

Goodin, Robert E. *Reflective Democracy*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. 320. \$46.79 (cloth).

Robert Goodin's approach to democratic theory takes questions of belief more seriously than the recent tradition in democratic theory, which is fixated on preferences. This school of thought is at an early stage, but Goodin advances the cause considerably. He does so, not by settling many of the important questions (I have much to argue with below) but by beginning to demonstrate the rich set of resources and ideas that this less preference-obsessed approach has at its disposal. Even where his arguments fall short, they nevertheless help to set a new philosophical agenda in democratic theory.

Normative theories of democracy have proliferated recently. "Deliberative" theories normally oppose themselves to "aggregative" conceptions of democracy, those that take voter inputs as given (usually conceived as expressed preferences) and concentrate on alternative ways of moving from there to an outcome that summarizes or aggregates the inputs. Deliberative democratic theory, by contrast, emphasizes the formation of the preferences and views that will eventually be brought together in a vote. Aggregation is fine in the case of beliefs, Goodin argues, because there are grounds for thinking that aggregated beliefs tend toward correctness. Reasoning both from Condorcet's Jury Theorem and from Bayes's Theorem, he argues that beliefs can be brought together to make groups highly accurate. Values, though, unlike beliefs, do not have any place in either of those theorems, and so they call for different handling. A person's vote brings together beliefs and values, and so a simple aggregative approach to votes fails to do justice to people's values.

Condorcet's Jury Theorem is a mathematical proof showing that (simplifying here), if voters on some binary choice on which there is a correct or better decision are, on average, individually better than random, then majority rule in a large group tends to get the right answer with high probability. The mathematical result is beyond dispute, but it only applies under certain preconditions. One is that enough of the voters must be statistically independent. This is often misunderstood. On the overly pessimistic side, many have said that this cannot be met since there will always be lots of influence one on another. Few will be independent of each other. What the theorem requires, though, is not causal independence but statistical independence. The chance of one person voting correctly should not be different given that some other voter voted correctly. This is compatible with some degree of deference to opinion leaders. On the overly optimistic side, some, including Goodin (125–26), have said that all the Jury Theorem requires is that enough voters make up their own minds rather than intentionally altering their votes to follow some opinion leader. But that is clearly not enough. It is logically possible for voters, each of whom makes up his or her own mind, to vote identically time after time. If too many voters did that, it would radically violate the independence requirements of the Jury Theorem, which mathematically depends only on correlations, not intentions. How much influence across voters the theorem can tolerate and how much is present in any realistic democracy are questions that are not yet well understood.

In its classical form as proven by Condorcet, the Jury Theorem explicitly

applies only to binary choices. This can look very restrictive. As many say, political choices are complicated, the narrowing of choices down to two is just the last stage in a process that starts with many more, and so forth. However, elections and referenda do often present themselves as binary. Whatever process leads to that moment, the binary choice precondition is, starting at that point, fully met. Again, I don't believe that this question is, as yet, adequately understood.

Nevertheless, it is enormously important if the binary choice condition can be relaxed. Goodin has contributed to a small literature arguing that it can be. The reasoning can't be presented here, but the main conclusion of the argument is this: when there are three or more choices, if each voter is more likely to vote for the (objectively) best alternative than they are to vote for any of the other alternatives, the chance that the best alternative will win a plurality increases with the size of the group of voters.

Some aspects of this result are underwhelming. For example, with three alternatives, the chance of a plurality getting the right answer climbs quickly with the size of the group if voters' individual competence is better than .5. But .5 is not a very interesting number when the alternatives are three or more in number. It would be a competence substantially better than random, and so a substantial assumption that would need some warrant. Another underwhelming result is that the correct answer is more likely to win than any other single alternative. This isn't much use when there are several other alternatives, since their probabilities of winning are cumulative. Even if the correct answer has better chances than any other answer, the chance of it winning might be far less than the chance of some erroneous answer or other winning.

