

The Public Sphere of Democracy and the Wisdom Tradition

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Abstract

The essay addresses contemporary trends in modern democracy, especially focusing on the transformation of the public sphere. It seeks to answer the following question: how can we strengthen ideologically diverse spaces of public discourse today in light of the social trends toward homophily and echo chambers? Specifically, it addresses the way in which modern political discourse has been transformed by social media and broader social and economic trends. Furthermore, it raises questions about the future challenges of discourse ethics and ideal conceptions of overlapping consensus in our contemporary context of pluralism. The role of the media in this broad public sphere is also addressed. An ideal-type conception of the wisdom tradition, one which can strengthen the channels of communication, is offered as a response to these trends. It is a pattern of thought capable of embracing the ambiguity.

Keywords

democracy – public sphere – wisdom tradition – Jürgen Habermas – John Rawls

1 Introduction

One of the core elements of democracy is the dynamic exchange of ideas in the public sphere through open channels of communication. This dynamic exchange aids the public in decision making and ultimately in self-governance. Today the broader dynamics of the public sphere have changed, especially when

one compares our situation to the situation of the middle or second half of the twentieth century. The speed of communication and the mediums of communication have changed, but also the official organs of news and the authorities and sources which interpret them. Even the very posture of media and media communication has undergone a transformation, including its role in society at large. Beyond this, the public sphere today is often corrupted with misinformation. As a general issue of human nature, this is obviously not new, and it has plagued every free society and democratic culture since their emergence. There is no way to eliminate this entirely, for freedom of opinion and the freedom of wrong opinion is a constitutional right in all modern democracies.¹ Yet there are limits to the expression of this freedom, and it is not absolute. With view to the American tradition, Supreme Court Justice Francis W. Murphy's opinion in *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942) demonstrated that:

There are certain well-defined and narrowly limited classes of speech, the prevention and punishment of which has never been thought to raise any Constitutional problem. These include the lewd and obscene, the profane, the libelous, and the insulting or 'fighting' words – those which by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace.²

In addition to these limitations, others have been specified that Murphy did not mention here. These "content-based restrictions"³ (also called "unprotected expression") are the subject of academic debate in jurisprudence. Today, for example, the term "fighting words" has become its own *terminus technicus* with multiple interpretations, some still protected by the First Amendment.

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- 1 This is anchored in the Bill of Rights (the first Ten Amendments) in the American tradition, where the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States states: "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*" Stone/Seidman/Sunstein/Tushnet/Karlan, *The First Amendment*, p. xxv, emphasis added. This is of course also closely related to the freedom of religion, see: Breidenbach/Anderson, *The Cambridge companion to the First Amendment and religious liberty*. Indeed, as Horst Dreier argues, in a functioning democracy, "no one has the right to remain unbothered by provocative, unsettling or even from (felt to be) offensive opinions or appearances." Dreier, *Vom Schwinden der Demokratie*, p. 79.
 - 2 *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568 (1948); as cited in Collins, *Foreword*, p. x. See also Bollinger/Stone, *The free speech century*, and Demaske, *Free speech and hate speech in the United States*.
 - 3 See Stone/Seidman/Sunstein/Tushnet/Karlan, *The First Amendment*, pp. 129–284.

Beyond this limited range of unprotected expression, public discourse in free societies and specifically the validity claims of opposing parties and opposing representatives of ideological positions stand under the critical watch of civil society, and are tested by rational discourse within the broader public sphere. Yet how can instances of misinformation be unmasked when the broader dynamics of sociality today drive us into isolating and self-differentiating enclaves, in which only those information sources are embraced which are carefully selected to affirm the preconceptions of the echo chambers in which we all live (to differing degrees)?

