary, fallibilist, problem-oriented, and self-reflective dimension of human experience. It fosters an understanding of philosophy as an epistemology of practice. As I contend, this achievement provides an important resource for contemporary philosophical work that deals with issues of moral and political—broadly practical—rationality both inside and outside the pragmatist tradition.

This book is accordingly intended to open lines of conversation between the pragmatists and others working in contemporary moral and political theory. By tackling issues of moral disagreement, public reason, pluralism, and relativism, I wish to convince the reader that a pragmatist approach fares better than many others, and to this end I engage in particular with perfectionism, critical theory, political liberalism, and other philosophical traditions.
Preface

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy’s concern with thought and its cognate terms is certainly as ancient as philosophy itself. One might even say that all or most of the great philosophical traditions can be distinguished on the basis of the form through which they have proposed to conceptualize this dimension. We need only think of Plato’s concern with logos, of Aristotle’s theory of phronesis, of Hume’s theory of understanding, of Kant’s architectural account of reason, or of Hegel’s idea of Spirit. In more recent times, it is upon the idea of reason as reasonableness that John Rawls has rested his theory of political liberalism, while Habermas’s overall philosophical project is based on an understanding of thought shaped by the antithetical concepts of communicative and instrumental rationality. Pragmatism is no exception in this regard. Indeed, one of its lasting contributions to the history of philosophy lies in its replacement of the old philosophical epistemic vocabulary with a new notion, that of inquiry.

By this radical terminological innovation, pragmatism introduced in philosophy a new image of thought: by conceiving thought through the model of inquiry, pragmatism provides us with a fresh account of what human reason is, of its place in human affairs, of how agents should rely on it to engage in their ordinary interactions. In conceiving rationality as inquiry, pragmatism resists the temptations of a rationalistic assessment of rationality as a faculty. As an attribute of human agency, rationality appears to be inextricably intertwined with all other dimensions of agency, such as habits, impulses, and the emotions. Moreover, by conceiving rationality as the adaptive outcome of the human evolutionary strategy, pragmatism averts the risk of transcendental flights into the ideal domains of pure forms and rarefied procedures. As the self-reflective dimension of human experience and practices, rationality is directly concerned with issues of regulation, adjustment, transformation, and control. At the same time, this naturalistic conception of rationality does not expose pragmatism to the shortcomings of the instrumental accounts of reason. Nor does it commit pragmatism to an anti-intellectual dismissal of the epistemic goals usually associated with the functioning of reason.

On this reading, rationality describes the way agents critically take hold of their experience. Rationality lies at the basis of their capacity to control action. It is also the factor that agents resort to when engaging in self-criticism. It therefore figures as a central dimension in moral and political experience, a dimension that plays a fundamental role in the complex and manifold phenomenology of practical lives. Pragmatism sees moral and political life as being in one way or another taken up with the question of conflict. Moreover, pragmatism is committed to the idea that it is our rational capacities—our ability to reflect and
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to exchange reasons—that we should rely on in seeking to achieve our personal
goals of self-realization and our collective goals of collaborative association. It
is thus fair to say that pragmatism has given us an original theory of rationality,
provided we redefine this term in accordance with the pragmatist theory of in-
quiry.

Proceeding from these premises, in this book I will be using the term rationality
in a way that covers a broad spectrum of forms of intellectual undertaking.
The word’s use will thus range from the informal, where it can be taken to de-
signate any form of reflection, to more specific areas that in turn range from
specialized forms of problem setting to institutionalized processes of decision
making. Indeed, this book is in an important sense taken up with an effort to ex-
pand the boundaries of the notion of rationality. One of the central intuitions at
the heart of the pragmatist conception of inquiry is in fact the idea, powerfully
outlined by Dewey, that a continuity exists that underlies the multifarious forms
through which human agents seek to control their behavior and their environ-
ment. And as I argue in this book, if we accept this pragmatist starting point, we
thereby commit ourselves to the idea that rationality has a central role to play in
human affairs. I will call this conception the “wide view of rationality,” setting it
in contrast to narrower conceptions of the nature and scope of reason. Using a
formula introduced by Bernard Williams a couple of decades ago, we might say
that the goal of a “wide view of rationality” is to contrast the drive toward a “ra-
tionalistic conception of rationality” (Williams 1985: 18). Indeed, the expression
“non-rationalistic understanding of rationality,” far from being self-
contradictory, aptly captures the idea at the heart of the project developed in this
book. Such an understanding is called forth by the awareness that the ideas of
rationality embodied in most contemporary moral and political philosophy fail
to meet the demands that action in the actual world presents us with.

Other terminological choices would have been consistent with this wide
view. If I insist on using the term rationality (rather than, say, thought or judg-
ment) to account for the reflective dimension of moral and political experience,
it is because I believe that the term rationality better grasps the justificatory di-
mension built in the idea of agreement. Yet, by bringing rationality home we are
in no way committed to downplay the role of the tacit, affective, prereflective
factors the pragmatists have urged us to acknowledge as ineludible parts of any
intellectual undertaking. Therefore, the appeal to rationality should not be taken
to imply a commitment to strategic, instrumental, utilitarian, or otherwise “ratio-
nalistic” conceptions of rationality. Indeed, I am well aware that unless the no-
tion of rationality is radically reconstructed, our understanding of what makes
agency rational will continue to remain inadequate, dependent as it is on a re-
ductive understanding of what rationality is. A unified account of rationality (the
“wide view”) will help us grasp the common traits shared by the wide range of
undertakings through which we reflect on our experience in the effort to make it
more intelligible, to converge on terms of cooperation with others, to justify and criticize the normative positions we take, and so on.

This wide view of rationality covers and attempts to keep conceptually unified at least those types of intellectual undertaking through which agents: (a) set and pursue goals; (b) account for actions, properties, or events; (c) make explicit the conditions for making their normative positions intelligible; (d) search for shared bases of agreement; and (e) deal with normative controversies.

Rationality so conceived corresponds to what in the pragmatist tradition has been conceptualized as intelligence and as inquiry. In developing this pragmatist thread, I have been confronted with a terminological problem. Indeed, while these two terms make perfect sense within the frame of the pragmatist tradition, their use in the broader context of contemporary moral and political philosophy is inevitably exposed to profoundly damaging misunderstandings. This is one of two main reasons why I have decided to keep to the terms reason and rationality, as this is the prevalent way of referring to those intellectual undertakings to which the terms of intelligence and inquiry refer. My reliance on these terms, however, should not in any way be taken to suggest the rationalistic understanding emphasized above, nor does it imply an assumption that these undertakings are ranked above the other dimensions of human experience. As will become clear, my understanding of rationality as inquiry is rooted in the priority of what John Dewey called “the qualitative.” My concern will rather be to explain how, given the priority of the qualitative, we can defend a viable conception of the epistemic validity for the moral and political domain.

The other reason why I assign theoretical priority to rationality has to do with a philosophical interpretation of what has been termed the “fact of pluralism.” While modernity urges us to understand ourselves according to rational categories, it has also shown that rationality is powerless to deliver the solutions we expected from it. In understanding the nature of moral disagreement and political controversies, in learning to deal with problematic situations, in grasping the pragmatic meaning of justification and critique in political practice, in identifying the right kind of objectivity needed in moral and political discourse and in working out new conceptions of public reason lie some of the challenges that a theory of practical rationality is expected to take on.

However much in a still too inchoate way, these remarks point to a central philosophical question: How can normative beliefs legitimately and reliably be fixed in conditions of pluralism? Once it is no longer feasible to converge on an external, independent reality, and once the idea of converging in the long run on a shared account of reality can no longer serve as a practically useful regulative idea, but rather acts as a misleading imposition, how will we be able to ensure that our moral and political practices can still be held to a standard of public accountability? As many liberal thinkers have persuasively shown, democratic societies are pervaded by radical, often rational, forms of disagreement that con-
stantly threaten our individual and joint undertakings. And so the idea—as we strive to manage our deep disagreements in ways that do not undermine individual self-assurance and social stability—is to rely rationality as the underlying capacity normative practices rely on. Yet confronted to this task, we have to admit that the contemporary understanding of rationality in moral and political theory proves inadequate. The current trend, as evinced in the justificatory turn in political theory and the resurgence of Kantian approaches in ethics, is toward a hyper-rationalistic account of rationality whose main consequence lies in a decoupling of reason from experience and of normativity from context. One need only think here about the vast literature that has been spawned since Rawls, or about the resurgence of moral realism (D. Brink) and of Kantian approaches to moral theory (O. O’Neill, C. Korsgaard). At the same time, the false promise of these idealistic and hyper-rational approaches to normative issues has provoked an opposite excess, giving rise to some equally troubling forms of anti-intellectualism. Dissatisfaction with the epistemic turn can thus be identified as the common theme behind the antirational stance of philosophers otherwise so far apart from one another as Richard Rorty and Bernard Williams, as well as behind the wide array of criticisms directed at philosophical modernity. It also explains the persistent attractiveness of skeptical and relativistic philosophies. Other examples of this reaction against the hyper-rationalism of the dominant moral epistemology can be found in the works of Cora Diamond, Alice Crary and of the so-called new Wittgenstein. Contra the reductionism of contemporary moral theory, these thinkers reclaim the irreducibility of moral thought to reasoning and judgment. Yet, as the Coetzee debate has shown, it is not always clear how dangerously close to anti-intellectual positions this critique of rationalism comes. Other examples of this attitude, which I discuss at length in Chapter 4, are to be found in the approaches that critical theorists take to the public sphere.

These two tendencies—the hyper-rationalistic one and the anti-intellectualistic one alike—can be counteracted by adopting a twofold strategy. Overcoming this dualism requires a firm commitment to rationality, while at the same time reconstructing this notion from the ground up, so as to make its grounding in experience and the practices explicit. My contention is that the pragmatist conception of rationality as inquiry provides a fruitful starting point in working toward this goal. Indeed, the theory of inquiry provides at the same time a model for describing the reflective dimension of human agency and a theoretical model for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate ways of thinking and acting. It explains why rationality is a necessary and intrinsic trait of human agency, and it describes the different ways in which rationality is deployed in human experience. In relying on the pragmatist tradition, then, my goal will not be to provide a historical account of classical pragmatist conceptions of inquiry. My use of pragmatist sources will rather be aimed at devising theoreti-
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cal categories whose use could play a part in solving some contemporary problems in moral and political theory.

The overall design of the theory I defend is informed at its core by Peirce’s conception of rationality as a reflective process through which beliefs that have come into doubt are stabilized. At the heart of this conception are three broad assumptions. The first is the idea that we engage in rational inquiry only when faced with real doubt, and that we engage in such inquiry in order to stabilize beliefs whose uncertainty has hampered our capacity to act. This assumption makes it necessary to bring inquiry back to the real and genuine problem that gave start to inquiry. The second assumption is that rational inquiry proves superior to other, competing ways of fixing beliefs because of its greater capacity to make beliefs stable over the long run. This assumption sets a constraint on the way rational inquiry is to be conceived: its superiority and limitation are both defined by that pragmatic capacity. The third assumption is that the stability of beliefs is defined in terms of their responsiveness to arguments and to experience. While arguments and reasons provide the material through which we defend and criticize given normative positions, our responsiveness to experience provides a practical benchmark against which to check those arguments and reasons. From this perspective, experience should be understood in its widest sense as encompassing all kinds of interactions between human agents and their contexts. It follows from this assumption that in any given area of inquiry we need to specify what should count as an argument and what should count as experience and how our reliance on them can legitimately sustain the processes through which beliefs are fixed. This understanding of inquiry as a rational enterprise aimed at fixing beliefs through arguments and experience provides the first key to my understanding of pragmatism.

An important corollary that follows from this conception of rationality is that no normative theory can thrive if it fails to take into serious account the role that arguments and experience alike play in fixing beliefs: from Peirce’s discussion of the social impulse to Dewey’s acknowledgment of the experiential basis of inquiry, the pragmatist tradition is imbued with the idea that stable and durable agreement will come only by seriously engaging with the beliefs held by others and with the responses that reality offers as we take on the challenges we constantly face. At the same time, the pragmatist tradition has always insisted on the social and contextual rootedness of the reasons and evidences that can be deployed in the process of inquiry. A society-centered and practice-based interpretation of such reliance on arguments and experience forms the bedrock of the pragmatist approach to moral objectivity as the outcome of fallible, experience-based processes of shared inquiry within the context of problematic situations. I am of course well aware of the apparently insurmountable problems that plague social and institutional approaches to rationality and normativity. Therefore, if
we want to have a chance to overcome the several objections raised against these approaches, we will need to rely on a strong epistemological framework. This is one of the main reasons why rationality enjoys pride of place in my project, and why I think that even if we are skeptical about Peirce’s conception of practical rationality, we should still rely as much as possible on the epistemic resources of his thought. These two reasons explain why this book devotes an entire chapter to his theory of inquiry.

