

Democratic Theory as Practice: Social Inquiry for Moral Dialogue

In Part I of the dissertation, I discuss why a philosophy of social inquiry that does not recognize the ways in which the “normative” and “empirical” aspects of social inquiry are in fact “interwoven” can undermine the basic aims of a deliberative or dialogic¹ conception of democracy. On my account, “empirical” claims and judgments (depending on the specific case at hand) *presuppose*, or are *reliant on*, or *convey* “normative judgments,” or themselves “‘have’ normative implications.”² Consequently, a philosophy of social inquiry that does not recognize – and so does not encourage us to investigate – the ways in which these two “kinds” of claims and judgments are interwoven can lead us *not* to grasp the potential (or actual) normative significance (or implications) of what we say (and so do). And, what is more to the point, this implies that in *certain* cases we will not grasp the potential (or actual) *moral* (or *ethical*) significance (or implications) of what we say (and so do). If so, it is fair to say that such a philosophy can undermine “rational self-clarity,” and so, by implication, “rational” moral dialogue and interest representation too. In consequence, it can also, on a deliberative view, undermine the basic aims of the democratic process.

On the deliberative ideal, as I take it, participants in the democratic process are to seek out “mutually justifiable” and “generally accessible” reasons for their expressed policy preferences.³ Such an ideal affirms the need for participants to *justify* decisions to those who are bound by them. The moral basis for that affirmation is the idea that participants are to treat one

¹ For ease of exposition, I shall hereafter speak only of a “deliberative” conception of democracy. But I

² These are not mutually exclusive possibilities. On my account, an “empirical” claim or judgment can *both*, for example, “presuppose normative judgments” *and* “convey” such judgments; or *both* “rely on” normative judgments *and* “‘have’ normative implications.” Indeed, in my view, an empirical claim or judgment can exhibit all of these features at once. But nothing I will here argue is dependent on one’s accepting this latter, more ambitious claim.

³ The idea of giving “mutually acceptable” and “generally accessible” (or, as I will sometimes say here, “mutually accessible”) reasons or justifications is also advanced, for example, by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

another (and those, if any, they represent) as free and equal persons, equally deserving and capable of participation in the governance of their common affairs. Treating one another in this way entails, in turn, that participants present reasons for the laws or policies that they would impose on one another, and that they respond to others' reasons in kind. But to count as reasons for "mutual justification," those reasons cannot be of just any kind. Rather, participants' reasons, on a deliberative view, should be addressed (at least in part) to the cares and commitments of relevant others, taken as free and equal persons; otherwise, they will not count as *moral* reasons, and so will not serve as an adequate basis for *mutual* justification. In a moral dialogue, it is always the *relationship* between two agents, or the *relationships* among some set of agents, that is at stake. And reasons that do not *address* those relationships cannot serve as an adequate basis for mutual justification with respect to the relevant agents.

This way of casting the deliberative ideal has important implications, I believe, for how we should conceive of the "rationality" of alternative forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry. In the direct context of the democratic process, I want to suggest, "rational" social inquiry should be crafted so as to facilitate the kinds of "self-awareness" and "self-correction" that "rational self-clarity" requires. But rational self-clarity, in the context of a moral dialogue, partly must mean *self-clarity in relation to relevant others*. Accordingly, the kinds of "self-awareness" and "self-correction" that I am speaking of have to do not only with how the self views the self; they have also to do with how the self views *other* selves and its relationships to them. Hence, "rational" social inquiry, in this context, partly must mean "*inquiry that is crafted to facilitate the elucidation of the self and its relationships to relevant other selves.*" And this implies that the "rationality" of alternative forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry is to be evaluated (*inter alia*) in virtue of the extent to which they serve that elucidation.

It is by *this* standard, I want to argue, that we may say that a philosophy of social inquiry that does not recognize the ways in which the normative and empirical aspects of social inquiry are interwoven can undermine the basic aims of a deliberative conception of democracy. If, as I suggest, such a philosophy can lead us, in certain cases, *not* to grasp the potential (or actual) *moral* (or *ethical*) significance (or implications) of what we say (and so do), it can thereby undermine “rational self-clarity.” That is, it can thereby undermine our understanding of our own selves and of their relationships to relevant other selves. It can also, by implication, undermine “rational” moral dialogue and interest representation too. And it can also, therefore, undermine the democratic process.

Let me now foreshadow the main position I wish to stake out in this section: In the direct context of the democratic process, “rational” social inquiry should be crafted so as to help us to determine what positions we are assuming or are able or willing to assume responsibility for – *a knowledge of our own considered positions in a moral dialogue*. For the truthful articulation of our own “*considered* interests,” those of relevant others, and mutual justification are each dependent on it. The search for such self-knowledge requires, in turn, that we endeavor to avoid the potential sources of irrationality that certain forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry can easily lead us into. As we shall see, these include a variety of forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry that have sometimes been associated with the attempt to erect a strict categorical distinction between the “normative” and the “empirical” aspects of inquiry (and thereby to construct a “value-neutral” or “value-free” social science.) But the search for such self-knowledge requires more than that we attempt to *avoid* such potential sources of irrationality; it requires also that we *actively seek to understand* the “desirability characterizations” which define the relevant agents’ lived experience and which they themselves clairvoyantly use (or else *would*

use had they reached a more reflective articulation of their own beliefs, desires, motives and interests). And this, I want to say, is true as much of “social inquirers,” taken generally, as of those they study. Such understanding requires, *inter alia*, that we develop our ability (continually) to identify, at least in imagination, with the evaluative viewpoints of relevant others, taken both individually and collectively. Otherwise, we will undercut our own basis for knowing what, in any given instance, our considered interests might consist in, and so what mutual justification might too.

Accordingly, I urge that in the direct context of the democratic process we view social inquiry as a “reflexive social practice,” which actively investigates the ways in which the normative and empirical aspects of social inquiry are interwoven. Such a practice, I suggest, openly evaluates the influence of its practitioners’ values – and so interests and cultural traditions – on both the *activity* of inquiring and the *content* of what is produced by it. To do so, it engages in diverse forms of cultural or collective “self-evaluation,” which aim to enable us more clearly to understand how we actually engage in social inquiry, and how we ought more properly do so. Such “self-evaluation” consists, in turn, in open inquiry into the *purposes*, *presuppositions*, and *parameters* of inquiry itself. In the direct context of the democratic process, it entails, on my account, that we openly inquire into the interests that *influence* decision-making and those that are *shaped* by it – and that we openly inquire into the purposes, presuppositions, and parameters of *those* inquiries themselves.

This summary provides a sketch of the central aims of section I of the dissertation. The present chapter lays the groundwork for approaching those aims. It is organized as follows. In section I, I briefly describe what I take to be the basic aims of a deliberative conception of democratic practice. In doing so, I note that one of the historic aims of democracy has been to

make it as likely as possible that “the people” will get what it wants, or what it thinks best. This aim, I suggest, provides us with grounds for wanting to evaluate alternative decision-making procedures (including agenda-setting procedures) *in virtue of* the opportunities they furnish citizens for discovering and validating the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen’s interests. We should thus want to evaluate alternative practices *in virtue of* the opportunities they provide citizens for acquiring and understanding of means and ends, and of one’s interests and the consequences of policies for interests. I then claim that, *in the direct context of the democratic process, alternative forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry should also be so evaluated*. Based on that discussion, I then introduce, in section II, a view of “rational” social inquiry that construes it as a “self-corrective” process, briefly considering what this view might imply for *inquiry as it is meant to inform moral dialogue*. There, I suggest that “rational” social inquiry should be crafted so as to facilitate the kinds of “self-awareness” and “self-correction” that “rational self-clarity” – and so, by implication, “rational” moral dialogue and interest representation – require. In section III, I then attempt to clarify the claim that certain of the aims of value-neutral social inquiry (or certain of the practices inspired by those aims) stand in tension with the historic goal of making it most likely that “the people will get what it wants, or thinks best.” Based on the view of “rationality” indicated in section II, the discussion considers how, in the context of a moral dialogue, each of these objectives may be viewed as potential sources of “irrationality,” since each can undermine the kinds of rational self-clarity that such dialogue demands.