At a fundamental level in most Western societies today, to varying degrees, we are witnessing a broad and complicated, cultural, social, economic and demographic transformation. In the United States this is often called the loss of “social capital”. With this, there is a troubling “opportunity gap” and many signs of social inequality, some of which were exacerbated by the Financial Crisis of 2007 and 2008.⁴ There are also many signs of polarization, cultural and social estrangement and hostility. We are also witnessing a new version of the old conflict between cosmopolitan philosophies and worldviews (including the social and political visions) and an anti-cosmopolitan, anti-multiculturalist, anti-globalist/globalization neo-nationalism (or neo-conservatism, neo-localism or neo-isolationism), that is sometimes nativist or even racist, and other times apparently post- or multi-ethnic (at least in its self-understanding). This specific “cosmopolitan/anti-cosmopolitan conflict” runs through families, churches, communities and is becoming more visible in parliaments across the Western world, especially in the debates about immigration.⁵ Another primary driver of polarization, social unrest, anti-immigration sentiment and the new political tensions on the right and left is a well-known economic dynamic and its associated pressures on the middle class, working class and something between the working class and the impoverished: the temporarily employed (occasionally unemployed) and always economically vulnerable class (“precariat”). Some (certainly not all) of the causes of this phenomenon came from 1990s globalization including the massive disruption of economic security through industrial outsourcing and labor and welfare reforms, but also the rising cost of living and the stagnation of purchasing power (even with increasing nominal wages). Especially since the Financial Crisis, the overall wealth (nominally) of the Western nations has increased, yet this was won primarily through the stock market explosion, and benefits not only the

4 See Putnam, *Our kids*.

5 See Ward, *Cosmopolitanism and its discontents*; Peterson, *Reformation in the western world*, pp. 168–170.

entrepreneurial class, but also a proportionally very small group on the very top of the economic ladder. By contrast, “the 60% least wealthy households [across the industrial countries, the OECD] own little over 12% [of total household wealth].”⁶ These economic issues are a major part of the problem of social estrangement and polarization, for the feeling of instability and insecurity (which comes to expression in remarks like “the system is rigged against us!”) drives people (who then willingly and not only passively adopt this, and make it their own) to find a “way out”, and sometimes this is found in radical rightwing ideology, and other times in radical leftwing ideology. In many cases, it also encourages people (who act not only passively in this, but also actively) to find a scapegoat, like “the foreigners”, and more often than not (as we know from history) Jewish people. Contemporary anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are just one example of this today.

While there is indeed evidence of significant social polarization in these regards, it is not a fundamentally new phenomenon in free societies. Viewed from a historical perspective, it is a reoccurring phenomenon with different levels of intensity. The issue of polarization has received a lot of publicity, and some media outlets have added fuel to the fire. In terms of market driven media, there is a vicious cycle at play, for media companies can and do profit from polarization. In many cases, however, a soft consensus behind the polarization is often left unmentioned in the reporting and opinion pieces, whether it is regarding core values of individual rights, liberty, democratic principles of representation and equality, the status of law and even for the most part the economic system as a freely operating market economy (which could of course be improved and made more fair).⁷ There are also many shared discursive spaces in which ideologically diverse groups interface with one another. Generally, however, we seem to be living in an era in which these *diverse* or *shared* discursive spaces are diminishing to some degree. One of the trends of our time seems to be the diminishing social association of *ideologically diverse* spaces: neighborhood restaurants or bars, as well as the many different

6 Balestra/Tonkin, *Inequalities in household wealth*, p. 4; see also Standing, *The precariat*; Paus, *Global capitalism unbound*. Recently, Thomas Piketty (*Capital in the twenty-first century* and *Capital and ideology*) has very rightly drawn attention to this problem, even if his solutions may not be effective, and may lead to negative economic consequences.

7 See Peterson, *Reformation in the western world*, pp. 161–168. In the United States, for example, according to a recent study: “55% of Americans had a negative impression of ‘socialism’, while 42% expressed a positive view.” Of this group that has the positive view, only 4% name “better than capitalism” as their reason for their positive view. 31% of this group, the largest cross section, mention this reason: socialism “creates a fairer, more generous system”, while 20% named this reason: socialism “builds upon and improves capitalism”. See Pew Research Center, *In their own words: Behind Americans’ views of ‘socialism’ and ‘capitalism’*, p. 2.

neighborhood clubs (such as fire departments), memberships in religious organizations, political party memberships, voluntary school boards, and most volunteer organizations have all come to realize this shift. These shared discursive spaces of civil society are places where people who disagree about some things, and agree about many others, come together and have shared experiences of life together, despite their disagreements. These spaces are vital for a functioning democratic culture; and today, more than in past generations, there is a need to strengthen these areas of shared discursivity, and to foster dialog in them. While there are indeed parallel communities of interpretation within the social and political orders in which we live, the points of overlap and the points of dialogical exchange between these are essential for preventing these parallel communities from becoming parallel worlds. In the worst case, this could lead to the destruction of the bonds of solidarity and eliminate the foundation for mutual support, which is essential to all our public institutions. At the international level, as well, it is essential that our shared discursive spaces are strengthened, especially when considering joint efforts to address the common challenges of humanity.