The second key to my pragmatist understanding of moral and political rationality lies in Dewey’s appraisal of Peirce’s theory of inquiry, and in the original conception of the qualitative that Dewey developed in making that appraisal. In several articles, in *Experience and Nature*, and in the central chapters of his *Logic*, Dewey showed that human thought operates in continuity with our capacities for feeling and imagining. Imagination and feeling are central, in that they shape our first, immediate, and inarticulate access to reality. However, in giving temporal and logical priority to the qualitative, Dewey was not downplaying the role that reasoning plays in human affairs. Quite the contrary, he was urging that we understand this role in a radically new way. Which is to say that the grasp and articulation of the indeterminate qualitative trait of situations gives thought its central motivation. Indeed, any felt perception of the qualitative provides only an incomplete, inchoate grasp of reality. Thought is therefore required in fleshing out the initial insight, in bodying forth this initially grasped trait. In addition, we have to remark that this felt understanding of the situation forms not only the starting point of any intellectual undertaking but also its point of arrival, thought is by its very definition conceived as having a transformative finality built into it. As I intend to show, this peculiar understanding of rationality as being articulative and transformative not only characterizes and singles out the pragmatist epistemology from competing theories of knowledge and thought: it is also the cornerstone of the pragmatist approach to moral experience. Indeed, it explains the pragmatist understanding of how and why human agents should rely on their intellectual capacities—their rationality—in dealing with moral disagreement and political controversy. In defending a conception of rationality as being articulative and transformative, I intend to bring the normative practices of critique and justification down to earth, pulling them from the heavenly realm of the abstract, formalistic conceptions of theoretical argumentation common to many contemporary philosophical approaches and dragging them into the earthbound habitat of the living, reflective processes where the point of normative inquiry is to defend, revise, transform, and extend our present values and institutions.

In advocating a fallibilist conception of inquiry and by defending a contextual, problem-driven conception of justification, pragmatism seeks to change our current philosophical practices so as to bring them more in tune with the social, moral, and political needs at the core of contemporary experience. Therefore, in
exploring issues of disagreement and controversy from a pragmatist perspective, I intend to show how radical the pragmatist conception of rationality as inquiry proves to be once it is applied to moral and political issues. As to the question of disagreement, the primacy of consequences at the heart of the pragmatist maxim brings about a shift from a theory-based to a practice-based conception of disagreement, enabling us to define a situation of disagreement as one where people disagree about how to act rather than as a form of conflict or contradiction among forms of epistemic content (among beliefs, doctrines, and values). This conceptual revolution, which brings to the fore the experiential dimension of disagreement, also forms the basis of my interpretation of relativism. In the same way, once the notion of public reason is couched in terms of consequences associated with beliefs, important conceptual implications follow. As I intend to show, pragmatism aims to cast conflicts over values, beliefs, and principles in a new light by framing them as conflicts about actions and their consequences. More generally, this reframing of theoretical issues in terms of practical consequences for the agent forms the basis of the original approach that pragmatism takes in dealing with issues of pluralism, relativism, disagreement, and controversy. On this approach, we are urged to take more seriously the impact of expected consequences in the fixation of our beliefs, fostering a fallibilist and experimental attitude as a self-critical guide in moral and political matters. While acknowledging the tangible existence of value conflicts, the approach seeks to relocate the normative discussion from the theoretical sphere of a divergence among beliefs to the properly moral and political sphere of interactions mediated through reflective and shared processes of inquiry.

At this point of the introduction I expect some of my pragmatist readers to raise serious objections about the compatibility between my project and the pragmatist predicament. In focusing on the epistemological dimension of moral and political experience, I realize I am taking a philosophical stance might be taken to be at odds with the priority of practice which is at the heart of any truly pragmatist undertaking. I want to reassure these readers that my approach to epistemological issues has developed out of a pragmatist concern with the philosophical primacy of practices, precisely in the manner advocated by pragmatism. Indeed, I take it to be a central point of pragmatist epistemologies that a thoroughgoing pragmatist approach to moral and political theory requires in the first place a full-fledged account of the nature and scope of our rational capacities. If so many of the shortcomings of contemporary moral and political theory can be traced to the inadequate account of human rationality on which they rely, it is only through a different account of this dimension that we might hope to provide a fresh start in facing the most compelling moral and political issues of our time. This is the main reason why I call for a renewed account of rationality rather than accepting to drop the terms reason and rationality altogether, as
many would suggest. This move is not unlike what Dewey did when he rejected the epistemological theory of knowledge, not in order to enter a post-epistemological era, but to replace it with a new, non-reductionistic one. Indeed, I am persuaded, as Dewey was, that pragmatist epistemology contains the antidote necessary to counter the increasingly rationalistic trends that in contemporary moral and political philosophy threaten to reduce moral experience to moral discourse, moral thinking to moral argumentation, and public reason to a compliance with formal procedures. While being very skeptical of the recent epistemic turn in moral and political philosophy, I believe that epistemological issues should remain a central concern in our understanding of moral and political practice and experience. It is a matter of evidence that the increasing complexity of moral and political experience in an age of pluralism is irresistibly bringing to public awareness the idea that our epistemic powers might be inadequate in fixing our moral and political beliefs. My contention is that we should resist this trend.

In the previous paragraphs I have indicated how classical pragmatism might help us framing a new approach to rationality. One of the assumptions that lies at the background of this approach is that while moral inquiry can be accounted for through a unified model, the meaning and scope of “inquiry” in the moral domain may vary considerably, depending on its objects and on the situations in which inquiry takes place. Just to give some examples, the concept of inquiry covers at least the following types of intellectual undertakings, (a) the reflective activity of agents engaged in solving concrete cases of disagreement, (b) practices of civic and public deliberations, (c) philosophical practices of moral justification, (d) journalistic and other forms of empirical inquiry and social critique, (e) institutional practices of political decision making. All these levels, inquiry denotes the reflective attitude of agents who engage in normative reflection in order to find shared schemes for joint action. In these and other varied settings, agents engage in a rich and articulated variety of normative practices of justification, critique, and institutionalization of new norms and values.

In order to shed some light on the rich complexity of these forms, I want to introduce a simple fourfold taxonomy of forms of inquiry. These forms of inquiry can be understood as an expansion of the conceptual core of rationality as inquiry. I propose distinguishing four different forms of inquiry to which agents resort while dealing with conflict and disagreement in moral and political life: social, political, expressive, and imaginative. This rapid sketch provides a first presentation of how the idea of rationality as inquiry might help reshape the notion of practical rationality into a form compatible with the specific constraints and needs that characterize human reasoning in practical situations.

Political inquiry refers to all forms of intellectual undertaking that are carried out in the public sphere and that are aimed at assuring the governance of all
that has public relevance. In my appraisal of the notion of public reason (Chapter 4), I will propose to broaden this notion to make it hospitable to all the forms of intellectual undertaking that deals with issues having an impact on public life. The notion of public inquiry is larger than Rawls or Habermas’s conceptions of public reason, as it covers also form of collective discussion, deliberation, and decision making that take place outside what is generally taken to be the sphere of public reason. Political inquiry so conceived encompasses a wide range of deliberative practices, from the field of constitutional essentials (deliberation in the courts, parliamentary practice) to that of more distributed forms of political deliberation as they take place in citizens’ forums and other forms of collective decision making. All these forms of political inquiry share a commitment to experimental practice as the methodological prerequisite for attaining valid outcomes in decision making.

Social inquiry identifies any knowledge-oriented form of inquiry focused on the clarification of a problematic situation, through the examination of facts, the use of arguments, and the critical reflection on existing knowledge. Social inquiry operates as a theoretical exploration of a situation with the practical aim of transforming that situation. Inquiry is undertaken as a cooperative and public enterprise: “the community formulates the problem, develops facts, evidence, and explanations, reasons carefully to develop hypotheses, and evaluates these hypotheses through practical, social interaction” (Campbell 1992: 46). Social inquiry provides the information about relevant facts of the matter which is needed in order to undertake intersubjective discussion of the effects each decision might have on agents’ lives. It provides decisive contributions to render moral and political inquiry more objective. Considered as collaborative social inquiry, it offers active support to social transformation. Social inquiry includes both the practice and outcomes of academic research and all forms of inquiry run by journalists, social activists, educators, professionals, etc. aimed at transforming our perception of social life, making visible traits which call for a change in our individual or collective attitudes. Dewey’s idea of the philosopher as a liaison officer between the disciplines and between the academia and the ordinary world fits this conception of social inquiry perfectly.

Expressive inquiry denotes forms of moral inquiry aimed at making explicit the experiential basis of moral judgments. It is an inquiry into experience principally aimed at showing the conditions of intelligibility of agency. It has a self-transformative dimension that operates through the critical articulation—in view of its potential revision—of an agent’s normative position. The concept of expressive inquiry stems from the idea that in our judgments we always start from a set of beliefs, habits and attitudes taken for granted (the background that defines our basis of evidence). It states that only through the critical articulation of these taken-for-granted judgments we can become fully aware of their meaning and of their consequences (our inferential commitments). Pragmatist epistemol-
ogy starts from the general assumption that doubt is always localized and that in order to settle some problematic belief we rely on a background of beliefs that we consider valid and that we therefore take for granted or simply assume tacitly. This same paradigm applies to moral epistemology through the idea that articulacy is a fundamental phase of moral inquiry, whose function is precisely to make these underlying assumptions explicit. Articulation is a central dimension in the moral practices of justification and critique, and plays a central role while dealing with cases of disagreement.

Imaginative inquiry is a type of self-reflective, often internal form of inquiry. Through it, an agent assesses in his internal forum the different options open to his agency through the imaginative representation of the consequences associated with each, in order to gather the needed elements for a critical decision. Imaginative inquiry discloses a field of self-reflection based on the critical examination of the consequences of our beliefs and decisions on both our agency and our shared world. The idea of a self-reflective kind of inquiry is based on the assumption that personal conceptions are not immutable but are responsive to reasons and experience and that this responsiveness, even if carried out within a self-reflective imaginative process, always presupposes an encounter—even if imaginative—with the outer world and with the consequences of our choices and actions.

In calling for a broadened view of rationality, and in articulating the multifarious forms through which moral and political inquiry is conducted, pragmatism urges us to acknowledge the powers of reason in such a way as to take into account the full import of the qualitative dimension of human experience and the intertwining of thought and action and of theory and practice as the real conditions from which epistemic validity and objectivity can emerge and beliefs can be stabilized. Through a reflection spanning nearly one hundred and fifty years, pragmatism has striven to provide a satisfactory account of how this can be achieved. As is known, the pragmatist account is based on a theoretical appraisal of the epistemic implications that follow once we take seriously the idea that knowledge and thought are qualitative traits of agency whose properties can be defined only by reference to their function in different contexts of practice. This, in turn, shapes the experimental and fallibilist approach that pragmatism advocates for all domains of inquiry. Indeed, in this novel understanding of rationality as situated experimental inquiry lies the pragmatist key to the moral and political issues of disagreement, pluralism and public reason. This understanding, however, cannot be confined within an instrumental conception of rationality, as pragmatism has sometimes been understood to imply. On the contrary, the general model set out through the notions of inquiry, fixation of belief, and problematic situation should be understood as broad enough to encompass the whole range of experiences where agents reflect on their beliefs once these have been
cast into doubt in consequence of an encounter with experience or with the beliefs of other agents. In this sense, moral disagreement as well as public controversies qualify as specific kinds of problematic situations, accordingly to be reckoned as proper objects of rational inquiry.

To exemplify how such an attitude might change philosophical thought, in this book I discuss two highly contentious issues in contemporary moral and political philosophy: that of cultural constraints on individual liberty and dignity (as in the case of female genital mutilation) and that of the justification of political and social institutions (as in the case of antidemocratic challenges to democratic institutions). I indicate how a pragmatist answer to both of these challenges would be worked out, showing the extent to which evidence-based considerations should be brought to bear on philosophical inquiry in making such inquiry experimental. This is the main reason why I urge that the pragmatist theory of inquiry be conceived as a wide view of rationality.

This wide view of rationality I outline by relying on two distinct and successive approaches. I begin by laying out a comprehensive account of practical rationality based on pragmatist sources, to this end drawing for the most part on Peirce and Dewey, as it is through their work on the idea of rationality as a form of inquiry aimed at the fixation of belief and at the stabilization of conduct that an original, properly pragmatist conception of rationality has developed. Then, once the case for a pragmatist epistemology of practice will have been made, I will introduce a model of rationality suited for the moral and political domain. After that, I will enter into a quite detailed examination of different and competing approaches in moral and political theory both inside and outside the pragmatist tradition. The discussion here will mostly be concerned with moral and political epistemology in connection with the issues of pluralism, moral disagreement, public reason, moral objectivity, and justification.

This strategy requires some words of explanation. Recent scholarship that draws on the pragmatist tradition in moral and political theory has worked under the assumption that in order for a theoretical position to be truly pragmatist, it ought to draw inspiration from one or another of the founders of this tradition. This is especially evident in political theory, an arena dominated by an apparently unquestioned opposition between Peircean and Deweyan approaches. In this context, a commitment to a Peircean approach implies from the start to privilege of epistemological arguments, while a commitment to a Deweyan approach is taken to ground his discourse in a thick normative conception, such as that of democracy as a way of life. In this either/or frame, siding with Dewey is implied to mean downplaying epistemological concerns—accepting some form of relativism—in favor of psychosocial or culturally oriented accounts of moral and political issues. I take this partitioning of the pragmatist field to be particularly unhelpful, as it reintroduces within the pragmatist doctrine these dualisms
against which pragmatism has unrelentlessly striven. In addition to that, this approach relies on an interpretation of Dewey and Peirce’s thought that recent scholarship has cast into serious doubt. We therefore should be content with either option: not with dismissing Dewey by casting him in a relativistic and anti-pluralistic light, as some Peircean scholars have done; not with downplaying epistemological concerns, as some advocates of the Deweyan approach have done. Similarly, an analysis and assessment of Peirce’s contribution to a pragmatist conception of practical rationality should not be taken to imply a commitment to his theory of truth or any preference for justificatory approaches to normative theory.