The argument proceeds as follows. I begin by summarizing a number of objections to “value-neutral” or “value-free” conceptions of social inquiry. Doing so allows us to substantiate the view that “empirical” claims and judgments *presuppose*, or are *reliant on*, or *convey*

“normative judgments,” or themselves “*have*’ normative implications.” This allows us to challenge the attempt to erect a strict categorical distinction between the “normative” and “empirical” aspects of social inquiry. I then consider how several objectives associated with certain conceptions of value-neutral social inquiry stand in tension with the basic aims of a deliberative conception of democratic practice (and so, in that context, should be regarded as potential sources of “irrationality.”) These include: the adoption of a strict categorical distinction between “explanation” and “understanding”; the attempt to bypass agents’ self-descriptions or self-understandings; the adoption of a view of “rational” or “meaningful” language use which sees it exclusively as a tool for “labeling objects,” rather than for labeling objects *and* for “self-expression”; and the adoption of a view of the relationship between “theory” and “practice” that overlooks the fact that, in the social domain, theories can transform their own objects, the practices to which they are relevant. Section IV ends by bringing together the various strands of my argument.

I.

To begin our discussion, let me offer some remarks on what I take to be the basic aims of a deliberative conception of democratic practice. I start, however, by referring to the work of Robert Dahl, who does *not* offer an explicitly “deliberative” conception. I’ll then refer to the work of Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, who *do*.

It is commonly noted, by democratic theorists and practitioners alike, that a democratic process demands that “relevant constituencies” (however defined) have equal and adequate opportunities to express their choices on the decisions in question, and that such choices, and only such choices, are to be taken into account. This is one way of casting the idea of “equal

interest representation.” Often, it is viewed as applying not just to the “decision stage” but to the “agenda-setting stage” as well. The reasons for this, I think, are straightforward.

In Robert Dahl’s terminology, two fundamental ideas serve to justify a democratic political order: the *idea of intrinsic equality* and the *presumption of personal autonomy*.⁴ The first of these says that citizens are to be regarded as equals, the second that they are to be regarded as typically being the best judges of their own interests. If citizens are regarded as intrinsically equal, then no citizen should be seen as more *deserving* of interest representation or of the opportunity for political participation than any other citizen. If citizens are regarded as typically being the best judges of their own interests, then each citizen is to be regarded as equally *capable* of such participation. Consequently, throughout the process of making binding decisions, each citizen must be ensured an equal and adequate opportunity to express a choice that will be counted as equal to the choice expressed by any other citizen. With Dahl, we might call this the *criterion of effective participation*.

But notice, now, that a second criterion may also be derived from these two basic ideas. How so? Democracy has usually been conceived as a system in which “rule by the people” makes it more likely that “the people” will attain what it wants, or thinks best, than a system such as guardianship (in which an elite determines what is best). Proponents of democracy have almost invariably recognized this aim of democracy, and consequently have placed great emphasis on the means to an informed and enlightened demos, such as education and public discussion. Thus, the purpose of “equal interest representation,” we might say, is not just to treat citizens as equals; it is also to make it most likely that “the people” will get what it wants (or thinks best). This is because, first, “the people,” taken individually, are each regarded as equally

⁴ My characterization of Dahl’s views is based on *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 83-118.

deserving of the opportunity to get what they want (or think best); and, second, because they are each regarded as equally *capable* of pursuing what they want (or think best). (And a system of majority rule, compared to the feasible alternatives, is the system best suited to giving them that opportunity.) The first of these claims is connected to the *idea of intrinsic equality*, the second to the *presumption of personal autonomy*. If citizens are regarded as intrinsically equal, then there is no reason to presume that any one of them *deserves* to get what they want more than other one. And if citizens are presumed to be autonomous, then there is no reason to presume that any one of them is more *capable* of pursuing that aim.

Consequently, it makes sense not only to say that each citizen must be ensured an equal and adequate opportunity to express a choice that will be counted as equal to the choice expressed by any other citizen; it also makes sense to say that *each citizen ought to have equal and adequate opportunities for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests*. For, again, the *purpose* of a democratic order is not just to treat citizens as equals; it is also to make it most likely that “the people” will get what it wants (or thinks best). With Dahl, we might call this second criterion the *criterion of enlightened understanding*. It implies that alternative decision-making procedures (including agenda-setting procedures) ought to be evaluated according to the opportunities they furnish citizens for acquiring an understanding of means and ends, and of one's interests and the consequences of policies for interests, not only for oneself but for all other relevant persons as well.

Now, as Dahl himself observes, the criterion of enlightenment is not, of course, unambiguous. But it can, evidently, provide guidance for judging the shape that democratic institutional practices should assume. For instance, the criterion makes it difficult to justify

procedures that would cut off or suppress relevant information which, were it available, might well lead citizens to place very different issues on the agenda, or to arrive at very different decisions; or that would give some citizens much easier access than others to information of crucial importance; and so forth.

However, I want here to stress a less-noted⁵ implication of this criterion: namely, that it also makes it difficult, in the direct context of the democratic process, to justify *forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry (and so information or knowledge production) that are liable systematically to privilege⁶ the perspectives, interpretations, or interests of some (relevant or irrelevant) constituencies at the expense of other (relevant) ones*. If the criterion of enlightenment suggests that alternative decision-procedures are to be assessed *in virtue of* the opportunities they provide citizens for acquiring an understanding of means and ends, and of one's interests and the consequences of policies for interests, it likewise implies, I submit, that *alternative forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry should also be so evaluated*.

On Dahl's view, the criterion of enlightened understanding is regarded as providing guidance as to the shape that institutional practices should take, concerning both the decision and the agenda-setting stages. Similarly, what I want to argue here is that the criterion of enlightenment can also provide guidance as to the shape that, in the direct context of the democratic process, social inquiry *itself* should take.⁷ For I want to argue that *certain forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry are more liable than others to come into conflict with the criterion of enlightened understanding, and for that reason ought to be regarded as less appropriate to the aim of "equal interest representation."* If citizens are to have equal and adequate opportunities

⁵ Indeed, as I will later discuss, this implication is often overlooked entirely.

⁶ The notion of "systematic privilege," as I shall be construing it, is not a simple or straightforward one, and, to give it greater clarity, we shall have to return to it recurrently throughout later chapters.

⁷ There is a sense in which the criterion of effective participation can also provide such guidance. But in order to be able clearly to make that point, I will need first to revise how we understand that criterion. I do so below.

to decide what matters are even to be decided upon in the first place (“equal agenda-setting power”⁸), then we also have reason to prefer the forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry that are most appropriate for their doing so. Likewise, if each citizen ought to have equal and adequate opportunities for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen’s interests, then we also have reason to prefer the forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry that are most appropriate for their doing so. As with alternative decision-making procedures (including agenda-setting procedures), *we thus have reason to prefer forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry which are less likely to cut off or suppress relevant information which, were it available, might well lead citizens to place very different issues on the agenda, or to arrive at very different decisions; or that would give some citizens much easier access than others to information of crucial importance; and so forth.* And again, *we thus have reason to prefer forms of, or approaches to, social inquiry that are less likely to obscure the relationship between ends and means, or between our considered interests and the consequences of policies for interests, not just for oneself but for all other relevant persons as well; and so forth.*

Now, a deliberative account of democratic practice, I want to suggest, may also be said to begin from the two principles of justification that Dahl outlines⁹ (as well as the two aims associated with those principles¹⁰). And it may also be said to endorse the two ideal criteria¹¹ derived from those principles. However, it also adds, we might say, another ideal criterion: that *throughout the process of making binding decisions, participants should seek to offer one*

⁸ The phrase is my own; it is not drawn from Dahl. The ideal of equal agenda-setting power can be seen as derivative of the ideal of equal interest representation (and, more specifically, of the criterion of effective participation which supports that ideal).

⁹ I refer to the *idea of intrinsic equality* and to the *presumption of personal autonomy*.

¹⁰ I refer to the aims of treating citizens as equals and making it most likely that “the people” will get what it wants, or what it believes best.

¹¹ I refer to the *criterion of effective participation* and the *criterion of enlightened understanding*.

another “mutually acceptable” and “generally accessible” reasons for their expressed preferences with respect to the laws or policies in question. (The language of “mutually acceptable” and “generally accessible” reasons is borrowed from Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson.) Perhaps we might call this the *criterion of mutual justification*. And perhaps we might think that, on a deliberative view, it is necessary to introduce this third criterion precisely because a defensible interpretation of the first two principles of justification and their associated criteria requires it.

Indeed, this is, in essence, basically the position I want to endorse here. However, rather than introducing this view about the importance of mutual justification as a “third criterion,” I want rather to pursue another tack: to use it as way of amending how we interpret the two principles of justification and the first two criteria.