Ecclesial communities are involved in this public sphere passively and actively, being both influenced by the transformation but also influencing it to a certain degree. While churches today no longer marshal the same level of influence in cultural, social and political realms as they did in the 1950s or 1960s, ecclesial communities must be true to their own self-understandings and the high ideal of a unity in diversity. They also have their role to play in society at large, and must find ways to support the peace of the city and the broader cohesion of society in the promotion of the common good, while also raising awareness for and supporting the poor, marginalized and weakest members of society. As is addressed below, the prophetic tradition and the wisdom tradition (which are treated as ideal types) offer unique contributions to these shared discursive spaces and provide us with a framework for reflecting on it from a theological-ethical perspective. Before turning to this, however, the nature of the above-mentioned transformation must be addressed.

2 “A Space of Reasons” and the “Dynamics of Homophily”: The Transformation of the Public Sphere

The concept of a “public sphere” is rooted in and related to an older tradition of thought regarding the idea of common sense, and really the basic idea of a democratic forum or marketplace, epitomized in the Athenian Agora. This is an intellectual tradition that had one major zenith in Thomas Reid (1710–1796),

but which is older than the Scottish Enlightenment, having various roots and unique expressions in Platonic and Aristotelian ideas of reason, prudence and “common sensibles” or Cicero’s *sensus communis*. It has been articulated in various ways with John Locke and Immanuel Kant, and it is presumed in wisdom literature when it addresses wisdom, counsel and prudence, or theologically in the idea of a priesthood of all believers. The Cartesian *bon sens*, most authors of pragmatism, common language philosophy, discursive ethics, Karl-Otto Apel, Bernhard Peters and Jürgen Habermas all employ the idea in various ways. It is foundational to democratic cultures based upon egalitarianism and the belief that every human being, by virtue of their common sense, is capable of understanding the world, responsibly acting within it and taking responsibility in self-government.⁸ If one considers only the tradition of Enlightenment era thought, Immanuel Kant’s remarks from 1784 on enlightenment, reason, freedom and the slow, gradual and liberating transformation of the “herd” are a classic example of the basic idea of the public sphere as it is often understood today (in terms of discursive rationality of a common human intellect). Kant argued that the fact that

a public [*Publikum*] should enlighten itself [...] is nearly inevitable, if only it is granted freedom. For there will always be found some who think for themselves [...] and who [...] will spread among the herd the spirit of rational assessment of individual worth and the vocation of each man to think for himself.

This is a slow process, for “a public can achieve enlightenment only gradually. A revolution may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression, but it can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking.” Indeed, in this process toward the development of critical thought, “nothing more is required than *freedom*; [...] the freedom to make a *public use* of one’s reason in all matters.”⁹ The underlying religious dimension presupposed in this conception of a given human rationality was occasionally remarked upon in the debates of the eighteenth century, for example in Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s essay from 1793, *Reclamation of the freedom of thought from the princes of Europe, who have oppressed it until*

8 For a general overview, see Delaney, *Common sense as a paradigm of thought*; on the commonsense realism of Thomas Reid (*Inquiry into the human mind on the principles of common sense*, 1764) and its influence on the American tradition, including John Witherspoon, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. See Peterson, *Reformation in the western world*, pp. 138–140.

9 Kant, *An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?*, p. 59. The above citations are from this page.

now, where he clearly makes use of the argument regarding spiritual equality when addressing the princes and the need for freedom of thought and the advancement of open debate in society. He declared to the princes: “your fellow citizens are not merely citizens of states, but also of the spiritual world in which you hold a rank no more elevated than theirs.”¹⁰ Equality in the “spiritual world”, as one may conclude, necessitates the freedom of thought and ultimately the status of equality in the social and political realms. This view of a fundamental equality of human beings and the universal reality of human reason is essential to the idea of a society governed by common sense and the freedom of thought. There are also many points of continuity between this and specific impulses from the Reformation period (as well as Baruch Spinoza, John Locke and Thomas Jefferson).¹¹