Contrary to these tendencies, which I discuss at length in Chapters 5 to 8, I believe that Peirce and Dewey should be taken jointly into account in providing the theoretical starting point for a pragmatist answer to some of the most compelling moral and political issues of our time. On the one hand, we need to rely on Peirce’s seminal account of rationality as a process of belief fixation, as well as on his strong account of our intellectual powers. This is necessary to defend the importance of responsiveness to arguments and experience for problem-solving and deliberation. On the other hand, we cannot forego Dewey, since it was he who clearly saw that in order to account for the rationality of such processes we must relocate our intellectual undertakings within the social and affective dimensions distinctive to any human situation. Banking on Peirce while discarding Dewey would expose us to the risk of embracing overly idealistic accounts of moral and political rationality (or the anti-intellectual reactions against them), eventually reducing moral and political problems to their epistem-ic and justificatory dimensions. On the other hand, banking on Dewey while rejecting Peirce would expose us to the risk of embracing overly contextual accounts that, in magnifying the theme of “democracy as a way of life,” underestimate the momentous challenges that modernity has thrown at moral agents. Dewey provided some key arguments in support of an idea of democracy as a thin value-laden political theory—a conception recently defended by Charles Larmore and others. However, if we are to justify social and political institutions, we need a theory of public reason that can benefit from Peirce’s more solid account of rational inquiry.

Our theoretical journey must therefore start from Peirce. It will take its starting point in Peirce’s naturalistic insight that our rational powers are not primarily geared toward a theoretical knowledge of the world but rather serve to control our interactions with it. This naturalistic moment, seminally opened by Peirce’s article “The Fixation of Belief,” is subsequently brought to full theoretical fruition in Dewey’s epistemological writings. Indeed, it was Dewey who saw how to transform Peirce’s naturalistic insight into a full-fledged naturalistic account of thinking and knowledge through an evolutionary anthropology whose construction was achieved with the indispensable contribution of G. H. Mead.
Therefore, it was only by taking up the Peircean project that Dewey could develop his original account of rationality as inquiry. This exploration of the historical roots of the pragmatist conception of inquiry will provide the conceptual framework within which to examine the theoretical issues of moral disagreement and political controversy in contemporary debates. Moreover, it will help place into context contemporary discussions developed in the pragmatist tradition. While not providing a complete pragmatist theory of practical rationality (a task that will have to be postponed), I will nonetheless provide its basic skeleton by giving a tentative account of four distinct but correlated forms of inquiry which I call imaginative, expressive, social, and political. Together, these forms explain what it means to be rational in different areas of moral and political practice; or, stated otherwise, they show what rationality looks like in these different areas.

The book develops these ideas according to the following plan. The first two chapters respectively explore Peirce and Dewey’s contributions to a pragmatist theory of rationality as inquiry. In the first chapter I show that the importance of his contribution notwithstanding, Peirce’s account of practical rationality remains incomplete. In the second chapter I discuss Dewey’s conception of inquiry as an articulative and transformative process and contend that it achieves the theoretical project initiated by Peirce through his theory of rationality as inquiry. It is therefore to Dewey’s epistemology of practice that we have to turn if we wish to understand practical rationality from a pragmatist perspective. The third chapter introduces the notion of expressive inquiry as a way to enrich the pragmatist understanding of moral experience by expanding the notions of inquiry and problematic situation so as to make them better suited to dealing with moral issues. The fourth chapter extends the pragmatist paradigm to the domain of public reason, outlining the most relevant traits of a pragmatist conception of public reason through a comparison with competing contemporary paradigms of public reason so as to illustrate the originality and fruitfulness of pragmatism. The fifth chapter puts the pragmatist conception of rationality to the test by discussing the issues of pluralism and relativism, and in so doing it defends a theory of modest relativism compatible with the epistemological requirements necessary to sustain normative practices. In the sixth and seventh chapters I discuss some of the dominant approaches to moral objectivity and political justification in the pragmatist tradition. I do this by examining some recent attempts to build a pragmatist theory of moral objectivity and of political justification, tracing these attempts back to their classical pragmatist sources in Peirce, Dewey, and James’s conceptions of rationality and criticizing some contemporary approaches. And, finally, in the last chapter I present and defend my own conception of objectivity and justification, a conception based on the Deweyan approach to rationality as inquiry and consistent with the epistemology of practice outlined in the previous chapters.
Notes

1. Three authors who exemplify this trend in political philosophy are David Estlund, Gerald Gaus, and Cheryl Misak are. See my discussion in Chapters 5 and 6.

2. See my discussion from a pragmatist perspective in Frega 2011b.


4. Further inquiries will have to show how this fourfold taxonomy can be developed into a more general theory of normative practices. I provide a first instantiation of this model in Frega 2012b, where I use a simplified model of normative practices to criticize the clause of the proviso in the liberal theory of public reason.

5. In dramatic rehearsal, agents examine competing options of action through consideration of what would happen if a given option were adopted. Robert Goodin’s model of “democratic deliberation within” offers a theory of democracy which is precisely based on imaginary processes through which the individual assesses the different policies in imagination, projecting himself into the place of every other individual. Cf. Goodin 2003: ch. 9. Ralston 2010 offers a comparison between the concept of deliberation in Dewey and in Goodin. The pragmatist basis of this model, notably in Dewey’s work, has been set out by Caspary 1991 and Caspary 2000: ch. 4. See Frega 2006a: pp. 256–259 for an analysis of the epistemological implications of the notion of “dramatic rehearsal” in Dewey.
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A New Rationality for the Public Sphere

The pragmatist epistemology of practice, and the theory of rational inquiry that it supports have vast epistemological consequences not only in the domain of moral thinking but also in that of political reflection. In both cases, the notion of inquiry provides the conceptual basis for rethinking the relationship of beliefs to actions. In both cases, too, the acknowledgment that disagreement and controversies have a rational basis is the starting point for reconsidering the place and nature of rationality within human practices. While in the field of morality the problem of disagreement concerns specifically intersubjective relations which do not necessarily affect third parties and can be faced with the resources of what I have called “expressive inquiry,” in the field of public life it takes on political implications and requires different procedures to be dealt with. Public reason is the form that inquiry assumes when actions and beliefs take on public relevance.

Pragmatism has contributed in a profound way to a thorough redefinition of the political categories of the public and of the private sphere. Its conception of public reason is part of this philosophical project. Challenging the dualism of the public and the private that grounds the liberal approach to public reason, the pragmatist account provides a new understanding of the public sphere starting from a different approach to rationality. The novelty of the pragmatist approach, in this regard, is that its conception of the public sphere and the redefinition of the boundaries of the private and the public are strictly connected to the epistemological revolution operated by the introduction of the conception of belief as a guide for action and by the understanding of rationality according to the paradigm of inquiry. With reference to mainstream liberal and discursive political philosophy, pragmatism operates a double shift: on the one hand, it resists the understanding of the public sphere according to the categories of universality and neutrality; on the other hand, it rejects the traditional dichotomy of the public and the private. Both moves are important in order to provide a fresh interpretation of the contemporary dynamic transformations of the public space (Innerarity 2006, Held 2004), as these transformations have proven to be reducible
to traditional conceptions of public reason only at the cost of great losses in understanding.

Classical conceptions of public reason as neutral and universal are often couched in terms of a model of rationality dominated by the idea of a strong and irreducible opposition between the private and the public forms of its use. Ideals of universality and neutrality are generally conceived out of the persuasion that access to reason requires a process of detachment that frees the individual from his specific and personal traits (desires, interests, conceptions, etc.). In order to preserve the universality and neutrality that qualify its legitimacy, public reason needs, therefore, to set its operational conditions in opposition to the rules that govern its private use. This epistemological presupposition underlies the classical liberalist paradigm as well as the works of some of its opponents, such as communitarian and critical theorists. Whether such universalist reason is endorsed as the necessary basis of political legitimacy or rejected as a condition of oppression, it nevertheless constitutes the undisputed presupposition of the debate. Something similar happens with reference to the opposition of the private and the public: whether it is posited as the necessary presupposition of the social and political constitution or whether it is rejected in favor of a politics of identities and recognition, what is at work is the same epistemological framework according to which public and private reason are two statically differentiated and irreducible entities.

With respect to both issues, pragmatism defines these political categories along different lines. The outcome is a different account of the nature of the public sphere and of the place of rationality inside it. But it is also a different understanding of how the individual dimension (the “private”) can enter the public sphere and how the public sphere, while ensuring the necessary expression to the individual voice, preserves its public nature. In a similar way, defining the notion of public sphere through that of consequences and problematic situations, pragmatism points toward an understanding of the public dimension as being neither neutrally abstracted from individual interests nor reducible to the sum of individual interests. Indeed, while consequences affect individual lives and operate at the level of individual drives, according to the pragmatists they have an active role in the formation of new publics, giving form and meaning to collective action in a way that is adequately explained neither by the individualist paradigm of classical liberalism nor by the collectivist paradigm of communitarianism. Failure to understand this point determines the wrongful identification of pragmatism with a variant of utilitarianism. As I intend to show, the political outcome of a process of public inquiry aimed at assessing the consequences of intended courses of action is, in fact, the genesis of new publics which did not exist before. Drawing on the terminology developed in the former chapters, we might say that political inquiry, by way of an articulative inquiry on the consequences of courses of action, brings about transformations in the political consti-
The upshot of this approach is a critique of the utilitarian conception of the rationality of public action and to the liberal and anti-liberal approaches to the notion of public sphere. Pragmatism shows that all these options fail to explain how the political constitution of a common interest is non-instrumentally tied to the consideration of the consequences associated to competing paths of action.

Within the pragmatist tradition, it is Deweyan pragmatism which has offered the most relevant contribution to the articulation of this constructive understanding of public inquiry as the process through which publics are shaped, by means of the identification and discussion of specific issues that make visible the connections between consequences and individuals or groups that are affected by them. Such an approach requires that we drop both terms of the opposition between a universality and a particularity equally conceived as being a priori, in order to conceive of universality (or the global community—the Great Society in Dewey’s and Mead’s terms) as the outcome, rather than the input, of the political process of the quest for legitimacy. Pragmatism asks us to give up both the conception of a universal and neutral public sphere and that of a plurality of identitarian spheres statically defined by pre-determined traits (culture, gender, race, geographical proximity, language, religion).

This conception revolutionizes not only the political notion of public sphere but also the epistemological notion of public reason: constitution through inquiry, and not representation through justification, defines the proper core of public reason. In this way, pragmatism takes us also beyond the competing conceptions of rationality (a) as a rational (Rawls), arguing (Elster) or communicative (Habermas) form of discourse and (b) as a negotiating, bargaining, instrumental or pragmatic competition for the adjudication of scarce resources. Public reason is irreducible to both conceptions; it denotes a collectively undertaken process of inquiry in which interests, aims, visions and identities are constantly negotiated through the participation in a common undertaking at revising the system of our partly shared and partly diverging beliefs, and where the scope of this common interest also varies according to the different kinds of public that are mobilized by different kinds of issues. Reasons as well as interests, values, and political aims are the tentative and fallible outcomes of the political process itself. Through public inquiry, interests and aims are neither merely pursued nor simply justified: they are first of all constructed through deliberative processes carried out according to the epistemological paradigm of inquiry. It is therefore to inquiry and deliberation, not to aggregation and negotiation, that we should turn in order to reach this aim. This is the most concrete consequence of the epistemological shift from a classical to a pragmatist account of rationality.

In the previous chapters I have argued that, according to pragmatism, the fixation of beliefs for purposes of controlling agency defines the core function of rationality, and therefore constitutes the main feature a theory of rationality
should explain. This view is at the core of a pragmatist theory of rationality and provides the starting point to distinguish it from other political conceptions. Here as elsewhere, the pragmatist approach is first singled out by its understanding of the social and natural basis of rationality. In this chapter I intend to show how this conception leads to a different and promising understanding of what in recent debates has been called “public reason.” This approach will prove fruitful also to conceive of processes of consensus-making and justification in cases of controversies that divide the public sphere into competing and contrasting visions concerning issues that require some form of coordinated action. After having briefly outlined the main traits of the pragmatist conception of public reason, I will contrast it with the three main conceptions that have dominated the philosophical scene in the last three decades. This will help us grasp the novelty of the pragmatist approach in rethinking the nature and scope of the public dimension of common life.