The most interesting aspect of the result is one that Goodin tells us too little about. It is the fact that the chance of the correct answer winning increases with the size of the group. The stunning thing about the classical binary choice theorem is how fast group competence goes up with the size of the group even when individuals are not much better than random. For example, the group competence is above .999 if individuals are only .55 and the group is only 1,000 people, smaller than a small town. We know from the paper upon which this chapter is based (coauthored with Christian List) that, in a group of 1,001 voters with three alternatives and voters just slightly better than random (.34 chance of the right answer, .33 chance of the wrong answers), the chance of the best alternative winning a plurality is .489, which is not an enormous leap from the .407 achieved by 301 voters. What I would like to know is how large a group must there be before voters who are just barely better than random would be virtually certain to give the correct answer a plurality when there are more than two alternatives. Neither the chapter nor the original paper gives any indication of the answer.

A deeper worry concerns the assumption that voters are better than random. The problem is that factual errors, prejudice, and other factors could, for all we know, outweigh the average voter's margin of better-than-random competence, at least on matters that are sufficiently contested that they end up being settled by a vote. I think Goodin is too sanguine about this crucial parameter in the Condorcetian approach.

Add to this the problem of how to count alternatives. Even if we allow the assumption that voters are at least a little better than random, we need to know

what random competence would be. In the Condorcetian analysis, what random competence means when there are k alternatives is getting the correct answer with a probability of $1/k$. Two alternatives give a random competence of $1/2$ or $.5$, four alternatives $1/4$ or $.25$, and so on. Consider a choice among three alternatives: A, B, and C. If we suppose, a priori, that voters are a little better than random, we might let them have, say, a $.34$ chance of getting the right answer and a $.33$ chance of getting each of the wrong answers. In a large enough group, Goodin says, the right answer is almost certain to be a plurality winner. But suppose that we presented the choice differently: A versus the disjunction of B or C. By leaving the choice between B and C for later, the choice is now binary. Supposing that the best choice is A, then our assumption of a $.34$ chance of getting the right answer means that the right answer is now very likely to lose to the disjunction of (B or C). Since the choice is now a binary one, are we suddenly entitled to suppose voters must be at least a little better than $.5$? This would be quite a promotion, but on what basis? If, however, $.5$ seems the more reasonable assumption, then why can't we read that back into the three-way framing of the choice? But that lets us assume that voters are far better than random, since random would only be $.33$. Why think that they are far better than random? This problem might seem limited to the special case in which at least one of the alternatives is disjunctive. But the selection of almost any law or policy leaves significantly different possible ways of instantiating it, not just in the means employed but also in the ends. So lots of political alternatives are disjunctive, and so the disjuncts could have been presented as separate choices, giving rise to the difficulty I have pointed to. This difficulty about how to count alternatives raises questions about the a priori assumption that voters can be assumed, for Condorcetian purposes, to be at least a little better than random. And without that assumption, the Jury Theorem gets us nothing.

The Jury Theorem makes no use of interpersonal communication. The Bayesian model has a small social element: participants must be able to revise their opinions in light of information about how many people had certain opinions in the last round. Still, knowing the results of a poll or a vote and using it as data is still nothing like hearing people explain their opinions. Discussion is still utterly absent from the model. Goodin appeals to the traditional story of blind men touching different parts of an elephant and all having a different "view" of what is before them. If they can talk with each other there is some hope that they can figure out that it is an elephant, though none could do this alone. But neither the Jury Theorem nor Goodin's application of Bayes's theorem models the blind men sharing their perspectives. Under majority rule, if they were better than random individually, the group (especially if it is large) will have a surprisingly high chance of being correct. But, of course, they won't be individually very competent, since we know they are each inclined to say that, no, it is not an elephant. That is the end of that story from the Jury Theorem's point of view. Any epistemic improvement in the story must come from elsewhere. Bayes's Theorem adds a layer. After the first round of opinions, each should revise his opinion in the direction of the majority. But this is clearly not going to help anything. If anyone had been suspecting it was an elephant, the large majority against them would disabuse them of that notion, on Bayesian reasoning.