An enlightened social and political order encourages freedom of thought and the free use of reason in the public sphere, beyond the realm of private life. The term “public sphere” (also called public forum, public arena or the marketplace of ideas) may be understood as encapsulating the totality of human sociality in its public dimension, and more precisely the specific realm between the private life and the political structures governing society.¹² Most of the literature dealing with it today approaches the concept as a philosophical, political, social and cultural theory of democracy. The idea can also be differentiated and limited to only those actors within a given society who participate in and seek to increase the dialogical process, and thus strengthen solidarity (a public sphere within the broader civil society). In this reading, it can be understood as a type of “secular faith”.¹³ This situates it in the theoretical

10 Fichte, *Reclamation of the freedom of thought from the princes of Europe*, p. 136. He wrote: “Prince, you have no right to suppress our freedom of thought [...]” Ibid., p. 135. Later he claimed: “The wealth you distribute was never yours; it was a trust that society placed in your hands [...]” Ibid., p. 136. Ultimately, he argues: “Only those around you who advise you to advance enlightenment have true confidence in you and true respect for you. [...] Hear only them, and they will give you their advice without being praised or paid.” Ibid., p. 139.

11 See Peterson, *Reformation in the western world*, chapters 4 and 5.

12 For an excellent introduction to the conceptual framework and history of the concept of the public sphere, see Koller, *The public sphere and comparative historical research*. As Koller remarks: “Public communication is communication to an anonymous audience, potentially engaging everyone. Constituted by an ongoing process of communication open to strangers, it is not a reified entity.” Ibid., p. 263.

13 Jeffrey C. Alexander claims that the true “civil sphere” is not identical with civil society. The true sphere is rather “a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time. Such a sphere relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of principle, not experience, because of our putative commitment to a common secular faith.” Alexander, *The civil sphere*, p. 4.

realm in a virtually Schopenhauerian altruism, and thus seems to overlook the real plurality of sources through which solidarity can emerge (including synergetic self-interest in “win-win” situations), or in the strange moments of ethical-overlapping between even mutually exclusive religious traditions (many of which remain robust today).

By contrast, in the pragmatic and consequentialist theory of John Dewey the dynamic interplay of reflexivity is expressed more strongly. Dewey was one of the first (after Kant) to conceptualize the idea of a “public” as used in contemporary sociology. In *The public and its problems: An essay in political inquiry* (1927) he argues: “Direct, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences.”¹⁴ With the term “common interest” Dewey was locking into an older tradition of political thought in America, one going back to the founding period. At the fundamental level of his concept in the 1920s, the “public” is understood as a self-emerging group of people who recognize their shared situation, and seek to improve it or influence it together. Coming to understand this interconnected nature of social life and seeking to guide the influencing powers in their consequential nature is essentially the birth of a public. This social philosophy is basically a cultural theory of democracy, providing a theoretical reflection on the underlying dynamic of political reality. Democracy is understood as a moral approach of living together, the work of deliberation, participation, argumentation and the general exchange of ideas. There are multiple “publics”, as he sometimes refers to the idea in the plural,¹⁵ and holding the various “publics” together is the great challenge of democracy. In one of his famous lines, Dewey argued that “the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy.”¹⁶ It has to do with a

free give-and-take: fullness of integrated personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reinforce one another and their values accord. Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.¹⁷

He proposed a vision of not an exclusive community but a “Great Community” in which this “give and take” is enacted, and in which there is an accordance

14 Dewey, *The public and its problems*, p. 314.

15 Cf. Dewey, *The public and its problems*, p. 320.

16 Dewey, *The public and its problems*, p. 327.

17 Dewey, *The public and its problems*, p. 328.

of “values” (while unique individuals always emerge within various groups). This is the essence of democracy and its purpose, for it embodies the “art of communication” (which enables a space for the “give and take”) and works to form a general coherence and accordance of values. Democracy “will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communications.”¹⁸ The public is the realm of this community forming communication in which democracy is perfected as a great community.

The public sphere is brought to expression not only in print and digital media, but also in the realms of general human interaction in civil society, both at the level of daily life in person (in the bodily presences of cultural, religious, social and political communities), and, as one would add today, in the daily life of digital communication and in the shared social life as this is experienced in this digital realm. All these realms of human sociality, at the micro-, the meso- and macro-levels, entail spaces of discursivity, where even semi-private conversations can take on a public dimension or become a part of the public discourse.