**Pragmatist Public Reason: The Main Categories**

A first glance at trends in contemporary debates shows that the advancement of mainstream philosophy and of the social sciences in the last decades has often been reached at the cost of a progressively impoverished and reduced conception of what human reason is, what its tasks are and what outcomes it achieves. Critics of this tendency have pointed out that this has produced an increasingly narrow understanding of the main features of human agency: if we misconceive the nature and scope of human reason, we are likely to arrive at strong misconceptions concerning deeply important facets of human experience. This is a topic that pragmatism has long entertained in its calling for a renewed understanding of philosophy and the social sciences both in their professional identity and in their social function. Although pragmatism has traditionally advocated the idea of a unitary conception of reason based on the idea of inquiry, an updated account of rationality as a common feature of human agency is still missing.

Critics of traditional epistemology like Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Cavell, Michael Sandel, Bruno Latour and Michael Walzer join pragmatists in acknowledging that moral and political theory have been dominated by an understanding of human agency which is based on an inadequate account of rationality. One has only to consider the justificatory turn that has characterized recent mainstream Anglo-Saxon political philosophy, with the increasing focus on topics of justification, consensus, and truth. This recent turn is, from a pragmatist perspective, the symptom of a broader philosophical problem: the tendency toward an understanding of human experience (and of the role of intelligence inside it) dominated by a hyper-rational conception of human reason as
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detached from its generative and functional roots in natural and social experience. Defenders of this approach have often replied to critics by claiming that outside the safe harbor of such a conception of reason we are exposed to the uncertainty and risk of disagreement, conflict, and violence. They insist that we are obliged to choose between a normatively strong conception of reason and the arbitrary rule of power or the irrational play of instincts and sentiments.

The pragmatist concept of public reason is built upon the refusal of this presupposition; the location of rationality in the domain of its exercise—human agency and practices—opens a different understanding of basic facts concerning the functions of reason, its mode of operation, its outcomes and scopes, and its criteria of validity. According to this reading, in this chapter I will provide an account of the notion of public reason within the framework of the social and naturalistic epistemology developed by pragmatism. Such an account, as I have shown, deploys a conception of rational inquiry as a human activity embedded in experience (principle of continuity) and functionally oriented to the advancement of experience (immanence of reason to agency and practice) through the examination of contested issues in problematic situations. According to such an account, rational inquiry is conceived as an activity whose main function is the guiding of conduct through the fixation of beliefs. Accordingly, human agents act rationally as long as their interactions with their environments are guided by a reflective attitude characterized by the fact that obstacles are perceived and conceptualized as problems, and that inquiry is the privileged way to deal with them.

Rationality can be considered to be an attribute of agency only as long as the notion of agency is in turn defined by overcoming the duality of thinking and action toward the idea of a “reflective behavior.” This theoretical move, as I have shown, is common to the pragmatist tradition. On this general basis, inquiry becomes the general paradigm of human rationality. Here I would like to single out the traits of this conception which are most relevant for defining public reason. According to this perspective, an agent is rational if (a) he bases his conduct on accepted beliefs as long as those are not currently put into question (primacy of practice); (b) he adopts inquiry (and not authority or other means) as the method for fixing the beliefs that governs his present and future conduct (inquiry as paradigm of thinking); and (c) he considers beliefs as instruments for the control of agency that are revisable in principle (fallibilism) and whose meaning is defined with reference to the consequences derived by acting upon them. These traits point toward an understanding of rationality as a public and open enterprise and of public reason as a variant of rationality that is defined by its privileged relationship with public issues. For the pragmatist the exercise of rationality is inescapably public, both in its theoretical and its practical use. Indeed, rationality is rooted in a contextual situation, driven by the needs of practice, implemented through specific forms of activity and dependent upon the in-
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tersubjective scrutiny of other fellow inquirers and agents. The pragmatist ap-
proach to public reason is built upon this basic assumption. In order to articulate
a pragmatist theory of public reason, it is therefore necessary to qualify the term
“public” with reference to this more general awareness of publicity as an irre-
ducible trait of all expressions of human rationality. This task will be accom-
plished by starting from an examination of Dewey’s conception of the public. I
will then proceed to draw some broader implications for a pragmatist conception
of public reason.

According to pragmatist epistemology, publicity is a general trait of ratio-
nality in at least two distinct meanings. First of all, publicity as observability is a
general trait of human agency, which is public in the sense that it can be ex-
amined both in its actuation and in its outcomes and consequences. Second, pub-
licity is a corollary of experimentality and qualifies any form of human inquiry
as being guided by collectively agreed and public epistemic standard. More in
details, according to the pragmatist conception rationality is public in at least
four senses. The first sense is that *rationality is directed to the control of conse-
quences of actions*. Therefore, its use is public in the sense of taking place in the
open field of phenomena that affect a plurality of agents. The second is that *ra-
tionality is a trait of human agency* (Deweyan “reflective behaviour”). There-
fore, it is public in the sense of being the observable attribute of the open activi-
ty of individuals, as against the attribute of hidden thought processes. Third, *ra-
tionality is experimental* as, after the scientific revolution, it is characterized by
accessibility of results, transparency of methodologies, and repeatability of ex-
periences by a plurality of inquirers. Finally, *rationality is shaped by the social
and cultural matrix* that constitutes human experience. Therefore, it possesses
traits which are indexed to its socio-cultural context of origin.

This epistemological framework implies that publicity is a defining trait of
inquiry in all its expressions. Therefore, if we want to give a specific meaning to
the term “public reason,” in a way that is compatible with the meaning that has
become popular in political philosophy, we need to provide further specifica-
tions to our initial definition of what qualifies the public nature of rationality.
We need to specify in what sense, from a pragmatist perspective, the politically
public dimension has to be taken into account. My proposal is that the specifici-
ty of the public use of reason is provided by reference to a subset of the category
of consequences. The connection between the political dimension of rationality
and a philosophical reflection on consequences has originally been developed by
Dewey. This connection is pivotal for the definition of a pragmatist conception
of public reason. It provides the first condition defining the *public use of reason*
in *political* terms: rationality should be subjected to the requirement that where-
ver a plurality of agents is engaged, the general assumption that each action
produces consequences has implications which cannot be dealt with merely by
those who are directly concerned. The idea of public sphere is related to the
consequences of agency as they are not considered merely in terms of their natural effects (in modifying the environment) or of their epistemic implications (in view of the production of knowledge), but also in terms of their social impact (on the life conditions of other human beings). Dewey remarks that “human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others” (LW 2: 243). The third phrase introduces a theme which is crucial for a pragmatist account of rationality: that of the control of action and, through it, of consequences. Dewey writes that “consequences are of two kinds, those which affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned” (LW 2: 243). The concept of public refers only to those consequences (intended or unintended) that affect people beyond those directly involved in the action considered. More explicitly: “transactions between singular persons and groups bring a public into being when their indirect consequences—their effects beyond those immediately engaged in them—are of importance” (LW 2: 275). The criteria invoked for defining what should be considered important are: “the far-reaching character of consequences, whether in space or time; their settled, uniform and recurrent nature, and their irreparableness” (ibid). Making the appeal to consequences prominent in the definition of public reason, Dewey pioneered an issue-centered approach to politics.

Such an approach draws on the epistemological resources of inquiry in order to claim that the notion of public cannot be specified without taking the constitutive function of inquiry into account. That is to say that the notion of public ceases to refer to static entities such as representative or territorial entities that are determined by criteria that are external to the dynamic interplay of the public itself. A public is a temporally evolving entity whose existence depends upon dynamic effects of social interactions considered in terms of their consequences. This shift toward an issue-centered approach implies that issues at stake in political deliberation should not be considered to be the non-problematic starting point of the political process (as several approaches to deliberation and participation continue to presuppose) but are rather the outcome of processes of political inquiry and deliberation. Drawing on a model of functional integration that he developed in the context of his functional psychology, Dewey contends that public and political action are co-terminus entities constituted by their reciprocal interaction. As it was the case for the relationship of the self to his agency, in the same manner Dewey refuses to explain public action in terms of a collective entity that would be constituted in advance of the process of inquiry itself. That is to say, public action is expressive in the same way in which agency was said to be expressive with respect to the self.

The causes of a problematic situation (a situation in which a plurality of individuals perceive some negative consequence) are still inchoate traits of an in-
determinate situation in need of clarification: before setting out on the path toward resolving the situation, inquiry must focus on the way the political issue has been framed and contribute to the identification of the public that is concerned. Definition of the issue is, as a consequence, a preliminary step in a deliberative process, and is inseparable from the political process of the constitution of the public. Dewey considers that publics come to life when issues require their involvement (when situations come to be seen as problematic by a plurality of individuals). In this perspective, the public is neither external to inquiry nor does it precede it: it is not the already given depositary of consent, but a temporally changing collective agent that coalesces in order to ensure that emerging issues are dealt with.  

Controversies and disagreement are some of the forms through which public inquiry evolves. This is a corollary of the pragmatist conception of rationality as inquiry. According to Dewey’s epistemology of practice, the object of knowledge as well as the object of practice is in fact the outcome of the process of inquiry itself: the object, the issue, the problem, emerge out of the process of inquiry. This makes a radical difference with respect to classical liberal, procedural, and discursive approaches to public reason, as in the pragmatist perspective the function of public reason is not merely that of settling a given issue raised by a given public, but rather that of setting up a process for the formation of issues and publics. Once we have acknowledged that the impact of an action extends beyond those people that are directly engaged in it, extension of impact, regularity of pattern and irreversibility of effects are the main criteria we should consider when we have to decide, in a pragmatist perspective, whether an issue belongs to the public sphere or not. It follows that what should be publicly regulated and how, is a matter of empirically assessed consequences and not of theoretically demonstrated principles, and that the conflict emerging in the field of public regulation should be settled experimentally, which means through the use of inquiry. We will see later which are the epistemic and political consequences introduced by this reference to experimental inquiry.

This reference to the dimension of consequences is used by Dewey in order to define the notion of publicity, which, according to the perspective here outlined, is strictly related to that of the public: “there can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it” (LW 2: 239), as well as—I would add—in respect to the methods that are used to produce evidence about them. So conceived, the notion of public is a dynamic notion in two distinct senses that the pragmatist epistemology of practice helps explore. First of all, publics coalesce and gather according to the varying needs of situations: each agent belongs to different publics according to the different order of consequences that affect his life. Secondly, the public is the outcome of the reflective process of inquiry aimed at the identification of the consequences, not the pre-existing subject of the inquiry itself. The participation in processes of identi-
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The identification of a public sphere depends upon the following conditions: (a) human actions produce consequences; (b) these consequences affect also people who are not directly involved in the action itself; (c) such consequences need to be managed in order to secure some effects and avoid others; (d) the acknowledgment of these consequences is a distinctive feature of the exercise of public reason; and (e) the public so defined is not considered as a pre-existing collective entity but as the outcome of a process aimed at producing a shared response to the developed awareness of being commonly affected by the consequences of certain facts.

If the pragmatist conception of rationality can be defined through the idea of the intelligent control of action and of its consequences, the idea of a specifically public form of rationality is, accordingly, defined with reference to a specific subset of consequences: those that affect people who are not directly involved in the actions and are therefore not in the position to partake directly in the positive control of these consequences. The public thus denotes neither a specific political entity (e.g., state, government, representative bodies), nor a given set of reasons (universal principles, neutral reasons, etc.) nor a distinctive sphere of individuals involved in specific forms of agency (the officers, the readers, the bourgeois, the voters, the rational agents, etc.), but rather a specific set of effects induced by actions or events. The implications of this approach are threefold. First, the focus on consequences rather than on causes and principles determines a shift of democratic theory from a general quest for justificatory consensus to the search for solutions to specific problems. Second, the traditional democratic conception of publics as territorially based homogeneous communities (shaped according to the territorial state-model of citizenship) is replaced by an issue-centered conception of publics as being dynamic and shifting. This transformation in the nature of the publics has recently been identified as an important cause of democratic deficits and constitutes therefore a main challenge for democratic theory. Indeed democratic deficits occur when the community of those who are affected by the consequences of a given issue does not overlap with the political community that has the legitimate power to decide how the issue has to be dealt with. Third, the identification of the public with the effects of actions rather than with specific political institutions implies a turning away from the idea that the task of political philosophy is the justification of given institutions toward a transformative conception of political theory and practice as oriented toward regulation in the formation and resolution of problematic issues. The task of political theory becomes that of experimentally devising solutions to problems related to the consequences determined by private and public actions.

As Dewey notes, in political theories that do not acknowledge this fact, “reason
comes into play only to find justification for the opinion which has been adopted, instead of to analyze human behavior with respect to its consequences and to frame politics accordingly” (LW 2: 249). This change might be defined as a passage from a justificatory to a transformative conception of public reasoning.22

The shift from consensus to issues, the conception of rationality as inquiry, the acknowledging of the constitutive role of articulative processes, the pluralization of publics and the focus on transformative processes are four important traits which characterize a pragmatist conception of public reason. According to this reading, a public is a dynamic entity: it is not identified once and for all by some substantive traits (the belonging to a racial, linguistic, cultural, geographical or political community) but is functionally defined in terms of who is effectively involved by the consequences of a certain type of action.23 Therefore, the public should not be considered, like in traditional theories of representation, as a pre-constituted collective subject legitimated to advance political claim but rather as the outcome of a political quest.24 The implications of this passage are not merely political but also epistemological: the pragmatist approach to justification and consensus, in fact, relies on this particular conception of the community as a dynamic and shifting public. In this perspective, the State (using this expression to identify all kinds of governmental and representative institutions) appears to be only one among many other possible forms of public, characterized by the presence of “official representatives to care for the interests of the public” (LW 2: 259). Therefore, “the public forms a state only by and through officials and their acts” (LW 2: 277).