So, consider first the *idea of intrinsic equality* and the *criterion of effective participation*. The idea of intrinsic equality demands that the process of making binding decisions treat citizens as equals (with “equal concern and respect”). But doing so, on a deliberative conception, requires more than just upholding the principle of “one person, one vote”; or to put it more sophisticatedly, the principle that “each citizen must be ensured an equal and adequate opportunity to express a choice that will be counted as equal to the choice expressed by any other citizen.” For what, after all, does that process *consist* in? It consists in an activity in which citizens express their preferences for imposing laws or binding policies on one another. Consequently, in order for “the process” to treat citizens as equals, citizens *themselves* – in expressing their preferences – have to treat one another as equals. And doing so demands, *inter alia*, that they provide reasons for the laws or policies that they would impose on one another.

But, on a deliberative conception, not just *any* reasons. In order to express the value of equality, to treat one another as autonomous agents and as intrinsically equal, citizens should seek reasons that are mutually acceptable: reasons that free and equal citizens could mutually accept. Otherwise, “the *process*” will not treat citizens with equal concern and respect. But why should the reasons be “mutually accessible,”¹² too? If I cannot even understand the reasons you offer me, I cannot “accept” them.¹³ (More properly, as we shall see, I cannot “accept them as mutually justified,” which I take to be the intended *meaning* of “mutually acceptable reasons.”) Consequently, I cannot say that they *justify* anything, much less that they justify a law or policy that you wish to impose on me (and on my fellow citizens). The idea of a person, call her “A,” “justifying” something to another person, call her “B,” presupposes the idea that B can understand what it *is* that person A “seeks to justify.” True, B might say, “I admit that I do not understand your reasons; but I am nonetheless willing to accept them. For I believe you to be a reasonable person, and presume that your reasons are reasonable too. But I simply cannot understand them.” However, in that event, A would not have “justified” her reasons to B. Rather, we should want to say that B had “accepted” A’s reasons *without* “accepting” their *justifiability*. Accordingly, if we understand by “mutually acceptable reasons,” “reasons that could be mutually *justified*” (as I believe deliberative democrats do), “mutual acceptability” (in this context, that of a moral dialogue) presupposes the idea that person B (or, in the more general case, any individual participant) understands what it *is* that person A (or any individual participant) “wishes to justify.” Consequently, we may conclude that “mutual *acceptability*” is here

¹² I speak, for the moment, of “mutually accessible” instead of “generally accessible” reasons. This is because it is easiest to spell out the logic of searching for “accessible” reasons by first considering a dialogue between only two parties, in which case the term “mutual” is more appropriate than “general.” But once that logic is understood, and we begin to speak of *collectivities*, it is appropriate instead to speak of “general accessibility,” as I will later elaborate.

¹³ Gutmann and Thompson offer an argument that is, I think, complementary to the one articulated here. See *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, pp. 3-5.

dependent on “mutual *accessibility*.” Hence the criterion that in justifying the decisions they would impose on one another, citizens should offer one another “mutually acceptable” and “mutually accessible” reasons.

These reflections help us to see how a deliberative conception pushes us to want to modify the *criterion of effective participation*, as it was earlier articulated. In light of the immediately preceding remarks, we might recast it this way:

Throughout the process of making binding decisions, each citizen must be ensured an equal and adequate opportunity to express a choice that will be counted as equal to the choice expressed by any other citizen. In expressing those choices, participants should seek to offer one another ‘mutually acceptable’ and ‘generally accessible’ reasons for their expressed preferences regarding the laws or policies in question. Thus, before expressing their final choices on those laws or policies, each participant should also have an equal and adequate opportunity to offer, listen to, and respond to the reasons offered by the other participants.

Consider now the *presumption of personal autonomy* and the *criterion of enlightenment*. A democratic process is also to be judged, we have said, by reference to the degree to which it furnishes each citizen with equal and adequate opportunities for discovering and validating the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen’s interests. On a deliberative view, this aim is better served by a process of mutual reason giving than by a mere tallying of votes. Why? One major reason is that a person (say, citizen A) cannot know what she thinks is best for the interests of relevant others unless she listens to¹⁴ their reasons for wanting things as they do. And if we presume that part of what citizen A’s “interests” consists in is a concern for the welfare of those others, then, other things being equal, having the opportunity to listen to those others’ reasons serves citizen A’s interests. Consequently, it makes sense to say that, other things being equal, a process in which citizen A has the opportunity to listen to relevant others’ reasons is more likely to serve her interests than a process in which she has no such opportunity.

¹⁴ By “listens to,” I mean also to suggest that the agent (or agents) in question thereby try to understand the relevant other’s (or relevant others’) reasons for preferring things as they do.

And, other things being equal, the same may be said of any individual citizen for whom we accept this presumption. Thus, other things being equal, if the majority of citizens may be accurately so characterized, a process in which citizens are given the opportunity to listen to relevant others' reasons will better serve the citizens' interests, taken all around, than a process in which they have no such opportunity.

These reflections help us to see how a deliberative conception pushes us to want to modify the *criterion of enlightened understanding*, as it was earlier articulated. In light of the immediately proceeding remarks, we might recast it this way:

Throughout the process of making binding decisions, each citizen must be ensured an equal and adequate opportunity for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests. In considering that choice, each participant should have an equal and adequate opportunity to offer, listen to, and respond to the reasons offered by the other participants. In offering one's reasons for one's expressed preferences, listening to those of others, and responding to those of others, participants should seek to offer one another 'mutually acceptable' and 'generally accessible' reasons for their expressed preferences regarding the laws or policies in question.

II.

I want now briefly to introduce a view of "rational" social inquiry that construes it as a "self-corrective" process, and I want, furthermore, to indicate what this view might imply for *inquiry as it is meant to inform a moral dialogue*. As we have just seen, a deliberative conception of democratic practice pushes us to want to reinterpret the criteria of effective participation and enlightenment in terms appropriate to a moral dialogue. And this means that *what may be said to undermine such dialogue may be said also to undermine the democratic process itself*.

Now, following the classical pragmatists, knowledge can be “rational,” I want to say, not because it has a “foundation,” but because it results from a “self-corrective” enterprise.¹⁵ Thus, inquiry *itself* can be “rational,” on this view, because it can *itself* be “self-corrective,” and so potentially lead to judgments that are (*inter alia*) “self-consistent.” But to give some content to this view, something first must be said of what *kinds of* “consistency,” and so of what *kinds of* “self-correction,” are at stake here.

In different domains of discourse and inquiry there are different standards of rationality, of truth, of evidence, different principles of reasoning; and this implies that judgments of the “rationality” of our discursive practices, and of the practices of inquiry meant to inform them, need to consider the principles and standards which are relevant to the specific domain in question, *to consider what kinds of “consistency” are germane there.*¹⁶ While we will have to

¹⁵ Within the pragmatist tradition, the critique of the “foundation” metaphor goes back to Charles Sanders Peirce. As Richard Bernstein writes, “The conception of knowledge that Peirce criticizes as mistaken is one that claims that knowledge does – indeed must – have a basic fixed foundation. The character of this foundation is an issue that has divided many modern philosophers – whether it consists of impressions, simple matters of fact, sense data, universals, a priori truths, etc. But in such diverse philosophic positions as rationalism and empiricism, there is such a rock bottom foundation...If we can know what this foundation is (in fact or in principle) as well as the proper procedures for basing more complex knowledge on this foundation, then we will be in a position to “legitimize” our knowledge claims...[By contrast, for Peirce] knowledge and inquiry neither have nor need such a foundation...The alternative paradigm of inquiry or knowledge that Peirce begins to develop in these papers [his 1868 papers] and which he refined and modified throughout his career is *a view of inquiry as a self-corrective process* which has no absolute beginning or end points and in which any claim is subject to further rational criticism, although we cannot question all claims at once. *Our claims to knowledge are legitimized not by their origins – for the origins of knowledge are diverse and fallible – but rather by the norms and rules of inquiry itself. These very norms, rules, and standards are themselves open to rational criticism.*” *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. 174-75; my emphasis. See also Richard Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), especially chapter 1.