The public sphere is also the place where the self-understandings of modern democracies are both self-consciously internalized and externally enacted. The ideals of democracy, and the actual function of the democratic system, are reflected upon and enacted in these discursive spaces of the public sphere. In these spaces, the values and goals of a body politic, as a collection of equal and free individuals imbued with the power of common sense and organized in representative parties, become recognizable; they are also the spaces in which traditional customs and conventions are practiced, handed down from generation to generation, which in turn form habits of life and build upon the living traditions as they emerge in both continuity and discontinuity with the past. The constitutional and legal foundations of a given political order are grasped as living realities within these spaces, although they themselves transcend the discursive spaces by virtue of the authority vested into them by the body politic in its constitutional establishment. By contrast, in mob rule, for example, a specific discursive space of one limited cross-section of the body politic (or an individual “public”) asserts itself as the representative and determinative instance of the whole and enacts its will against the whole. The danger of “populism” is rooted in this underlying conviction that marginalizes the official representatives of the whole. In this dangerous situation, a specific discursive space of a group of individuals, being only *one cross-section* of the whole body politic and one dimension of the public sphere, misunderstands itself as the

18 Dewey, *The public and its problems*, p. 350.

representative of the whole and thus arrogantly and foolishly asserts its own self-interests without acknowledging the interests of others, and thus disregards the objective realities of modern political order, in which self-interests are always moderated by the interests of others. This can become even more radical and lead to the rejection of the objectively established form of this necessary mediation in representative parliament and in the tripartite order of government as it is anchored in modern Western constitutions.

Discursive spaces are ultimately governed by the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the state in liberal democratic societies, but the cultures of the spaces emerge from a much broader panoply of sources, and actually form the underlying life-world in which the tripartite system of government has its own meaning. In this process of mutual influence and interdependence between these realms, the political reality of human life in the tripartite system is reflected upon in the cultures of the discursive spaces. Thus, the political reality influences them, just as it is itself influenced by the cultures of the discursive spaces. Indeed, the day-to-day life of the steering and guiding institutions of modern democracies, including the specific instances of the tripartite government, political parties, educational institutions, think tanks, political organizations, churches, etc., and the leading features of their very ideals and hopes for peace, prosperity, justice and happiness are enacted and self-realized within these spaces of discursive interrelationship.

One of the most influential theoretical approaches to the public sphere in the second half of the twentieth century was offered by Jürgen Habermas, who emphasizes especially the role of the media in the public sphere. Habermas sees the public sphere as a realm of discursive rationality wherein public opinion emerges intelligently, being weighed and measured in the process of discursive interaction in the marketplace of ideas. As a modified expression of Kantian rationalism, Habermas believes that democratic civil societies are in a continual process of rational analysis. In this, we are continually analyzing and making judgments about the claims to truth within shared discourses in our life-worlds. As he argues, these conversations about the truth, about validity, about what is right, reasonable and applicable, must be carried out among equals and established within the broader political communities that understand themselves as equals. Furthermore, all of society should have access to these discourses; therefore, they must be open conversations that use language that can be understood by the broader public, and not only in exclusive communities of interpretation. In this idealized conversation among equals in a sense of openness and in a shared searching for the truth, tested opinions and reliable or considered positions within a specific discourse arise as consensually accepted standpoints of validity on the basis of reasoned argument.

This is a clear alternative to authoritarian forms of human sociality, on the one hand, and to relativism, on the other. Habermas writes that the “deliberative paradigm” has its central reference in the “democratic process.”¹⁹ This in turn generates “legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will formation” which is transparent, inclusive and reasonable. The reasonable nature of this legitimacy is itself dependent upon “the assumption that institutionalized discourses mobilize relevant topics and claims, promote the critical evaluation of contributions, and lead to rationally motivated yes or no reactions.” This all flows from the democratic process of “deliberation”, which is indeed a “demanding form of communication”, yet one fundamentally rooted in the “*daily routines* of asking for and giving reasons.” It is a deliberation that flows from this “space of reasons” in our daily life. In this we make “validity claims”, which we presume can be “proved” and which we hold to be “true or right or sincere, and at any rate rational.” Thus, there is an “implicit reference to rational discourse”, or “competition for better reasons”, that is already inherent in our daily life of “communicative action”. This process of reason-giving and reason-challenging is an inherent dimension of our daily life, but it is also the underlying dynamic that enlivens and guides our civil society and steers our liberal democracies in the direction of justice.