Dewey has this dynamic variation in mind when he claims that a public should not be defined in advance of public action and of identification of public issues: in politics, “the prime difficulty … is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interest” (LW 2: 327). Scattered, mobile, and manifold: a public is not a self-consistent collective entity being part of the furniture of the world; it is something that comes to existence by way of an action that subsequently—but not at the time of the action itself—will be considered as the public’s action. This conclusion follows from the definition of the public as the result of the acknowledgement of consequences indirectly affecting people. The acknowledgment of this fact is inseparable—and, indeed, it coincided with—the success in reconstructing the community that is affected by a given problem. The construction of the community, to this extent, is the outcome of a successful process of inquiry aimed at developing awareness of belonging to a single horizon of interrelated dependence and shared participation; it is a successful attempt at expanding the community of those that agree on the definition of the problem.25 Therefore, a relevant task of democratic theory is to account for the many ways in which something like a public can emerge from the scattered pro-
literation of consequences in an intersubjective context. Such a theory should be sensitive to historical variability and be focused on the fact that what counts are not bare consequences but perceived consequences. This thesis might be considered to weaken the pragmatist account of public reason and to expose it to a subjectivist drift, as it seems to introduce relativity and arbitrariness in normative theory. But a closer look shows that it is entirely consistent with the conception of rationality as inquiry. It is, in fact, a corollary of the fallibilist outlook of naturalistic epistemology.

Abandoning the justificatory project has consequences that might disturb contemporary readers but that seem nevertheless conceptually unavoidable: acceptance of a naturalistic framework, associated with the acknowledgment that all knowledge is intrinsically fallible, and that human values are shaped from within social context in order to orient agency, implies that we have to accept that even central pillars of contemporary democratic culture are but the fallible outcome of historical processes of problem solving. With reference to the secular separation of State and Church, Dewey remarks that its emergence is precisely related to a change in the collective evaluation of consequences: “as long as the prevailing mentality thought that the consequences of piety and irreligion affected the entire community, religion was of necessity a public affair” (LW 2: 266). If publicity is tied to perception, and if social conditions change accordingly, then we cannot expect to provide definitive justifications for our preferred political institutions and values: we have rather to expect that changes in the social situation will bring about also radical social transformations. Defense of political institutions and principles, once we abandon the myth of a foundational philosophy, is entirely confined to the hands of immanent criticism: as there is nothing outside the context of practice (only a broader context of practice), then our guiding beliefs should be considered as the provisional results of human efforts in dealing with changing situations. Such a form of contextualism does not throw pragmatists into the hands of dogmatic or radical relativism. As I will show in part three of the book, a pragmatic conception of objectivity prevents such a threat from succeeding, as it fulfills the epistemic requirements of normative practices. Indeed, history and experience offer can provide adequate grounds for backing the normative practices through which the values and institutions that are at the core of democratic life are engaged in the here and now of problematic situations.

This dynamic conception of the notion of public has a further consequence, which concerns the role played by inquiry in its constitution. As the public does not denote a mere collection of individuals identified through external criteria, but a self-aware community, public reason is composed by at least two dimensions: an objective dimension referring to the events that produce the consequences affecting the agents (exploitation of children in workplaces, pollution of a given area, racial/religious/gender discrimination, etc.), and a subjective di-
chernantion concerning the shared awareness displayed by a plurality of people acknowledging to be affected by the same consequences. Accordingly, inquiry fulfills its public function in two related ways: through the theoretical study of how consequences (direct or indirect, intended or unintended) affect a plurality of individuals and also through the practical work of raising awareness, in order to cause operating consequences to be perceived.

As a consequence of this approach, the idea of public reason that emerges from Dewey’s writings is considerably different from that which dominates current debates in political philosophy, not only because of its larger extension, but also because of its deeper context-dependence and because of its capacity to assume its own transformative responsibility. In a pragmatist’s perspective, we are confronted with a public use of reason whenever both the following conditions are satisfied: (a) a public is objectively and subjectively identified (reference to the shared and perceived nature of consequences) and (b) problems that concern it are faced through the use of rational means (resort to inquiry in order to face the problematic situation). Dewey adds two further conditions, intended as criteria for determining the degree of democracy of an institution trying to organize itself into a public. From the perspective of the individuals, a democratic public is one that grants to each individual “a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain” (LW 2: 328). With regard to the aggregate, a group is a democratic public if it is able to free “the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common” (ibid.). It should be noted that in a pragmatist perspective consequences (and not rights or other intrinsic properties of individuals) are the explaining factor in the use of public reason. Accordingly, values and other conceptual entities are defined with reference to their function in the organization of experience rather than as pre-defined. This has huge implications on philosophical issues like those of legitimacy and justification: notably, it puts into question the very idea that the task of philosophy should consist in providing justifications (or foundations) for existing institutions, ideals or norms. This is, indeed, a task that continues to exhaust the energies of a great part of political philosophers.

From Liberalism to Pragmatism

In order to better grasp the distinctive traits of the pragmatist account of public reason sketched so far, I will compare it with the three dominant conceptions of public reason in contemporary political theory: (a) the classical liberal conception of the public as the space of shared reasonable beliefs; (b) the discursive conception of the public as an enlarged sphere characterized by the rational use
of discourse; (c) the critical theory account of public reason as the political answer to conditions of oppression.27

The Dualism of the Public and the Private

In the liberal tradition, epistemic conditions of validity for public rationality are defined through the opposition of the public to the private use of reason (a conception to be found in the liberal tradition from Hobbes and Locke to this day).28 Most of the liberal tradition shares the idea that the public use of reason is legitimate as long as it respects certain requirements which guarantee its impartiality. This is the idea of publicity that dominates the liberal tradition and which has become of central importance especially since the work of John Rawls. This idea stems from the long-lasting commitment of liberalism to the autonomy of the self. But it is also rooted in a strong epistemological conception of human reason as divided into a private and a public realm. At the heart of this distinction lies the intuition that, while the use of reason in its private form is selfishly subjected to individual drives and therefore liable to producing conflict and disagreement, access to its public use enables a universal understanding which alone provides a reliable basis for social life.

The idea of such a dualism is already present in the philosophical work of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and spans the entire liberal tradition.29 Here I will briefly present it with reference to its recent account by John Rawls. In Rawls’s philosophy, the dualism of the private and the public is formulated as an opposition between the rational and the reasonable, with the latter standing for the public use of reason and the rational for its private use. Rawls defines private reason through the paradigm of instrumental rationality as “a conception of rational advantage of each participant, what they, as individuals, try to claim.” Private reason is defined as the ability to pursue with efficacy an end, no matter what it is,30 while public reason is identified by the capacity to reason from a common standpoint, the function of which is to free the individual from his particular perspective in order to identify the collective aim worthy of being pursued. Private reason can be altruistic (whenever the interest I pursue is the well-being of another person) but cannot be intersubjective.31 It cannot, therefore, work toward the construction of the common good. Public reason, or reasonableness, is then introduced in order to provide a suitable epistemic basis to a particular form of reasoning that takes place when an interaction aims at instituting fair terms of cooperation. This requires two conditions: (a) the willingness “to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation” and (b) the readiness “to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so” (Rawls 1996: 49). Intersubjectivity is then defined in terms of reciprocity: human reason attains its public functioning whenever it operates on grounds that all agents can accept.
We can grasp the strong continuity in liberal thinking in the long lasting idea that human rationality has an intrinsically asocial nature expressed by its private use (a use which, as Rawls observes, aims not only at identifying the most efficacious means for given ends, but also at choosing among competing ends). In order to overcome their deep disagreements, human agents must therefore give up their private reasons and engage in a different way of thinking characterized by the fact that they appeal only to reasons that are shared by all (reasons that nobody could reasonably be expected to reject, in the classical liberal wording). As Rawls remarks, the meaning of the concept of public as referred to reason is threefold\(^{32}\) (Rawls 1996: 213): (a) its subject is the public: it is constituted by the whole group of beliefs that are shared by all citizens (in virtue of those beliefs being ones that no individual could reasonably reject); (b) its object is the common good: it aims at defining the basic structure of a democratic society; (c) its content is public: it consists of those assumptions that are implicit in the political culture of a democratic society and therefore assumed to be shared by all (under the presupposition of reciprocity).

Public reason, therefore, speaks with a universal voice and addresses common problems starting from shared assumptions and referring to shared criteria of assessment (a theme that accompanies Rawls’ thinking from the Theory of Justice to the subsequent theory of political liberalism and to his later revisions of the idea of public reason).\(^{33}\) Justification, in fact, “is addressed to others that disagree with us, and therefore it must always proceed from some consensus, that is from premises that we and others recognize as true” (Rawls 1985: 229). Public reason identifies all the shared beliefs that constitute the common framework for making public decisions, according to a deductive paradigm of rationality. Public reason can operate only against the background of such a shared set of premises, that is, from the vantage point of a neutral point of view which is the outcome of a process of purification through which human reason is freed from all traits that can be ascribed to individual identities. Public reason denotes this necessary common ground without which intersubjectivity is impeded and agreement cannot be reached. As John Dryzek has remarked, “public reason is a set of commitments that individuals must adopt before they enter the public arena, not what they will be induced to discover once they are there” (Dryzek 2000: 15).

As can be seen even from this short sketch, pragmatism and liberalism are grounded in two radically different epistemologies; refusal of the dualism of the private and the public and willingness to conceive of public reason as a deliberative arena are the main traits that distinguish the pragmatist from the liberal conception of public reason.

**Publicity as a Property of the Discursive Sphere**
A different account of the public dimension of reason is offered by Jürgen Habermas, notably in his groundbreaking work on the origin of the modern public sphere. His speaking of a public sphere rather than of a public reason is quite revelatory of the fact that we are confronted with a rather different idea of what constitutes the public character of reason. The most relevant innovation introduced by the notion of a public sphere concerns the acknowledgment that beliefs about public life have an inescapably dynamic nature: the public sphere is conceived not as the institutional arena where competing individual interests find a compositional order but as the social sphere where individual beliefs concerning the public dimension of life are constantly formed and unformed. Habermas includes in his account of public rationality a strongly transformative perspective that brings him close to the pragmatist tradition well before his later more explicitly pragmatist turn. In addition, in his account of the process of belief-formation is given primacy over the process of belief-justification.

However, this transformative stance is formulated in linguistic terms, as the public sphere is mainly conceived as being discursive: it is a realm of discourses oriented toward agreement. Public opinion, then, more than public reason, seems to be the adequate category for grasping the content of Habermas’s understanding. The public sphere, as Nancy Fraser puts it, “designates a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (Fraser 1992: 110). Discourses are emancipated from practices and rationality is separated from agency to become an attribute of discourses: it denotes discourses which respect given procedural constraints. A second relevant difference from the liberal account is the broader range of contexts to which public reason can be applied. According to Habermas, in fact, the public use of reason is not confined to the formal context of institutional practice (governmental, parliamentary and judicial) but extends over to what he calls the informal public sphere. This broadening is so evident and the recognition of the importance of the informal public sphere so great that it could even be possible to conceive the public sphere as being external and somehow opposite to the state (see Fraser 1992 and Cohen-Arato 1992).

These differences notwithstanding, Habermas shares with Rawls the idea that in order to rise from the private to the public use of reason—a mark, indeed, of the dualism of reason they both accept—a moral supplement is required. The injection of an ethical drive (Habermas speaks of solidarity, Rawls of reciprocity) is seen as the necessary condition for contrasting the insufficiency of a reason that, because of its private character, has no legitimacy where public issues are at hand. Like Rawls, Habermas sees public reason as requiring private reasoners to refrain from exercising their reasons in their own private interest. Only in that way can rational discourse attain the legitimacy which is required in order to ground public decisions and institutions. While in Rawls the egoism of private rationality is neutralized through the fiction of the veil of ig-
norance freeing each agent of his individual traits, in Habermas this same moralizing function is accomplished by procedural rules that inform and orient communicative public discourse.

Habermas’s discourse-centered democratic theory grounds democratic legitimacy in the institutionalization of procedures of public discussion and reasoning that are consistent with those discursive standards of rationality that he identified as the normative grounds of all discourses oriented toward communication. These are necessary procedural presuppositions of rational argument. Their respect constitutes the main requisite for a public use of reason. In this perspective, the public sphere is conceived as a space of dialogue among citizens in which every speech is governed by the ultimate telos of arriving at a form of agreement. Habermas’s model of public reason as communicative is centered on a purely linguistic understanding of rationality as the practice of exchanging reasons with the aim of producing consensus among people—and so assuring the coordination of social action—through reciprocal understanding (instead of coercion). As was the case with Rawls and more broadly with the classical liberal tradition, this communicative use of reason has to be understood through its opposition to a different conception of rationality, which Habermas, referring to the sociological tradition, calls strategic or instrumental and which is defined by the lack of reference to the intersubjective dimension of the coordination of social action. It is, in short, another avatar of the private vs. public dualism. The Habermasian approach to public reason is characterized by a focus on the procedural content of rationality: it identifies a list of criteria that should be respected in order to ensure that discussion is oriented toward communication rather than toward manipulation and that will enable us to distinguish a discourse conducted according to normative requirements—and thus able to claim legitimacy—from a discourse that is not.