¹⁶ The line of argumentation I develop here concerning what I refer to as different “domains of discourse” is inspired, in large part, by Hanna Pitkin’s work on the later Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein, Pitkin writes, “uses ‘language game’ as more or less synonymous with ‘way of operating with language in action’ and ‘uses ‘form of life’ as more or less synonymous with ‘coherent pattern of human activity or reaction’”. “Wittgenstein’s discussion of language games and forms of life,” Pitkin continues, “suggests that we might think of language as being subdivided into clusters of similar and related concepts, used in similar and related language games. Certain concepts will show similar grammatical peculiarities because they are at home in the same area of language, used in similar circumstances for similar purposes; other concepts will show quite different patterns because they originate in connection with quite different forms of life... Wittgenstein himself speaks at one point about ‘regions of language,’ and again invokes the analogy between language and an ancient city: ‘a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.’ Some regions of the city are separate and clearly distinct.

defer a more extended defense of these views until a later point, it is necessary, by way of introduction, to say a bit more about them, if only to hint at what they might be seen to imply.

Here, of course, our concern is with the domain of *moral* discourse and the practices of inquiry that are appropriate to it. In this domain, “rationality,” as I have intimated, takes on a particular meaning. For instance, the significance of agreement and disagreement, in this domain, is not the same as in other domains. Despite what may be true elsewhere, I want to suggest that the familiar lack of “conclusiveness” – the familiar *persistence of disagreement* – that characterizes moral discourse need not be regarded as indicating its “irrationality.” Indeed, I want to say that, “rather than showing up an irrationality,” the apparently inevitable fact of disagreement in moral discourse “shows the kind of rationality it has, and needs.” (Stanley Cavell)¹⁷

To see this, it is useful briefly to compare certain features of moral discourse with other kinds of discourse. To do so, let us start with some thoughts offered by Hanna Pitkin. Drawing on the work of the latter Wittgenstein, as well as that of his student, Friedrich Waismann, Pitkin writes:

Wittgenstein himself speaks at one point about “regions of language”... Waismann argues that language regions differ in the way that propositions are formulated and related to each other; it is as if they were “constructed in a different *logical style*.” Propositions in different regions will “be *true* in different senses, *verifiable* in different senses, *meaningful* in different senses.”¹⁸

Wittgenstein suggests that we think of the specialized, technical subdivisions of language, such as the symbolism of chemistry or the notion of calculus, as “so to speak, suburbs or our language,” neat, clearly laid out, unmistakably separate. But in the old city, regions will be more difficult to distinguish or delineate precisely... Wittgenstein does not develop the theme further, but it is developed in various ways by his student, Friedrich Waismann, by the ordinary language philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, and, from a different philosophical stance, by Michael Oakeshott. Each of them argues that there are significant subdivisions within language, differing in fundamental ways... *All three agree that these subdivisions differ not merely in vocabulary or subject matter, but in the way in which language is used: in grammar, logic, structure – what counts as a statement, what as a justification, what as validity or truth, what constitutes agreement and the significance of disagreement.*” Hanna Pitkin *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 140-41; my emphasis.

¹⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

To illustrate, consider, for instance, how the nature and meaning of truth is different in different language regions:

The truths of mathematics, unlike those of science, poetry, everyday practical concerns, sensations, ethics, are strictly deductive, and entirely a matter of internal coherence. ‘Take for instance, a mathematical proposition, say a theorem of geometry. To say that it is true simply means that it can be deduced from such-and-such axioms.’ The axioms themselves are simply assumed; all the mathematician “is concerned with is that *if* these and these axioms apply, *then* the theorems apply too.” [QB: Pitkin is quoting Waismann]. No recourse need be had to “observation” nor to “empirical evidence.” There is no room here for productive “debate” among “various opinions,” nor for the testimony of witnesses. Contrast, as Arendt says, the language of specific historical facts, like “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914.” Yet such a factual truth, like the truths of mathematics, is “much less open to argument” than, say, a proposition of political theory, or art criticism, or political opinion. “It concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved, it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony.” As a result, factual truth of this kind is characteristically subject to distortion by deliberate falsehood or lies, in a way that the truths of mathematics, science, poetry, and even political opinion are not.¹⁹

“As a corollary to differences of this kind,” Pitkin observes, “various language regions differ also in how judgments are supported in case of dispute, and more generally in the significance of dispute and the modes of its resolution.”²⁰

In mathematics – or at any rate in arithmetic – disputes arise only when someone is in error; there is no such thing as “each man being entitled to his opinion.” Truth is established deductively, by proof. Contrast this with, say, truths of specific historical fact, where “in case of dispute, only other witnesses but no third or higher instance can be invoked.” [QB: Pitkin is quoting Hanna Arendt] Where witnesses disagree, we are forced to adopt the majority account, or to estimate reliability, or to leave the conflict unresolved. Disagreement in political opinion, disagreement among literary critics, disagreement in moral judgment – each will have different significance and possible modes of resolution. Each realm has its own “ways in which a judgment may be supported,” in which “conviction in” the judgment may be produced, as Cavell says. “It is only by these recurrent patterns of support that a remark will count as – will be – aesthetic, or a mere matter of taste, or moral, propagandistic, religious, magical, scientific, philosophical.”²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 145.

If accurate, these comments suggest that when we turn to the domain of moral discourse we should be careful about how we interpret the nature of validity or truth, and we should be careful also about how we view the significance of agreement and disagreement. “Those positivistically inclined,” Pitkin observes, “will doubt that moral discourse can have a logic or a rationality at all, since it seems to them ‘normative’ and resting ultimately on personal preference or taste or feeling, beyond the reach of reason.” For in morality – as opposed, say, to science – “disputes often ‘cannot be resolved,’ do not culminate in agreement, do not result in conclusions everyone must accept.”²²

However, against this perspective, we might again note that there appear to be different standards of “rationality” in different domains. If so, we should like to ask: What kinds of standards are relevant to the domain of moral discourse? And relatedly: What kinds of “consistency” are germane there?

To begin with, we might suggest (as Michael Oakeshott does) that each kind of human activity has an “idiom” of its own, each with its own *distinctive* “rationality.”²³ If so, we might then think (as Pitkin does) that “rationality is not one single thing, the same in all areas of human conduct or thought”; rather, we might think that it “has its own particular, distinctive embodiments in various realms of human life.” Accordingly, rationality, we might then conclude, “*consists essentially of faithfulness to the particular idiom in which one happens to be operating; it is a kind of consistency.*” In science or mathematics, for instance,

the rationality of an argument depends upon its leading from premises all parties accept, in steps all can follow, to an agreement upon a conclusion which all must accept. And, of course, “all must accept” does not mean that no human creature could conceivably refuse or fail to accept the conclusion. It means, rather, that anyone who fails to accept the conclusion is regarded as either incompetent in that mode of reasoning, or irrational.²⁴

²² Ibid., p. 152.

²³ Michael Oakeshott. *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1962)

²⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

But such standards of rationality, of course, need not be viewed as the only ones available to us; they need not be viewed as those appropriate, for instance, to moral discourse. For the *point* of such discourse is not agreement on a conclusion, but successful elucidation of the interlocutors' positions with regard to one another – and, circumstances permitting, to a certain course of action. Its function, in short, is to clarify the positions of the relevant agents, both to themselves and to others. If so, “what makes moral argument rational,” we might say, “is not the assumption that we can always come to agreement about what ought to be done on the basis of rational methods. *Its rationality lies in the following of methods which lead to a knowledge of our position, of where we stand.*” (Cavell)²⁵ “Without the hope of agreement,” Cavell writes, “argument would be pointless; but it doesn't follow that without agreement – and in particular, without agreement arrived at in particular ways, e.g., without anger, and without agreement about a conclusion concerning what ought to be done – the argument was pointless.” “The *hope*, of course, is for reconciliation,” as Hanna Pitkin writes; “but the test of *validity* in moral discourse will not be for reconciliation but truthful revelation of self.”²⁶ Cavell continues:

Suppose that it is just characteristic of moral arguments that the rationality of the antagonists is not dependent on an agreement's emerging between them, that there is such a thing as *rational disagreement* about a conclusion. Why assume that ‘There is one right thing to be done in every case and that that can be found out’? Surely the existence of incompatible and equally legitimate claims, responsibilities and wishes indicate otherwise?²⁷

“After all,” Pitkin writes, “we do not merely differ with others on such questions; often we are at odds with ourselves.” If so, moral discourse would seem then to *serve the role of self-elucidation*:

²⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154; my emphasis.

²⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 153.