The way to bring their perspectives together is for them to talk to each other and to do so before any polls or votes are taken. Each could hear what the other is experiencing. Some could offer hypotheses about what might explain all the data. People could raise objections to these hypotheses and offer alternatives. Only then might some or all of them come to think about its possibly being an elephant. Since all of this takes place beyond the horizons of Condorcet and Bayes, so does much of the most important epistemic work in politics.

Goodin admits that this is just “aggregation” and not really reasoning. “Where values are at stake . . . the proofs that vouchsafe the truth-tracking power of democratic politics are formally inapplicable” (148). The reason for this distinction is that Condorcet and Bayes require that certain answers count as better or correct by some standard other than merely the outcome of the aggregation. But notice that, if some laws would improve justice compared to the status quo and their quality is not simply the fact that a majority would vote for them, then we have all the Condorcetian and Bayesian approaches require. Whether or not we think those two approaches promising, we should not easily accept that, when values are at stake, notions of truth and correctness are inapplicable. That would be an inauspicious prelude to any attempt to understand rational persuasion, a notion that would seem to depend on the truth-bound concepts of premise, inference, fallacy, and so on. (Insofar as some noncognitivist theories of value can supply adequate versions of these notions, they are very likely also to supply whatever the Condorcetian and Bayesian approaches require.)

“Democratic deliberation within,” one of Goodin’s central ideas, is the bringing to one’s mind the variety of perspectives and supposed arguments of many others who are not present but whose interests are at stake in some political decision. Goodin’s main point about democratic deliberation within is what we might call the *efficiency of imagination*: because there are too many people, and they are too far away, and there is too little time, we must imaginatively represent people’s perspectives internally.

One difficulty is that insofar as there are too many people to actually hear them all, there are too many points of view to imagine them all. Goodin suggests, quite rightly, that, once we have internalized a view of many perspectives, we can bring them to bear on our thinking all at once, intuitively, in a way that doesn’t require a series of appointments in which to consider each one (188). But that’s true whether we internalized them by actually hearing them or by imagining them. It doesn’t tell us how we find the time to internalize all those perspectives in the first place.

A second point against resting the case for democratic deliberation within on the efficiency point is that much of the value Goodin attributes to it is present even where the person’s actual voice can be heard. Novels and other imaginative exercises help me understand even my family, my neighbors, and others with whom I have every opportunity to communicate. Indeed, Goodin himself often argues that the same mechanism is involved in all communication.

There is much for democratic theory to learn from Goodin’s idea of democratic deliberation within. I doubt, however, that its value rests in the efficiency of imagination, its ability to overcome the problems of time, distance, and numbers of other people. Those problems remain. But an imagination that is educated about different kinds of lives and different kinds of people is bound to

be an important ingredient in morally adequate reflection and deliberation about political issues. This has implications for cultural policies, as Goodin emphasizes, but also for democratic theory's conception of what a voter is called upon to do in deciding how to vote.

Goodin argues that many beings other than humans have interests that ought to be equally considered in political decisions. Since they have no voice, it might seem that democratic deliberation within would have obvious application. Actually, in my opinion, it doesn't. Democratic deliberation within is a more specific idea: in seeking to give equal consideration to the interests of those with whom we don't have the opportunity to hear or speak, we ought to seek to understand what they would say for themselves if they could be heard. When it comes to whales and Sequoia trees, though, giving due weight to their interests is not a matter of asking what they might have to say for themselves, or seeking to understand their point of view. ("If a lion could speak," Wittgenstein claimed, "we could not understand him.") The model of "imagining what that sort of person would say to us" (224) might apply to future generations, but Goodin runs them together with other mute interests (224) such as animals and natural objects.