While the familiarity of Habermas with pragmatism has often been noted, his Kantian-based epistemology puts him nevertheless at odds with some central tenets of pragmatist epistemology. With reference to the notion of public reason, it is notably the priority accorded to the linguistic dimension and the acceptance of the dualism of public and private reason that mostly contribute to differentiating Habermas’ thinking from a pragmatist account.

**Public Reason, Critical Theory, and the Critique of Actually Existing Democracies**

There is a third conception of public reason worth examining, which is shared by a wide range of political thinkers ranging from post-modernist to feminist thinking to subaltern studies via critical discourse theory. This wide array of conceptions is unified by an agonistic understanding of the public sphere as a political arena where reason and discourses are but some of the forces engaged
in the task of shaping collective agency, and where power (and its unmasking) becomes the primary focus of attention. While many of these thinkers acknowledge a deep indebtedness to Habermas (and some also to pragmatism), they tend to privilege discourse over rationality, and power over reason as the main explicative category of political theory. One of the most relevant achievements of this approach is an enlargement of the boundaries of the public sphere, associated, however, with a remarkable restriction of the prerogatives accorded to rationality at its core.

The main reason for this restriction has to be found in the fact that traditional universalistic models of rationality are criticized on a political rather than on an epistemological basis. Indeed, public reason is criticized not on epistemological grounds (as is the case with pragmatism) but according to the political argument that under its universal guises public reason hides particular interests and is the vehicle of forms of oppression: while claiming to speak with a universal voice, public reason unduly generalizes a particular interest (gender, class, race) at the expense of others and, in so doing, it masks real differences and sustains forms of oppression. While in Rawls and Habermas public reason is the most authentic expression of human rationality, in critical thinking it becomes the mask of power and the instrument of exploitation and exclusion. From this perspective, broadening the very notion of reason has a direct political implication: it aims at giving voice to all those instances that have been kept silent under the fiction of a universal public reason speaking with a single and universal voice.

The important key to critical theory is that its countermove is enacted in the same presupposition as Habermasian discourse theory, that is, a definition of reason through the notion of discourse: if rationality is discursive, then discourses can be claimed to be either the instrument of universal emancipation or of particular forms of domination. To speak rationally, and rationality as the attribute of a mode of linguistic expression, become therefore the focus of debate, as can be seen in many of the critiques that have addressed the rational/logical form of expression as being merely a form of distinction aimed at enforcing exploitation by western, bourgeois, white, adult, males of some minority group. If we, therefore, look at the parable going from Rawlsian political liberalism to critical theory, passing through discourse theory, we acknowledge an inverse relation between the breadth of the public sphere and the place assigned to reason in public affairs: while Rawlsian public reason was highly restricted in its scope but Olympic in its epistemological power (in the most classical sense), critical theorists broaden the notion of public reason at the expense of its epistemic relevance. The consequence of this move is that many of the normative positions included within the public sphere can hardly be called rational or be considered as genuine expressions of rationality.

The broadening of the public sphere accomplished by this heterogeneous group of scholars is realized along multiple and differentiated lines: (a) through
the pluralization of the forms of expression that are considered to be legitimate in the public arena (*pluralization of expressive forms*), (b) through the pluralization of the kind of discourses that can legitimately be admitted in the public arena (*pluralization of discourses*), and (c) through the pluralization of the forums where people meet and which are considered part of the public sphere (*pluralization of spheres*). According to the first way of broadening the public sphere, expressive forms such as greetings, visual communication, and personal narratives, should be given full citizenship in the public arena, as they express the voice of subaltern and exploited groups, while communicative rationality is said to express the voice of dominant bourgeoisie (Fraser 1992, Young 2000, esp. ch. 2). According to the second way of broadening the public sphere, public reason has to be broadened in order to include “artistic methods, arts of communication and arts of living, philosophical reflection, and therapeutic and educational methods” (Neubert 2008: 103–104), as these are legitimate discursive forms that shape public agency. Finally, according to the third way, the Habermasian preference for a single universal bourgeois public sphere should be given up in order to let a plurality of subaltern counterpublics flourish, in which counterdiscourses will be produced and circulated in order to affirm different and contrasting interpretations aimed at shaping identities (Fraser 1992).

In all these approaches, the refusal of the neutral or universal subject, which follows the acknowledgment of the inescapability of expressivist traits in rational discourses, is obtained through the dismissal of some of the central epistemic requirements implicit in the notion of public reason. Rationality is then progressively deprived of some of its distinguishing traits: by equating reason with other forms of utterance, or rational inquiry with other forms of discourse, or reducing public discourse to its role in shaping identity, we miss some distinctive traits which are nevertheless necessary if we wish to account for the role rationality plays in shaping and guiding not only private but also public agency and life. In what follows I will briefly review some contributions of critical theory in order to show the extent to which the political epistemology on which it relies is significantly different from the epistemology of practice that grounds the pragmatist understanding of public reason.

Iris Marion Young has proposed an insightful broadening of the concept of public sphere, making it hospitable to political struggles aiming to recognize, or to challenge, oppression. She notably considers that liberal public reason has systematically excluded relevant minorities from the public arena and, in order to counter this exclusivist trend, she claims that it is necessary to reconsider the very notion of public reason in order to make it less exclusionary. She claims that requirements of reasonableness should be weakened to include in the public arena expressive forms which, while not complying with strong epistemic requirements of public reason (e.g., Rawlsian and Habermasian), should nevertheless be considered as being part of public reason in order to let excluded groups
enter the public arena and stake their claims. Young has focused on three expressive forms which, according to her, should be included in our understanding of public reason: greeting, rhetoric, and narrative. Greeting refers to verbal acts through which recognition of the other takes place. Rhetoric refers to the affective dimension of discourse and to non-verbal forms of expression aimed at producing a persuasive effect inside the political arena. Narrative refers to biographical forms of expression through which individuals and groups make their experience a public concern (Young 2000: ch. 2). These expressive forms are the normative constituents of Young’s theory of inclusive deliberative democracy and, as such, are constitutive of her idea of public reason (Young 2000: 17–18). In a similar way, Nancy Fraser’s notion of subaltern counterpublics aims at pluralizing Habermas’ notion of public sphere in order to include in the public arena all discursive practices which operate in the constitution of the collective identities composing the post-bourgeois and multicultural society. In both cases, public reason no longer designates the neutral sphere advocated by liberals, but rather the agonistic arena where the perspectives of various groups face each other without the assurance of a common epistemic or methodological framework.

Young meets the pragmatist tradition in her recognition that there is no public sphere until a given problem becomes the object of a shared perception (Young 1990: 402). In the same way, Fraser points to the fact that conceptions of the good are always internal to the publics that express them, and that each public has to discover its own idea of the good, that is to say of what it will consider to be the matter of common concern. This thesis sets critical theory beyond classical identification of the public with the citizenry (an assumption common to most liberal theories) toward a conception of the public which, like that offered by pragmatism, is defined by all those that are affected by a given set of consequences. As Fraser puts it, “the all-affected principle holds that what turns a collection of people into fellow members of a public is not shared citizenship, but their co-imbrication in a common set of structures and/or institutions that affect their lives. For any given problem, accordingly, the relevant public should match the reach of those life-conditioning structures whose effects are at issue.” Critical theory and subaltern studies have done much work in showing that intersubjectivity is a condition for the emergence of public reason; they show that it is through encounters with others that our beliefs are challenged and confirmed or refuted, and our identity shaped.

However, the political imperative of opening the space of reason to the largest number of citizens—a political idea shared also by pragmatism—is sometimes seen as implying that we renounce strong requirements on the epistemic quality of the discourses. If each group and individual has a right to enter the public arena with the expressive resources it possesses, then every attempt to restrain the practice of public reason to given beliefs or procedures should be
avoided as containing in itself elements of oppression (cultural, social, ethnic) that the politics of difference aims precisely at removing. In the same way, if social and political reality is constructed through socially and politically context-bound discourses, then experimental inquiry does not have any epistemological priority but should be considered as being one among many other competing methods for fixing human beliefs (Rorty 1982: Introduction, Neubert 2008). The priority of inclusion over legitimacy explains the focus on the transformative dimension of public reason and the priority of the right to expression over the right of protection. While the liberal tradition takes as its starting point the assumption of equal citizens who possess equal rights that should be protected, the politics of difference starts from the acknowledgment of political oppression and sets out on the search for the political means needed in order to overcome it. As a consequence, right of voice is prioritized at the expense of stronger requirement on the epistemological quality of forms of expression.

The situatedness of public reason is therefore twofold. First, the subject of reason is a specific group speaking from a situated and specific perspective (and never from a universal or neutral point of view). As a consequence, discourse is considered to be public as long as it keeps track of its situatedness, and not when it removes it. The epistemic constraint of justification is replaced by a weaker hermeneutical requirement concerning the search for understanding: “for the content of an expression to be public does not entail that it is immediately understood by all, or that the principles to which argument appeals are accepted by all, but only that the expression aims in its form and content to be understandable and acceptable” (Young 2000, p. 25). Second, the content of public reason is public in a sense different from that conveyed by the Rawlsian conception: far from restraining its content to neutral reasons to be used within the institutional debate, it covers all beliefs and forms of expression which circulate in the multiple forums where political issues are debated, according to a model which, like the Deweyan model, is problem driven. While the focus of public reason in the liberal tradition is the justification of beliefs and their legitimacy and efficacy in a state of pluralism, according to critical theory public reason is concerned with conflicts over decisions and actions having an impact on people’s lives. Public reason does not proceed through appeal to supposedly uncontroversial universal principles, but by producing local decisions relying on contextual factors. According to this perspective, a public is not identified by the set of beliefs, institutions, or principles its members share, but by the fact that its members acknowledge to share some interests or to be concerned by the same problem.

These approaches are right to denounce the distortions generated by the idealizing model of reason that philosophers such as Rawls and Habermas have introduced into political discourse. They are right, too, to acknowledge that agents access the public sphere not as disembodied rational agents but as bearers
of an individual and social identity that shapes their participation in public life. From this perspective, a viable account of public reason has to take into consideration how social, cultural, political, and economic practices are intertwined with rational discourse. But the acknowledgment of the irreducibly practical nature of human reason, of its being a distinctive trait of human agency, cannot be adequately maintained unless we acknowledge also the specific traits that rationality brings to agency. In order to do this, we need to fix some clear limits to the pluralization of reason advocated by these theorists. Indeed, only in this way can the epistemic requirements of rationality be preserved. Critical thinking fails to comply with this last requirement by lack of an adequate understanding of public reason. Acknowledging the place of reason in the public sphere and explaining how rationality can remain public while not severing its constitutive relationship with the agents’ identities requires dropping the universal project of classical liberalism. But it requires, too, that we avoid blurring the epistemic boundaries separating reason from the other, non-rational, expressive forms. To this extent, a different epistemology is required.

**Public Inquiry and the Pragmatist Concept of Public Reason**

As I have tried to show, the contemporary scene of political philosophy offers three main conceptions of public reason. According to the first, public reason denotes beliefs which can be granted universal assent and, for this reason, can ground forms of reasoning that can deliver legitimate normative conclusions to be enforced upon a community. According to the second, the normative force of public reason depends upon respecting procedural constraints which guarantee that outcomes are not driven by selfish interests but rather by genuine commitment to the public good. According to the third, public legitimacy belongs to any form of expression which is used in the political affirmation of a collective claim (identity, need, right), provided it is not driven by violence but by the search for understanding.

Pragmatism offers a different account of public reason and, as a consequence, of the notion and functioning of the public sphere. A first important consequence of the pragmatist notion of rationality as inquiry is that it avoids to split rationality into a private and a public dimension. A second innovation concerns the function assigned to rationality in the functioning of the public sphere. While in the liberal and discursive traditions rationality is aimed mainly at identifying the reasons that can legitimately be used by citizens in their public deliberations, pragmatism sees rationality as a tool for problem solving: the use of reason is not justificational but issue-oriented and problem-driven. Indeed, both the classical liberal and the discursive approaches assign to rationality a justifi-
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catory task: its goal is to justify existing institutions or beliefs such as democracy or the idea of liberty, rather than to solve specific controversies related to the governance of the social world. The idea of citizens engaged in a coercion-free discussion aimed at producing a justification for given institutions, compared to the pragmatist idea of a process of inquiry aimed at identifying and debating specific issues, shows the main points of divergence between the two traditions. While liberalism shares with discursive theory an exclusivist concern for the discursive or linguistic dimension of politics, pragmatism insists in claiming the full relevance of human practices in the normative functioning of public reason. Moreover, while the liberal tradition locates public reason in the methodological context of the pluralism of beliefs and the conflicts to which they are subjected in the modern era, pragmatism locates public reason in the context of concrete and pluralistic practices, focusing its use on the assessment of consequences affecting social life. In so doing, pragmatism relocates public reason on the ground of practice.