In the elaboration of our conduct through speech, we disclose and discover, as Arendt says, ‘the agent together with the act.’ In action and its subsequent elaboration in speech, ‘one discloses one’s self without ever knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals.’ Hence the ‘revelatory quality of speech and action’: moral discourse concerns self-definition and self-knowledge.²⁸

In short, the “direct point” of moral discourse, we might say, is “to determine the positions we are assuming or are able or willing to assume responsibility for” (Cavell). And to determine that position, what we should seek is *clarity about what we are reflectively willing to endorse*. But clarity about what we are reflectively willing to endorse requires, in a “moral dialogue,” *clarity about the self and its relationships to relevant other selves*. Hence, “rationality” is here connected to the following of methods or procedures (formal or informal) that give us such clarity. And this would seem to suggest that “consistency” is here connected to *faithfulness to such methods or procedures as yield such clarity*.

Often, of course, such self-knowledge or self-clarity is not easy to attain, as thinkers throughout the philosophical tradition have frequently reminded us. But it is precisely for that reason that moral discourse is useful, indeed necessary; for without it we are surely liable often to mistake our own motives and effective commitments – and, perhaps even more so, the implications of our conduct, and of the practices we support, for others. Equally, it is also precisely why moral discourse should be informed by “rational” forms of social inquiry, where “rational” is understood in a way that is consistent with the specific demands of rationality *in this domain*, to the attainment of adequate “knowledge of our [own] position, of where we stand,” and of our relationships to relevant others. For the truths that moral discourse can reveal are by no means obvious, because our responsibilities, the “extensions of our cares and commitments, the implications of our conduct, are not obvious” – indeed, because “the self is not obvious to the

²⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 154.

self” (Arendt).²⁹ And that means, as Pitkin suggests, “that we do not always see the implications of our own position, who we are; and that we do not always see the reality of our own action, what we have done.”³⁰

Moral discourse – when conducted with *actual* (or *potentially actual*) human activity in mind, and not *just* abstract or hypothetical referents – concerns what has been done, or what will be done. Accordingly, “informed” moral discourse, I want to say, presupposes that the protagonists possess adequate “empirical” information: that they are well informed about the agents and actions in question, and the actual or likely consequences of those actions. (Note, however, that we might say that judgments of the “likely consequences” of those actions are better described as “speculative” or “conjectural” judgments than as “empirical” ones.) Without such information, agents cannot hope reasonably to judge where they stand with regard to those actions, nor consequently with regard to one another. Thus, “informed” moral discourse presupposes, it would seem, that relevant agents either *themselves engage in* or *are adequately informed by* forms of “rational” social inquiry that facilitate the attempt to bring them to an adequate understanding of the actions and agents in question, and consequently of the relationships among them.

Of course, the *burden* of that task – of the attempt to bring them to such understanding – does not fall entirely, or even primarily, on such inquiry; that is also the role of the moral dialogue that is meant to *succeed* it. But if we assume, with Arendt, that the self is (often) not evident to the self, and that our responsibilities and the implications of our conduct are often not obvious, it becomes clearer why such inquiry as *precedes* that dialogue should also *itself* be crafted to facilitate the kinds of “self-correction” that the aims of truthful self-discovery and self-

²⁹ Cited in *ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

revelation necessitate. And while I do not think that those two assumptions are much in need of substantiation, the arguments that follow could nonetheless be viewed as an attempt further to substantiate them. *However, what is more important here is that we clarify what, from a democratic point of view, should be said to follow from them.*

III.

Now, in light of the foregoing, one thing that may surely be said to follow from those assumptions is this: “rational” social inquiry, in the direct context of the democratic process, should surely be crafted so as to *counteract* those two difficulties – crafted, that is, to make the self more evident to the self, and its responsibilities and the implications of its conduct too. And, of course, these two tasks are interrelated; for part of what it *means* to “make the self more evident to the self” is to make its responsibilities, and the implications of its conduct, more too.

But how, more specifically, might we do that? One way, to put it first simply, is to be clear about what practices, or modes of thinking, are liable to exacerbate those difficulties; for it is in that way that we can develop ways of counteracting them. Thus, I want now to begin a discussion of why a philosophy of social inquiry that does not recognize the ways in which the “normative” and “empirical” aspects of social inquiry are in fact “interwoven” can undermine such forms of self-clarity. We’ll then be able to see how we can better counteract those difficulties. And we’ll then be able to state more directly how such a philosophy can also, as I have intimated, undermine the basic aims of the democratic process itself.

To begin that discussion, let me now summarize a number of objections to “value-neutral” or “value-free” conceptions of social inquiry. Doing so will allow us to substantiate the view that “empirical” claims and judgments *presuppose*, or are *reliant on*, or *convey* “normative judgments,” or themselves “*have*’ normative implications.” And this will allow us to challenge

the attempt to erect a strict categorical distinction between the “normative” and “empirical” aspects of social inquiry. Subsequently, I’ll then consider how several objectives sometimes associated with value-neutral social inquiry stand in tension with the basic aims of a deliberative conception of democratic practice (and so, in that context, should be regarded as potential sources of “irrationality.”)

So, let us now consider a few of the ways we might challenge a view of social inquiry that construes it as a “value-neutral” enterprise.

But before proceeding, let me enter a prefatory note about the idea of “value-neutral” (or “value-free”) social inquiry, and about my use of the phrase “philosophy of social inquiry” (or “view of social inquiry”). Here, it is not my aim to recount the history of the idea of “value-neutrality” (or “value-freedom”³¹) in social inquiry. Rather, my concern is to critique certain contemporary practices of inquiry, and certain modes of representing or understanding those practices; and I am concerned to use those criticisms as a way of investigating how values arise or are implicated in *all* aspects of social inquiry. Furthermore, I am concerned thereby to challenge *any* perspective according to which any *one* aspect of social inquiry may be thought amenable to “value-neutral” activity or to the production of “value-neutral” content. Consequently, my aim is *not* simply to defend the idea that values must arise or be implicated in *some* aspect of social inquiry (so as to argue that we cannot, therefore, hope to construct a “value-neutral” social science or to conduct “value-neutral” social inquiry); it is rather to defend

³¹ Hereafter, I shall speak only of the notion of “value-neutrality” or of “value-neutral” conceptions of social inquiry. The phrases “value-neutrality” and “value-freedom” are not, I believe, entirely synonymous (likewise with “value-neutral” and “value-free”). But the arguments I here canvass would serve to undermine “value-neutral” *as well as* “value-free” accounts of social inquiry; and nothing of importance, for present purposes, would seem to turn on my employing one phrase instead of the other. So, I will simplify by using only the former.

the idea that *no* aspect of social inquiry is or could be “value-neutral” (so as to point up the need to investigate how values arise or are implicated in *all* aspects of social inquiry).

The distinction is crucial. For if my concern laid with the first of these aims, the motivation for what follows might seem unclear. After all, few (if any) contemporary philosophers or practitioners of social science, it might be objected, would even *want* to maintain that we could construct such a “science” (or that we have already done so) or that we could conduct such inquiry. And so the question arises: Is it really worth critiquing what no one (or almost no one) of relevance even thinks we *might* be able to do? Fortunately, my purpose is a more ambitious one, and that objection would seem to have little or no force in relation to it. For who would deny that *some* important commentators would want to maintain that at least *some* aspect of social inquiry is amenable to value-neutral conduct or to the production of value-neutral content? And if that is correct (if at least *some* important commentators would take up that position), as I believe it is, it would then seem that my arguments would be directed not toward proverbial straw-persons, but toward real interlocutors.

Accordingly, let it be understood from the outset that, throughout, I will be invoking the phrase “philosophy of social inquiry” (or “view of social inquiry”) in reference to *any* philosophical or conceptual stance according to which *any* aspect of social inquiry is thought to be “value-neutral” (or thought to be amenable to “value-neutrality”).

We turn now to an initial statement of several reasons one might invoke in challenge of a view of social inquiry that construes it as a “value-neutral” enterprise, charged simply with formulating hypotheses and comparing them with the facts. At first, I’ll state the central claims very briefly; later I’ll elaborate.

First, knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of theories.³² *Pace* the view once advanced by prominent logical positivists, for example, observation is not “theory-neutral” (or “theory-free”) but rather “theory-laden.” (By invoking the claim that observation is “theory-laden,” I intend the idea that observation cannot serve as an “unbiased” or “neutral” way of testing or adjudicating between alternative theories or explanations [or broader units like paradigms], for observational judgments are *themselves* influenced by the theoretical beliefs of the observer.³³) And since social theories are themselves arrived at in particular cultural contexts, and conveyed – largely – in terms developed in them, we have good reason to say that observation is frequently *itself* “culture-influenced.”