Goodin also makes a separate point. He argues that the old idea that the interests of slaves or wives are incorporated or subsumed in the interests of masters or husbands might have decent application in the case of nature or future generations. Perhaps those interests should be seen as subsumed in the interests of actual living political participants. This would be very convenient, of course, just as it would be (in one respect) if wives' interests never conflicted with those of their husbands. The problem is that, as with husbands and wives, the interests of certain natural objects or of future generations seem just as likely to conflict as to resonate with the interests of actual participants. We can't simply choose to subsume or incorporate them if they conflict. As a result, unless voters vote on some basis other than their interests, other legitimate interests are doomed. This point is as fateful for persisting minorities as it is for future generations or natural objects. Neither democratic deliberation within nor incorporation of interests finds a proper place for the interests of beings with nothing to say where those interests conflict with the interests of political agents.

Goodin believes in democracy, not because the people are always right but (at least partly) because the people, properly motivated and situated, can do the right thing, maybe even better than the wisest elite. No grand claim of this kind is meant to be argued for here, but the incorporation into democratic theory of the goal of getting it right is a shot across the bow of elitist or authoritarian models that might claim to do better. There is much work left to do along these lines, of course. The epistemic mechanisms that might support this approach—especially involving rational persuasion—are not worked out here, and the underlying normative theory in which the epistemic aim is integrated with liberal and democratic principles is not meant to be treated thoroughly. But this book is a central contribution to an exciting young school of thought. By bringing his concern with beliefs and collective cognitive practice into engagement with an enormous range of scholarship on politics—ranging from empirical and rational choice research to liberal and postmodern normative

theory (the bibliography runs thirty-six pages), Goodin has helped this emerging strand in democratic theory to find a permanent home.

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Graham, Keith. *Practical Reasoning in a Social World: How We Act Together*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xi+202. \$55.00 (cloth).

This short, clearly written book argues that certain universal features of the social dimension of human life have previously unappreciated normative implications. Keith Graham contrasts his approach to normative theory with the method of reflective equilibrium. He thinks that, once we have seen that universal social facts have normative implications, we can obtain normative conclusions that are not tied to the values of a particular culture, as the method of reflective equilibrium inevitably is. Graham does not restrict normativity to morality, however. He has much to say about the moral implications of the facts he cites, but he is wary of the primacy that many writers accord to moral considerations. Especially important for Graham is the possibility that his approach can contest more effectively than the method of reflective equilibrium the individualism that is dominant in Western cultures.

Graham begins by setting up a foil. Much contemporary moral and political thought derives normative conclusions from what it takes to be a universal fact of human life, the distinctness of persons. Graham helpfully identifies four different ways this idea might be interpreted. Qualitative distinctness is the view that persons, by which Graham means individual persons, exhibit a number of properties that are not exhibited by entities of any other kind. Distinctness as separateness is a doctrine about boundaries. Persons considered individually are distinct from each other. They live their own lives, each with separate experiences, behavior, and ideas about how that life should go. This sense of distinctness is closely connected with the view that the best state of affairs is one in which as many people as possible are successfully carrying out their plans. Distinctness as integrity is the idea that each individual human life displays a certain unity and coherence; distinctness as uniqueness is the idea that each human life is different.

Graham does not deny that there are individual persons, or that, in some sense, all the forms of distinctness he has distinguished are features of human life. But he believes that contemporary moral and political theory has exaggerated the importance of these facts. He regards the first two senses of distinctness as fundamental, so the discussion in the book focuses on them.

Distinctness as separateness is challenged on the ground of the causal interconnection of individual lives. This calls into question the picture of a large number of plans that can be separately pursued. One point Graham makes is that virtually every action has causal consequences for the lives of other people. This leads him to criticize John Stuart Mill's harm principle, as well as the idea that democratic theory can rely on a distinction between preferences for oneself and preferences for others (which Graham calls "nosy preferences"). The most