A further aspect of the difference between these two accounts can be seen in the different appreciation of a common theme, that is, the introduction of a reflective element at the heart of the concept of reason. But while in Habermas the reflexivity stands for the critical attitude of reason in questioning its own presuppositions, in pragmatism the reflexive stance expresses a relationship between the individual, the situation and the experimentally public nature of inquiry. In Habermas the idea of a public sphere is closely connected with a discursive understanding of rationality. The use of reason, in its instrumental and especially in its communicative dimension, is mainly seen as the practice of exchanging reasons. The public sphere is certainly enlarged compared to the Rawlsian notion, but it extends to the broader society only in so far as society develops forms of communication and discussion that respect given discursive standards. The development of a public sphere is then connected with the diffusion of this discursive practice. From this perspective, the public sphere is the place where discourses are exchanged and where people debate political issues in a manner that is subject to procedural rules, the first of which is the publicity made possible by broadened access to information. In the critical tradition these limitations of the liberal tradition are clearly identified and overcome. In particular, the dualism of the public and the private is fully criticized. However, as I have shown, this critique relies on political rather than on epistemological arguments. In addition, the justificatory project is rejected and replaced with a more contextualized project of critique of actually existing democracies whose aim is transformative rather than foundational. However, from a pragmatist perspective these positive aspects are generally accompanied by a too rapid dismissal of the prerogatives of rationality in human agency, private and public. The appeal to the principle of difference, to the right of expression and inclusion and to the hermeneutical paradigm of understanding, in fact, are an inadequate basis for
providing a full account of public reason. The critical idea of public reason, as a consequence, lacks the epistemological resources that are necessary for enabling it to address questions of legitimacy and of normative validity.

Critical theorists have criticized classical liberal paradigms of public reason for relying on too formal a model of rationality, which has exclusionary consequences that democratic theory should avoid. Pragmatism shares this critique but is persuaded that this critical stance overlooks epistemological requirements that should be preserved in order to shape policies according to goals and by resorting to means that can best support the flourishing of a society. Pragmatism joins critical theory in claiming that the use of public reason cannot be made depend upon the sharing of some universal beliefs or principles, nor on the adoption of some conceptual framework a priori considered to be shared by all. The inescapability of the fact of pluralism, of the inhibitory effects of oppression, and of the fragmentation of identities imply that traditional conceptions of rationality such as those of Rawls and Habermas are not adequate for providing a normative account of how rationality should guide political practice. But the solution, according to pragmatism, cannot consist in replacing rationality with expressive and rhetorical forms of expression, nor inquiry with communication, discourses and narrative, but rather in developing a conception of rationality capable of taking into account the experiential conditions within which public reason operates. Communication and narrative are certainly powerful resources at play in public spaces, but their role should not be confused with that of rationality. In particular, their role should not be overestimated in the domain of justificatory practices.45

Pragmatism, as I have claimed so far, assigns this task to inquiry. The idea of a political form of inquiry offers the preliminary basis for a pragmatist theory of public reason. How, then, can the pragmatist notion of inquiry deal with the problems faced by its main competitors? We have seen that critics such as Young highlight the political importance of forms of expression which do not follow the calm, reflective and argumentative modes of inquiry. Similarly, other critics advocate, for the same reasons, the legitimacy of bringing into the public arena discursive disciplines such as arts, literature or cinema, a proposal which, once again, does not respect the minimal epistemological requirement that the notion of inquiry imposes on practices aimed at publicly fixing beliefs, as these disciplines do not comply with fallibilist and experimental constraints. We have also seen that the notion of publicity that grounds the pragmatist notion of public reason is not based upon some a priori form of agreement (shared beliefs, principles, procedures or framework). Rather, it relies on the openness of inquiry to inspection and participation, under the requirement of experimental practice, in order to carefully take into account the measured or expected consequences of a decision.
The pragmatist solution to the problem highlighted by critical theory consists in distinguishing two different epistemic dimensions of human reasoning, which, while being both constitutive aspects of the process of inquiry and part of the public sphere, should nevertheless be kept separate for purposes of analysis. The first consists in the *experimental* dimension of inquiry, whose outcome is the controlled hypothesis concerning the action to be undertaken. The second consists in the *expressive* dimension through which participants are challenged, listened to, etc., in order to gather and produce data and information relevant for the advancement of the issue (identification of the issue, construction of the public, devising of the solution). This expressive dimension, which includes the articulative and the transformative stances introduced in the previous chapter, is subjected to less stringent requirements, as its function is not the formulation of experimentally sound hypotheses but rather that of making explicit previously unknown traits of the situation which will have to be worked out in order to come to a final deliberation. The notion of expressive inquiry is therefore hospitable to discursive forms of narrative and self-expression which are often crucial for giving voice to silenced groups, provided that assessment of their public relevance will subsequently be made through forms of analysis which respect to epistemological requirements of publicity. Indeed, according to pragmatic epistemology, articulation is only the first step of inquiry, which must therefore be completed through further steps aiming at the formulation and testing of the experiential hypothesis.

Once the deep implications of the articulative and transformative dimensions of rationality are acknowledged, it becomes easier to see the rational properties of processes of inquiry by means of which political issues are shaped and political values created through the progressive determination of a problematic and undetermined situation. Political actions, such as the definition of private violence as a public issue, or the new categorization of some previously existing behavior as “sexual harassment” are typical outcomes of an expressive form of inquiry through which new concepts are forged and attitudes toward a given dimension of reality are transformed. As Dewey remarked long ago, “The worse or evil is a rejected good,” and processes of inquiry and deliberation have a decisive role in shaping our normative conceptions. On a more general basis, pragmatism claims that in order to attain the political goals set by critical theory, we need not weaken the role of rationality to make room for other expressive forms. Rather, the notion of rationality should be transformed in order to account for the rational properties of expressive discursive processes. In doing this, we legitimize them by their inclusion in the reflective process aimed at finding solutions to problems. This move avoids dualistic oppositions of argumentative against other expressive forms, which impede the understanding of the specific logic of reasoning in human practices. By acknowledging that expressive actions are phases of inquiry, and by identifying their logical function, we reinforce our
understanding of the place of reason in human agency. Therapeutic disciplines, art, rhetorical forms of expression, irony, etc., do indeed play an important role in shaping people’s identities, in raising consciousness and also in changing our understanding of events. And yet their importance notwithstanding, such expressive forms do not comply with the requirements of public reason, as they do not comply with the justificatory requirements of deliberative processes. Therefore, if we want to preserve the conceptual coherence of the notion of public reason and if we intend to acknowledge the function that rationality plays in making human agency intelligible and controlled, we need an epistemological framework that is different from that provided by critical theory.48

Contestation and Controversy as Public Forms of Disagreement

In this last section I will address a question that I should have discussed earlier, but which the order of exposition requires me to discuss here. It is the question of the extent to which disagreement can be considered to be also a political and not merely a moral category. In the last section of this chapter I have offered a definition of moral disagreement: examination of consequences, in contrast with logical analysis of value propositions, opens the road for intersubjective discussion, negotiation of outcomes, the search for shared solutions. To this dimension, which is essential in any project aiming at subtracting disagreement from an exclusively moral determination, I would like to add another one. Following recent trends in Science and Technology Studies,49 I propose to call this dimension “controversy.” Adopting a different meaning from definitions in use in STS, I propose to call controversy any form of public conflict among opposing parties over a specific issue. This definition helps in focusing the pragmatist general notion of problem or problematic situation in a way that favors its application to the conception of public inquiry that I defend.

Controversy is the general form taken by disagreement in public contexts: *a political controversy is a form of disagreement whose consequences affect individuals beyond the private sphere*. Controversies are therefore part of the process through which a public emerges: from the scattered perception of given consequences through the contested formation of issues, to the formulation of a judgment/decision/request aimed at settling the controversy that gives the situation its problematic character. The notion of controversy contributes to reinforce the pragmatist conception of public reason as being processive: in the study of controversies we see public reason at play as the process through which issues emerge as relevant items for the political agenda, are recognized, and are faced in the search for adequate solutions.
In defining political problem solving as controversy, I am merely extending to political forms of inquiry the general epistemological paradigm set out by Dewey. This means, notably, taking seriously the idea that inquiry is the process through which the determination of the subject and predicate that will constitute final judgment takes place, and that the object of knowledge is not conceptually given before inquiry takes place but is always “in the making.” As Dewey epitomizes in the note written as the introduction of his *Essays in Experimental Logic*, “the object of knowledge is not something with which thinking sets out, but something with which it ends: something which the processes of inquiry and testing, that constitute thinking, themselves produce” (MW 10: 368). The spatio-temporal extension of inquiry enables us to conceive also public reason as a spatially and temporally extended process. Clear identification of an issue, definition of its terms, and the search for a proper solution are, to this extent, merely the practical counterparts of those “phases or emphases” that, according to Dewey, constitute any judgment.50 Already implicit in this epistemological conception of rational inquiry is the idea that one of the main functions of inquiry is the progressive determination of an initially undetermined situation where the issue at stake is difficult to grasp: competing settings of the situation are offered, competing analyses are advanced, varying identifications of “who” is concerned follow one after the other. According to the epistemology of practice, this is the general, standard condition in which human inquiry takes place. It is, therefore, the natural condition in which rationality—private and public—is exercised.

The notion of controversy integrates perfectly into this epistemological outlook and offers interesting insight for a pragmatist understanding of public reason. This notion—pragmatically re-fashioned—helps to make at least three traits more explicit: The first one is the adoption of a broader conception of the process of political decision making as taking place in different sites, at different times, and engaging different types of agents. The second trait is the privileged focus on issues as the aggregating factors of political practice. The third is the adoption of a broader conception of political practice, not restricted to merely discursive activities, yet attentive to the epistemic quality of discourses.

With reference to the first trait, controversies are the appropriate locations for the deployment of inquiry: different agents operate at different times in different places, all partaking in the complex and distributed task of transformatory practice. While pragmatism does not explicitly advocate a distributed understanding of practice, it is fully compatible with it, inasmuch as no reason obliges us to consider inquiry as the activity of an individual human agent. STS explicitly extends the Peircean notion of a collective subject of inquiry, opening the notion of community to extra-scientific (professional, economic, ordinary, etc.) and even non-human agents (“actants” in Latour’s terminology) in a way partially foreshadowed by Dewey. In this light, the public sphere has to be seen as composed of intertwined and spatio-temporally extended controversies in which pol-
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...iticians, journalists, academics, citizens, institutions, associations, etc., are involved in the definition of the issues and in the search for reasonable—although often contextual—solutions that could restore proper conditions for making community life viable. Public reason refers to this complex set of practices and discourses where the controversy takes place and agents are involved in defending and advancing their positions.

Concerning the second trait, issues are considered to be the elements around which a public forms and gathers. This definition builds on Dewey’s notion of the public but extends beyond it, making the processive, transitional nature of “issues” more explicit. While this aspect was already implicit in Dewey’s epistemology, and notably in his idea of the indeterminate nature of problematic situations and in his conception of the object of knowledge, recent researches within the STS tradition have made the constructive and aggregative power of issues more explicit. In a way never explicitly formulated by classical pragmatism but consistent with it, STS scholars show how through controversies new publics are generated, that is to say that the very existence of problems (issues) gives birth to publics (is public-raising). Issues are constructed by these theorists as situations in the Deweyan sense. Joining these perspectives we see public reason at work any time a controversy about shared perceived consequences emerges. It is at work in the preliminary phases of issue-formation, when some agents might deny that a given issue has political relevance (or that it even exists as an issue), while others gather data to prove that the issue is momentous. As a consequence, one of the first tasks of public reason consists in enabling the transition from what is presently a mere matter of dispute to what will later be a matter of fact. Bringing an issue to the political agenda, making it be acknowledged as being a or the problem, leading people to acknowledge that the consequences related to the issue affect their lives in a way that calls for common action, is part of that extended process of political inquiry that we can call “public reason,” according to this pragmatist interpretation.

The third trait highlighted above puts into focus the dangers and limitations of several “practice-based” approaches, whose conception of practice does not take the normative dimension into adequate consideration. Here the notion of controversy unleashes all its epistemic potential as it refers explicitly to forms of disagreement in rational inquiry: a controversy emerges when claims about matters of fact become contested and counter-claims are advanced in order to state a different interpretation of the issue at hand. Public reason, in this perspective, can be seen as an attribute of practice based processes engaging real actors in real problematic situations, while at the same time it enables agents to qualify some practices as being rational. The political goal of the control of consequences, in fact, is pursued through the positing, setting, and—eventually—resolving of contested issues on a basis that, at least in principle, is open to rational scrutiny. The notion of controversy, so conceived, helps to incorporate the
political factors of conflict, recognition, and control of consequences within public reason. At the same time, it does not rule the rational, deliberative dimension out of the heart of political practice. This constitutes a clear advantage with reference, for example, to critical theory, as too often critical theory obtains its remarkable grasp of political processes at the price of losing sight of the rightful place and importance of the rational processes of issue formation, issue resolution, and justification.52

The controversial nature of problematic situations qualifies them as being epistemically loaded: the problematic dimension can be formulated in terms of contrasting beliefs which block agency and require inquiry in order to restore a condition of agreement. Moreover, the study of controversies helps us understand how the work of inquiry proceeds in practice: by articulating the indeterminate situation, inquiry contributes to the formation of contrasting positions that give shape to the issue and, successively, helps to keep this discursive dimension alive. While not denying the powerful play of interests, prejudices, and other non-rational drives, the notion of controversy helps maintaining the public space open, as long as it maintains that conflicts, under the guise of “controversies,” can be faced through rational means.