Second, knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of interpretations. To confirm the type of judgments that are indispensable to inquiry (concerning, for example, a prediction), one must be able to *interpret* the linguistic utterances in question. W.V.O. Quine held that observation statements may be said to possess “intersubjective stimulus meaning,” and that this meaning can be determined *behavioristically*; “hermeneutical” considerations need not arise. But – as Hilary Putnam, for one, has emphasized – this claim is undermined by the fact that sentences “promoted” by the same stimuli need not have the same truth-value. As Putnam writes:

If a tribe says *bosorkanyok* when they see an ugly old woman with a wart on her nose, should we translate this as “ugly old woman with a wart on her nose” or as “witch”? If they expect a “bosorkanyok” and one appears (according to them), did they make a true prediction or a false accusation of witchcraft? The answer requires interpretation of the utterance, and not just knowledge of its “stimulus meaning”.³⁴

³² In this and the following three paragraphs, I draw on – though in various ways extend – the arguments offered in Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995) and *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³³ Cf. Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 156. For discussion of the notion of “the theory-ladenness of observation” and some debates surrounding it, see *ibid.* pp. 155-162.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Third, knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of values. Judgments of “reasonableness,” “plausibility,” “coherence,” and so forth are all *normative* judgments, based on *epistemic* values. (Such judgments are “normative,” as Charles Sanders Peirce observed, in the sense that they specify “what ought to be” in the case of our reasoning.³⁵) Social and other scientists do not choose hypotheses by reflecting on all the stories and myths about the past that are available to them; instead, they do so by reflecting on the records and testimonies that they have good reason to trust *by these very criteria of “good reason.”* Hence we do not appear to have a way of rendering factual judgments *apart from* such epistemic values, which – with respect to their influence on social judgments, at least – are apparently also culture-influenced.

Fourth, descriptions of social affairs employ concepts that already “mix” fact and ethical value, and these “components” cannot be “peeled apart,” as some proponents of the fact/value dichotomy have thought. Social description is thus value-laden – just as, by implication, social *explanation* is too. (Wherever a social explanation employs descriptive terminology that is value-laden, then, by implication, that explanation must too.)

Indeed, this entanglement is sometimes evident even at the level of individual predicates, as the word “cruel,” for instance, indicates.³⁶ “Cruel” is sometimes used for normative or ethical purposes, and sometimes for descriptive ones. It cannot simply be classified as a factual term *or* an evaluative one. As Putnam notes, if someone is asked what kind of person his or her child’s teacher is, and responds, “He is very cruel,” the person has both criticized him as a man and as a teacher. If one wishes to be understood, one cannot simply say, “He is a very cruel person and a very good teacher.” To be understood, one has to separate the manner (or the circumstances) in which he is a very good teacher and the manner (or the circumstances) in which he is very cruel.

³⁵ This observation about Peirce’s thinking is offered by Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, p. 30.

³⁶ This paragraph is based on Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, pp. 34-40.

One has to say something like, “When he isn’t displaying his cruelty, he is a very good teacher.” Likewise, one cannot hope to be understood if one merely says, “He is a very cruel person and a good man.” However, “cruel” may also be used “purely” descriptively, as when a historian, for example, describes a monarch as being exceptionally cruel. The purpose of the sentence is to describe the monarch, not – as in the first case – to condemn him.

These and related criticisms of value-neutral conceptions of social inquiry, I want to suggest, provide good reason to view a “rational” approach to social inquiry as consisting in a “reflexive social practice,” which actively investigates the ways in which the normative and empirical aspects of social inquiry are interwoven. For they serve to show how our empirical claims and judgments *presuppose*, or *are reliant on*, or *convey* “normative judgments,” or themselves “*have*’ normative implications.” For instance, to foreshadow what I will later elaborate: If we do not have a way of judging facts *apart from* our epistemic values, then our empirical claims and judgments must *presuppose* a knowledge of normative judgments; if descriptions, and so explanations, of social affairs employ concepts that already “mix” fact and ethical value, and these “components” cannot be “peeled apart,” then whichever of our empirical claims or judgments invoke or rely on those concepts also, therefore, *convey* normative judgments; if an empirical claim or judgment *presupposes* and/or *conveys* a normative judgment, then it must, in some sense, *rely on* it; and if the self – as certain varieties of “expressivism”³⁷ would have it – is not a static or fixed entity but one that is rather *defined* [or rather *becomes* “*itself*”] *through the very activity of expressing or articulating itself*, then the empirical claims

³⁷ For a discussion of one variant of expressivism, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Taylor writes: “My claim is that the idea of nature as intrinsic source goes with an expressive view of human life...In realizing my nature, I have to define it in the sense of giving it some formulation; but this is also a definition in the stronger sense: I am realizing this formulation and thus giving my life a definitive shape. *A human life is seen as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation*; it is not just a matter of copying an external model or carrying out an already determinate formulation.” (1989, pp. 374-75; my emphasis)

or judgments we *make* in that activity may serve not just to *describe* the object in question [the self] but also to *give it shape* – in which case those claims or judgments would *themselves* “‘have’ normative implications” (for they would, then, not just *describe* the self but also serve partly to *constitute* it – and, moreover, in ways that partly have to do with how the self *wishes* or *prefers* to do so).

Such forms of reflexive investigation, I will be arguing, are necessary aspects of “rational” inquiry; without them, we are liable to undermine the very *purpose* of engaging in moral dialogue: to determine what positions we are assuming or are able or willing to assume responsibility for. For without them, we are liable, in *certain* cases, not to grasp the potential (or actual) *moral* (or *ethical*) significance (or implications) of what we say (and so do). And this means, as we shall see, that we may undermine our ability to understand our own “*considered* interests,” as well as those of relevant others – and so to engage in “rational” moral dialogue and interest representation too.

But in order convincingly to be able to make those arguments at a later point, it is useful first to consider how several objectives sometimes associated with value-neutral inquiry stand in tension with the basic aims of a deliberative conception of democratic practice (and so, in that context, should be regarded as potential sources of “irrationality.”)

Two Related Sources of Potential Irrationality: The Explanation/Understanding Dichotomy and the Avoidance of Agents’ Self-Descriptions

Suppose, for example, that we were to adopt an approach to social inquiry, following certain proponents of value-neutrality, which does not consider agents’ self-understandings or self-definitions, which does not consider agents’ own professed reasons for acting, their own reasons for preferring things as they do. What I want to claim is that we would, then, undermine our own basis for evaluating whether our preferred decisions could potentially be regarded as

mutually acceptable. As deliberative democrats, our approach to empirical “description” and “explanation” would serve then to undermine our “normative” aims.

To see the potential inconsistency here, between a “value-neutral” understanding of social inquiry and the explicit aims of dialogue and deliberation, it is useful first to note several of the reasons why some – particularly those who have accepted the natural sciences as providing a model for the social sciences – have felt a strong inducement to want to bypass the self-understandings and self-definitions of the actors they study. To accept the natural sciences as providing the model for how social inquiry should be conducted has meant, for many adherents to that view, that inquiry should aim to produce a verifiable, predictive science. cursorily summarized, the principal objective of social inquiry, on this view, is to predict, or to allow us to derive, the pattern of observable social and historical events, and the regularities they exhibit – and to do so, moreover, in a language that allows for unequivocal verification.

Once we consider the supposed means of its realization, however, this objective can be seen to stand in clear tension with how we typically (believe we) come to understand an agent, or a set of agents. In our ordinary, everyday usage, when we say that we have come to “understand,” or to “get,” or to “comprehend” others’ motives and actions, or our own, we typically employ concepts like “charitable,” “brave,” “generous,” “mean-spirited,” “cruel,” “vindictive,” and so forth. In our everyday lives, that is, we tend to understand our own understanding of others, and of ourselves, as deeply dependent on our ability competently to deploy such descriptive terminology. When we say that we have arrived at such understanding, moreover, we also typically say that we have come to “explain” their motives and behavior. Consequently, we typically view our ability to “understand” human motives and actions as dependent on our ability to “explain” them *in terms that make use of precisely this kind of*

terminology. In our everyday view, that is, we tend to see “description,” “explanation,” and “understanding” as, we might say, *interwoven*. For us, to “understand someone” just *is* to be able competently to describe and explain her motives and actions.

This line of reasoning can help us to see why some have felt a strong enticement to view the development of a predictive, verifiable science as dependent on a strict separation between “understanding” and “explanation,” and so also to want to bypass agents’ self-understandings and self-descriptions in “explaining” their activities or behavior. But the same may be said, in fact, of those who have placed less stress on “prediction,” of those who have instead emphasized the need simply to “describe” and “explain” social patterns and regularities in terms amenable to “unambiguous verification.” For if “understanding” is dependent on competent usage of the kind of descriptive terminology that I have just spoken of, and if “explanation” itself is too, then “explanation” in human affairs will have inevitably to enter into the descriptive morass that such usage frequently entails. For, as I will be detailing, we will have then to recognize that “competent” deployment of such terminology is *intrinsically* context-dependent, imaginatively sensitive, and, what is perhaps most troubling, deeply dependent on the moral or ethical virtues of the narrator in question. And this recognition clearly stands in tension with several of the most important tenets – several of the most resolute ambitions – of certain conceptions of a “science of society.”

Now, I want to defer a more extended defense of these views until a later point; I am just using these claims as a way of opening up a certain problematic that is relevant to our more immediate concern with the tensions between “value-neutral” social inquiry and the aims of dialogue and deliberation. But to make the tensions I have in mind now initially more transparent, a few further observations will here be useful.

To begin with, notice several features of what deploying such descriptive characterizations involves.³⁸ Following Elizabeth Anscombe and Charles Taylor, we might describe the kind of understanding we are considering here as involving the application of the “desirability characterizations” which define an agent’s world. When one comes to “understand” another, one comes to understand her emotions, her desires, what she appreciates and finds deplorable in others, and so on. One’s ability to formulate this understanding consists in one’s ability accurately to apply the desirability characterizations that she herself applies in the manner in which she herself applies them. If, for instance, the agent in question loathes “pretentious” people, then understanding her demands that one be able to apply the concept of “pretentious” in the sense it has for her. However, it is necessary also to observe that some aspects of what the agent feels, desires, yearns for, loathes, and so forth, may be unformulated for her. Thus, to state more accurately what is involved here we could say the following: the explicit formulation of what one understands when one understands another requires that the interpreter grasp the desirability characterizations that the agent in question *herself* “clairvoyantly” uses, or else those which she *would* use if she had arrived at a more reflective formulation of what she feels, desires, yearns for, etc. (Indeed, on the view of “interpretive social science” articulated by Taylor, it is precisely these kinds of “self-descriptions” [in the extended sense of that term just specified] that are essential for identifying the very *explananda* of social science.)

But let us now notice, with Taylor, that there are several features of such desirability characterizations that create problems for “science,” as this term is frequently construed. I have already said that “understanding” ourselves, and others, entails that we be able accurately to ascribe such terms as “charitable,” “generous,” “vindictive,” and so forth. And with regard to

³⁸ The arguments in this paragraph and the next basically trace, though not in all their details, those offered in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 118-120.

ways of life, I should now add, it also entails competent usage of terms like “fulfilled,” “integrated,” “free from illusion,” or negative descriptions like “false,” “shallow,” “hollow,” and so forth. Such terms, however, cannot be intersubjectively validated in an unproblematic way, as a verifiable science would hope; for whether or not a life is truly “fulfilled” or actually “shallow” is a matter of possibly interminable interpretive wrangling. What is more, we tend to hold that there are, or may be, certain pre-conditions of character for the successful discrimination of these qualities. Accordingly, if we are to employ such concepts, we cannot at the same time hope for replicable findings on the part of any “scientifically competent observer.” Or rather we might say that “scientific competence” depends here on certain developments of character and sensibility that are themselves only identifiable as such from the viewpoint of persons who have attained them. Furthermore, the terms in question are intrinsically evaluative; indeed, they are what we might call “*strongly* evaluative.” For, as Taylor says, “the goods putatively identified are not seen as constituted as good by the fact that we desire them, but rather are seen as normative for desire. That is, they are seen as goods which we *ought* to desire, even if we do not, goods such that we show ourselves up as inferior or bad by our not desiring them.”³⁹ And since the terms of scientific discourse are thought, ideally, to offer a value-free account, we again have a mismatch between the use of such desirability characterizations and certain aspirations to a science of society. Finally, note that since these desirability characterizations are culture-influenced, our reliance on them appears to undermine the ambition of a universal science of society. For “to describe people in *their* terms is to describe each culture in *different* terms, and terms which are incommensurable, that is, which have no exact translation in other languages.”⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120; my emphasis.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; my emphasis.

In sum, these observations suggest why an approach to social inquiry that bypasses agents' self-descriptions would seem to be, for that very reason, inadequate. For they suggest that – at least on our own common-sense interpretation of interpersonal “understanding” – such an approach will undermine our own ability to understand those agents. (They also help to clarify a claim that we will pursue at greater length later on, namely, that description, explanation and understanding are *all* intrinsically context-dependent, imaginatively sensitive, value-laden, and dependent on the moral or ethical virtues of the narrator in question.) But what I want now further to clarify is the way in which, for a deliberative conception of democratic practice, such an approach is especially disastrous.

The basic aim of a deliberative conception of democracy is to articulate the most justifiable way of dealing with moral disagreement in politics.⁴¹ To do so, it affirms the need for citizens and their representatives to *justify* decisions to those who are bound by them. To reiterate, the moral basis for this affirmation is the idea that citizens are to be treated as agents, as persons capable and deserving of participation in the governance of their common affairs (either directly or through the intermediation of their representatives). And treating one another as so capable implies, in turn, that agents present the reasons for their preferences, and that they respond to others' reasons in kind. But again, to count as a process of *moral* reason giving, those reasons cannot be of just any kind. To justify imposing one's choices on others, agents' reasons must be addressed to the relevant others' cares and commitments; otherwise, they will not bear on, will not help to elucidate, their positions *truthfully*, and so will not serve as an adequate basis for *mutual* justification. But if addressing the relevant others' cares and commitments, if illuminating their positions truthfully, also entails that we try to “understand them,” as it surely

⁴¹ Cf. Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, especially chapter 1.

must, then we can see also why mutual justification entails that we competently deploy precisely the kind of desirability characterizations we have been considering. Accordingly, to the degree that social inquiry attempts to *avoid* such deployment, it shows itself up as inadequate for the demands of mutual justification.

There is, however, a further point here. If we assume that it is not always the case that every agent potentially affected by the laws or policies in question is included in the relevant dialogue and deliberation – if we assume, for instance, that some form of representation is operative – then it becomes clear that “mutual justification” will have to proceed, in part, *imaginatively*. If relevant constituencies cannot directly “speak for themselves,” then actual participants will have to take on the burden of learning imaginatively “to speak *for* them.” But then it becomes still clearer why an approach to social inquiry that does not consider agents’ own reasons for preferring things as they do, does not consider agents’ self-descriptions or self-understandings, cannot serve as an adequate basis for evaluating whether proposed laws or policies could potentially be regarded as mutually acceptable. “Informed” moral discourse presupposes, we have said, that the protagonists are well informed about the actions and agents in question; and this implies, in turn, that “rational” forms of inquiry are so to inform them. In such cases as where agents cannot directly speak for themselves, however, “rational inquiry” takes on a still more specific meaning. “Informed” dialogue and deliberation depend, then, on the ability of actual participants to represent those who cannot represent themselves; and this implies that “*rational* inquiry” partly must mean, in this context, “*inquiry that adequately and appropriately helps them do so.*” If actual participants do not know how even to *try* to “speak for” relevant agents who are absent – because they do not understand those agents’ own reasons,

their self-understandings – then they can make no defensible claim *to* “represent them.” “Rational” social inquiry should help them defensibly make that claim.

A Third Source: The Labeling View of “Rational” Language Use

Consider now a second potential inconsistency. Suppose we were to adopt a view of “rational” or “meaningful” language use that sees it exclusively as a tool for *labeling objects*, instead of as a tool both for labeling objects *and* for self-expression. (This, in fact, was the position taken by the logical positivists and many of their followers.) If we do so, we will not see the need to evaluate the consistency of our self-expressions *as well as* that of our label use. What we *will* see (among other things) is the need to ask: do we consistently call that object “X” when it appears before us? But what we will *not* see (among other things) is the need to ask: do we convey the same normative valence (say, the same disapproval) when we discuss *our own* activities as we convey when we discuss the activities of *others* (of which we explicitly disapprove) – when, that is, those activities are essentially the same or essentially comparable? If we are not consistent in *that* sense, too, clearly our claim to “rationality” comes into question here; but a value-neutral conception does not raise this question, for it does not even recognize the self-expressive functions of our language use – not, at least, where “rational” or “meaningful” language use is what is in question. Consequently, the adoption of a value-neutral conception of social inquiry can lead to irrationality, because it does not engage in the appropriate kinds of (linguistic) self-reflexivity. And, clearly, such irrationality is relevant to the interpretation of our own interests, and to those of others – and so to the questions of “mutual justification” and “equal (deliberative) interest representation” with which we are concerned here.