The displacement of politics produced by the issue-oriented and consequence-based conception of political practice and by the pluralization of publics requires a stronger notion of public reason than the classical liberal, discursive, and critical ones. Once, in fact, the political sphere has been so broadly extended beyond institutional domains, it becomes problematic to define its boundaries and to assess the democratic quality of an increased plurality of forms of political debate, decision, and action. In this context, the idea of a public sphere made out of controversies and the idea of public reason as a form of inquiry devoted to the identification, discussion and settlement of issues can be a useful guide for deciding when a discussion, a contestation, etc. can be said to be part of the democratic process. Pragmatist public reason, to this extent, appears to be a suitable candidate for this task, insofar as (a) it is based on the epistemological model of inquiry; (b) it is oriented toward issue-solution rather than legitimate representation; (c) it is based on a transformative conception of the public use of reason; and (d) it is committed to a practical treatment of specific controversies. It is with the tools of this epistemological framework that, in the next part of the book, I will address the issues of relativism, moral objectivity and justification.

Notes
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1. The notion of controversy is introduced here as the political equivalent of moral disagreement. The notion of controversy is explored at greater length in the last section of this chapter.

2. This approach offers an answer to those critiques that consider pragmatism to be too oriented toward a naive consensual theory of political practice (See Mouffe 2000, Neubert 2008, Fraser 1998). By acknowledging the deep nature of conflict and disagreement, without, however, giving up hope of solving it through rational means, expressive inquiry makes room for conflict at the core of rational processes of public deliberation.

3. Critical remarks along these lines can be found in the work of many contemporary philosophers. An account of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy along these lines is offered in Frega 2012a. For a critique of the instrumental paradigm of rationality from a pragmatist perspective see Frega 2006b. See also, from a different perspective, Richardson 1994 and 2002.


5. This theme runs from the classical liberal sources of Hobbes and Locke through contemporary liberal scholars. For a survey, see Gaus 2003.

6. Bohman 2007 discusses in a partially similar way the political implications of the pragmatist passage from a politics of demos to a politics of publics. For a very perceptive reading of the political significance of Dewey’s appeal to the public, see Honneth 1998.

7. I will not discuss here the impact of this approach on issues of global governance, although it is quite evident that whereas the political community of those concerned and the territorial forms of representation do not coincide, the question of the legitimacy of decision making becomes explicitly intertwined with that of the extension of consequences. On the one hand, in a globally wired world the indirect consequences of actions tend to multiply and to become rapidly too vast to be controlled through territorially democratic procedures. On the other hand, it is precisely in a globalized world that the principle of territorial sovereignty becomes inadequate, as consequences of actions extend beyond territorial boundaries. On the necessity to take into consideration the widest range of those affected by consequences while at the same time defining thresholds of impact of consequences, see Held 2004: ch. 6.

8. “The essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them” (LW 2: 252); “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (LW 2: 246). Further on: “the public itself, being unable to forecast and estimate all consequences, establishes certain dikes and channels so that actions are confined within prescribed limits, and insofar have moderately predictable consequences” (LW 12: 268). For a recent attempt at developing a pragmatist approach to political theory directly inspired by Dewey’s conception of consequences and of experimentalism as a basis for political decision making and for the justification of political institutions, see Knight–Johnson 2011.

10. In a way still needing to be explored, the notion of “controversy” as it is developed in the STS tradition—and notably by Bruno Latour—plays a role in political philosophy which is analogous to that played by disagreement in moral philosophy.

11. Koopman 2009 totally fails to grasp this point.

12. As Dewey has stated it with reference to general epistemology, in political inquiry, too, the object of knowledge (and practice) has to be considered as being the output, and not the input of the process of inquiry. On Dewey’s theory of the “object of knowledge,” see Dicker 1972.

13. This point is articulated well by some critical theorists, as well as by scholars in the STS tradition. One has to recall that the same awareness was at the root of the Chicago School in Sociology, and that it gave rise to its distinctive approach to social problems. It should be noted, however, that all these traditions are indebted to Dewey’s transactional and social conception of experience, either directly or via Mead’s appraisal of Dewey’s ideas.

14. Honneth has clearly identified, in the opposition between agency (joint problem solving) and discourse, the main difference between the concept of public reason of the critical theorist and that of the pragmatist: “The political sphere is not—as Hannah Arendt and, to a lesser degree, Habermas believe—the place for a communicative exercise of freedom but the cognitive medium with whose help society attempts, experimentally, to explore, process, and solve its own problems with the coordination of social action” (Honneth 1998: 775).

15. Concepts of public and publicity must be kept distinct, even if they are strongly related. It is useful to indicate the similarities to and differences from other notions of publicity, e.g. the Arendtian one. If the idea of a strong correlation between public reason and full accessibility is generally acknowledged, Dewey’s originality lies in the fact that the constraint of publicity is considered to be an attribute of consequences and not of decisions (power) or discussion (discourse).

16. I disagree with McAfee’s statement that Dewey’s notion of public cannot be plural (McAfee 2008: ch. 6). As I will show, publics are plural not merely according to a multicultural perspective; they are structurally plural because the world we inhabit is organized according to multilayered and evolving systems of consequences which affect the constructions of collective identities and, therefore, of publics. The pluralization of publics in Dewey can be understood also in reference to Mead’s pluralization of the “generalized other.”

17. Noelle McAfee, who has a narrative conception of the public, states that “the public can find itself, or to put it more aptly, make itself by coming together to talk about the pressing problems of the day, to identify their sources, see how the problems differentially affect others, and try to decide together what should be done” and that “individuals become a public when they come together, with their individual opinions, preferences, and complaints, and begin to talk together” (MacAfee 2008: 115–116). I have already explained why I consider discursive models insufficient especially at the normative level; indeed, discourses and narratives can surely help shape a public, and they are often powerful supports to this task. Yet if the performative making of a public has to rely on the correct identification of consequences, inquiry constitutes a necessary ingredient of politics. I take on the issue of the epistemic relevance of narratives again in Chapter 7.

19. See Held 2004 for the notion of the concept of a multilevel citizenship, and Bohman 2007 for a similar pluralization of the concept of demos.
20. This approach has dominated the liberal debate of the last three decades and that has come to be identified, following Gerald Gaus, as “justificatory liberalism.”
21. In Dewey’s words, “the formation of states must be an experimental process” (LW 2: 256).
22. McAfee 2004 shows clearly the impact of the pragmatist approach to public reason—as opposed to Rawlsian and Habermasian approaches—on conceptions and practices of deliberative democracy.
23. A similar conception of the public can be found in the work of Iris Marion Young. I discuss these and similar approaches in the next section.
24. The upshot of this conception is a reversal of the relationship between agent and action: the collective action constitutes the collective agent. Therefore, the collective agent is at the same time the spring of the action and its outcome.
25. This theme was also developed by Mead in his social philosophy. See also Cavell’s re-interpretation of this theme at the epistemological level of his theory of rationality (a theme I examine in Frega 2012a), and his well known statement that “the wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason” (Cavell 1979: 20).
26. Both conditions have recently been taken into serious consideration by theories of deliberative democracy. For an account which considers these two dimensions, see Dryzek 2000, Niemeyer 2002, Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007.
27. For a different taxonomy of non-pragmatist conceptions of public reason, see Ferree, Gamson, Gerhardt, Rucht 2002.
28. For a complete account, see Gaus 2003. For a critical appraisal, see Frega 2007. The idea of impartiality and universality as attributes of reason is common also to the whole British tradition of Empiricism, where it plays a very similar role in preserving reason from the selfish outcomes of its private functioning. Cf. Raphael 2007 for an account of the genesis of the category of impartiality as an attribute of reason from Hume to Smith.
29. The criticism of the dualism of the private and the public that I am advancing on pragmatist grounds is mainly epistemological: its focus is not the public/private divide as such—as is the case for example in critical theory—but the specific understanding of rationality that is presupposed by liberal epistemology and on which liberal political philosophy is built.
30. In Rawls’s words: “the rational … applies to a single, unified agent … with the powers of judgment and deliberation in seeking ends and interests peculiarly its own” Rawls 1996: 50.
32. Properly speaking, the criteria are only two, as the first and second criteria can be reduced to one, the second depending clearly on the first.
33. See my reconstruction of this theme in Frega 2012a.
34. This exclusively discursive definition of the public sphere can be found also at the bottom of new concepts such as those of “transnational public sphere” or “global public sphere,” which focus precisely on the new discursive arenas which are made possible by the development of new media technologies (mainly web based) and which are there-

35. “Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations,” (Habermas 2002: 9).

36. It is not by chance, then, that those who have attempted to develop empirical tools for measuring the degree of rationality of practical deliberation have turned toward Habermas in order to find a theoretical framework for their enterprise. Cf. especially Steenberg et al. 2003.

37. I will not discuss here the more pragmatically oriented turn that characterizes Habermas’s writing since the de-trascendentalizing move accomplished in the mid-nineties (see notably Habermas 2002). My aim here is not to provide a complete assessment of Habermas’s philosophy but rather to highlight the main differences between two competing paradigms in moral and political epistemology. For a more general assessment of the relationships between Habermas and pragmatism see Bernstein’s view of Habermas’s “Kantian Pragmatism” in Bernstein 2010.

38. See the critical remarks of Fraser in Fraser 1992: 110.

39. I take this term in Bourdieu’s sense.

40. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Mouffe 2000, Laclau and Mouffe 1985) provide a clear example of how the refusal of the classical model of rationality can give rise to an antirationalistic approach that opposes language games to argumentative foundation (Mouffe 2000: 11–12). Pragmatist public reason, as we have seen, is similarly critical of the classical model of foundational rationality, but leaves much broader prerogatives to the use of reason in politics and justification.

41. See also works from, to name a very few, Nancy Fraser, Chantal Mouffe, Sheyla Benhabib, who are all aware of pragmatism but tend to distance themselves from this tradition.

42. Fraser 2007: 23. Her question “why not apply the all affected principle directly to the framing of publicity, without going through the detour of citizenship?” (Fraser 2007: 21) is in line with the pragmatist definition of the public via the notion of consequences. It should, however, be noted that the notion of public is not completely freed from the institutional model of citizenship but only broadened in order to take into account transnational processes. In doing this, Fraser does not endorse the pragmatist principle of the primacy of consequences, which would have offered a further step in the emancipation from the classical identification of publics with institutional boundaries.

43. Young 2000 offers an explicit critique of the privileging of rational argumentation in the public arena.

44. “The approach of critical theory suggests that there are dangers in abstract and generalized normative theorizing, involving, for example, importing into supposedly general theories assumptions derived from the particular socio-historical context in which one thinks, or from the structured social positions conditioning one’s own life in that context” (Young 2000: 14). But see also Fraser 1992.

45. On this aspect, see my critique to MacGilvray’s program of a motivational pragmatism in chapter 7. For a different pragmatist approach to narrative as a key factor in the reshaping of public space as distinct from the public use of reason, see McAfee 2008: esp. ch. 5.
46. This distinction finds a proper exemplification in the figure of the facilitator who operates in the deliberative forums: the task of the facilitator, in fact, is to maximize the expressive dimension of deliberation, while at the same time supporting individuals in translating their expressive utterances into forms that can be compatible with the deliberative framework. In other terms, he mediates between the expressive and the deliberative dimensions of inquiry.


48. In Frega 2011d I provide a more detailed account of this issue, introducing a conceptual distinction between the normative practices of justification and of adjudication and showing how this distinction helps in overcoming the shortcoming of the Rawlsian and the Habermasian account of public reason.

49. See notably Latour 1999. The notion of controversy was originally designed by Latour (1987) as a methodological device in the study of the genesis of scientific conceptions and technological innovations. For our purposes, such an approach is relevant because it proposes that one should conceive of discursive controversies as the locus where scientific facts are “fabricated.” Focus on controversies enables the shift of attention from finished outcomes of research (matters of fact) to the processes of fact-making (matters of disputation). Given the scientific interests of STS and its methodological starting point, Latour proposes identifying controversies with their discursive inscription in debates, articles, etc. For our purposes, neither this constraint nor the exclusive focus on scientific controversies should be considered as exclusive. See Marres 2005 for an extension of the STS paradigm to the study of democratic processes. Those interested in implications of STS for normativity theory, can see Winner 1993 for a critical appraisal and Hamlett 2003 for a tentative answer.

50. See notably Dewey’s *Logic* (LW 12: ch. 12).

51. Reference to Dewey’s political philosophy is explicit in many scholars belonging to this tradition. See notably Latour 1999 and Marres 2005.

52. While STS tends to consider this form of rational scrutiny as being incorporated into the sociological perspective of researchers studying the controversy (the aim, in the end, is academic: to explain how scientific facts are being formed through controversies), a theory of public reason will also have to show how this rational scrutiny can be incorporated into the political process itself. This book provides a partial answer to this question.
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