A Fourth Source: The Theory/Practice Dichotomy

But these are not the only sources of irrationality, and so of potential interest *misrepresentation*, worth stressing here. A further, related source concerns the fact that value-neutral conceptions of social inquiry have often endorsed the misleading view that the natural sciences can provide us with paradigms for the appropriate methods and procedures of social science. While the social sciences can no doubt learn from the natural sciences, and even appropriately emulate certain of their practices, this view is misleading because there are also fundamental *disanalogies* that we should bear in mind here.

Perhaps the most fundamental of these – as Charles Taylor has stressed – concerns the relation of theory to practice.⁴² In the natural sciences, theories are about “independent” objects. Here the relationship of knowledge to practice is that one applies what one knows about causal powers to specific cases, but the truths about the powers that one counts on are believed to remain unaltered. Thus, while we may say that natural science theories can “transform practice,” the practice that is transformed is not what the theory is about. By contrast, social theories are *not* about independent objects; rather, they can shape the practices to which they are relevant, as we can see by recognizing that they are theories about practices, which are partly constituted by particular self-understandings; and in so far as our theories transform these self-understandings, they may undercut, bolster, or otherwise shape the constitutive features of our practices.⁴³ And this raises different problems of validation in the social sciences. We cannot simply say that a theory is right when it corresponds to the facts it is about, because, put simply, our social theories are about our practices, and their rise and adoption can alter these practices. And this makes it

⁴² This paragraph is closely based on, but slightly re-articulates, the arguments in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, pp. 101-102.

⁴³ Compare Anthony Giddens, “Hermeneutics and Social Theory,” in *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 13: “The technical language and theoretical propositions of the natural sciences are insulated from the world with which they are concerned because that world does not answer back. But social theory cannot be insulated from its ‘object-world,’ which is a subject-world.”

clear that our theoretical formulations can serve more than just descriptive or explanatory or predictive purposes, as these are typically construed. For we may come to formulate a certain self-understanding – employ certain self-descriptions or self-explanations – so as to make it possible to continue a practice, or to reform it, or to rationalize it; and so on.

The attempt to model the social on the natural sciences, however, mistakenly encourages us to see social theories as simply concerning the description, explanation, and prediction of an *independent* reality, and consequently to ignore the question of what *other* purposes our theories might serve. But if it is true that they often *do* serve such purposes,⁴⁴ as I believe it is, then the attempt to make social theories into natural-science type models can lead us to the irrational standpoint which this failure implies: it can lead us *not* to inquire – openly and self-reflectively – into our own purposes in theorizing. If we begin from the supposition that our purpose in social theorizing is *merely* to “describe” social phenomena (or *merely* to “describe” social phenomena so that we might better “explain them” – “as they truly, or in fact, are”), then our attention will be directed away from the need to inquire into how our descriptive or explanatory choices may themselves help to *produce* those same phenomena; or how our manner of describing or explaining certain of our own actions may be tied to a need to rationalize them; or how, for reasons of power or status competition, we may be (wittingly or unwittingly) disinclined, individually or collectively, to deploy certain descriptive terms or explanations, ones which we would otherwise – if we had arrived at a more reflective understanding of our own cares and commitments, or were simply more honest – view (and openly declare) as appropriate; and so forth.

IV. Summary

⁴⁴ I shall later attempt to substantiate this claim.

In the preceding pages, I have made an initial attempt to outline a critique of a value-neutral conception of social inquiry. And I have attempted to show how, in the direct context of the democratic process, certain goals sometimes associated with such a conception may be viewed as potential sources of “irrationality.”

First, we discussed why many proponents of value-neutrality have felt a strong incentive to want to erect a strict categorical distinction between “understanding” and “explanation,” and, relatedly, to want to bypass agents’ self-descriptions or self-understandings. For “understanding,” on our common-sense view, involves the accurate ascription of (what we have called) desirability characterizations. And these terms present certain challenges for a “science of society”: they cannot be intersubjectively validated in an unproblematic way; they refer to concepts that are clearly culture-influenced; and they are intrinsically evaluative (and, at least in some cases, “strongly” so). Moreover, we tend to hold that there are, or may be, certain pre-conditions of character for the successful discernment of the qualities to which they refer. However, the attempt to avoid such terms stands in clear tension with how we typically, in our everyday lives, view the process of coming to understand another person, of what that entails. On our everyday view, to “understand” someone just *is* to be able competently to describe and explain his motives and actions. As we have said, “description,” “explanation,” and “understanding” are, for us, *interwoven*. Consequently, the attempt to avoid agents’ self-understandings (so as to avoid the use of desirability characterizations) can undermine our attempts at mutual understanding, just as the attempt to separate “explanation” from “understanding” (also to avoid the use of desirability characterizations) can too. And since mutual *justification* depends, in some measure, on mutual *understanding*, that which undermines the latter can undermine the former. *In this way, attempting to avoid agents’ self-descriptions or*

self-understandings can undermine the aims of mutual justification, and consequently, on a deliberative view, the aims of the democratic process itself. Because the criteria of effective participation and enlightenment are both dependent for their proper articulation on our third criterion, that which undermines mutual justification may also be said to undermine the first two criteria.

The second source of irrationality concerns the fact that some understandings of “value-neutral” inquiry have endorsed a view of “rational” or “meaningful” language use which sees it as a tool exclusively for “labeling objects,” rather than as a tool for labeling objects *and* for self-expression. On the labeling view, it is unnecessary to evaluate the self-expressive aspects and functions of our language use; these simply fall “outside” the domain of “rational discourse,” which simply concerns “matters of fact.” But we have seen why this view is indefensible. For one thing, “factual discourse” itself raises, is dependent on, questions of epistemic value *as well as* ethical value. Consequently, to evaluate the rationality of even our *factual* discourse, it is necessary to evaluate the consistency of both the labeling aspects and functions of our language use *as well as* the consistency of its self-expressive ones. (The same is true, I will be suggesting, of ethical and moral discourse more broadly.) Yet these are requirements that the labeling view does not see. Accordingly, it does not see the need to engage in the kinds of self-reflexive (linguistic) inquiry that are needed for rational self-clarify. *In this way, the labeling view may serve to undermine the criterion of enlightenment, as well as the processes of mutual justification that, on my account, are constitutive of the democratic process itself. For understanding our own considered interests, and those of relevant others, is a task that demands rational self-clarity, just as genuine mutual justification is.*

The third source of irrationality we have considered concerns the fact that some value-neutral conceptions have overlooked the need to inquire into the purposes *aside from* description, explanation, and prediction that our theories may serve. Taking the natural sciences as the basic model for how social science should be conceptualized, many have overlooked the fact that in the social sciences theory can transform its own objects. As suggested, this oversight has led many *not* to see the need to inquire self-reflectively into the full range of purposes that our theories might serve. But if we accept the presumption that our theories sometimes *do* serve such additional purposes – or if we can show that, in practice, this is so – then it becomes clear why this standpoint is irrational. For it may obviously lead us sometimes to mistake, or to overlook entirely, certain of the purposes of our own theories, and so *to misunderstand the interests that they may serve*. Consequently, *it does not provide an adequate basis for the evaluation of our own considered interests, nor for the processes of mutual justification that presume to help us articulate them*.

In brief, we might now attempt to summarize by just saying this: In the direct context of the democratic process, “rational” social inquiry should be crafted so as to facilitate a knowledge of where we are reflectively willing and able to stand, a knowledge of our own considered positions in a moral dialogue. For the truthful articulation of our own considered interests, those of relevant others, and mutual justification are each dependent on it. Such self-knowledge requires, in turn, that we endeavor to avoid the sources of irrationality that certain conceptions of social inquiry can easily lead us into – including, among others, those we have just considered. However, it also requires that we *actively* seek to understand the desirability characterizations that agents themselves clairvoyantly use, or else those which they *would* use had they reached a more reflective articulation of their own desires, motives, and interests. And this is true as much

of social scientists – or, what I here prefer, of “social inquirers” – as of those they study. Such understanding requires, I have suggested, that we develop our ability (continually) to identify, at least in imagination, with the evaluate viewpoints of relevant others.