The media plays an important role in this process, as Habermas argues: “the *dynamics* of mass communication are driven by the power of the media to select, and shape the presentation of, messages and by the strategic use of political and social power to influence the agendas as well as the triggering and framing of public issues.”²⁰ He acknowledges that there is an elite guiding this public sphere: “Mediated political communication is carried on by an elite.”²¹ This includes journalists, politicians, lobbyists, advocates, experts, moral entrepreneurs and intellectuals. Collectively, they foster a process of deliberation in the public sphere which in turn highlights issues of public concern, develops interpretation and opinion and ultimately offers the public a plurality of perspectives for democratic decisions.²² In the later twentieth century this was certainly the case. Today, however, the dynamics of the internet and social

19 This and the following citations from Habermas are from *Political communication in media society*, p. 413. On this theme in Habermas's work, see Habermas, *Between facts and norms*, chapters 7 and 8; and Fraser, *Rethinking the public sphere*; Calhoun, *Habermas and the public sphere*; Fraser, *The theory of the public sphere*; Nanz, *Public sphere*; Greve, *Jürgen Habermas*, pp. 21–42; Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 24.

20 Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 415.

21 Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 416.

22 Cf. Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 416.

media have transformed the nature of the public discourse. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of this public deliberation is the generation of a “a plurality of considered public opinions.”²³ Bernhard Peters’ understanding of public deliberation is a critical background concept here, according to which media outlets of a given society both join diverse groups in a common discourse and also filter out false opinions or deceptive claims.²⁴ In this, as Habermas argues, the media must work autonomously and have “functional ‘independence’”.²⁵ Habermas sees “an informal hierarchy” in the media, which itself “accords the national quality press the role of opinion leader.”²⁶ He argues that “[t]here is a spillover of political news and commentaries from prestigious newspapers and political magazines with nationwide circulation into the other media.”²⁷

When considering our situation today, Lewis A. Friedland and Thomas Hove correctly argue that these views regarding the media are now in need of reanalysis. Among other things, this systematic theory “overestimates the degree to which media systems have remained autonomous from political and economic influences.”²⁸ Furthermore, it fails to see how media today no longer operates in a “one-way, top-down direction”,²⁹ indeed the deeply networked, digitalized and interconnected media world today no longer has exclusive rights to the older filter function. Today, many people “get their news” (as we say today with two potential meanings) from non-traditional sources. In summary, as Friedland and Hove argue: “Habermas’s model cannot account for the degree to which publics have become politically and culturally polarized.”³⁰ The ideal of a custodial and chaperoning media system which serves the public good as an independent actor (an idea which is still quite dominant in Germany) is undergoing a transformation today, in which the structural differentiation between journalism and politics sometimes seems to be unidentifiable.³¹ Today, “many

23 Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 416.

24 Cf. Friedland/Hove, *Habermas’s account of truth in political communication*, p. 25. See Wessler, *Public deliberation and public culture*. Apel is also in the background, although Habermas did not follow his arguments for ultimate foundations. Apel himself was familiar with Charles S. Peirce’s critical common-sense theory.

25 Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 419.

26 Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 419.

27 Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 419.

28 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas’s account of truth in political communication*, p. 25.

29 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas’s account of truth in political communication*, p. 25.

30 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas’s account of truth in political communication*, p. 25.

31 Cf. Friedland/Hove, *Habermas’s account of truth in political communication*, p. 26. The older model, which is still very influential, was deeply influenced by a specific cultural, social and political development after World War Two and leading up to the 1970s in which “structural differentiation in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe

of Europe's media systems are highly elite-directed and politically dominated, while those in the English-speaking world are market-driven."³²

The world we live in today is one characterized by the shift to a new "infotainment", which is less about careful arguments and dialog than making fun of the opposition.³³ Our context is also influenced by the shift from the "blogosphere" to social media. Since "the mid-2000s, social media contributed further to fragmentation processes in the formation of public opinion and the circulation and public reception of news."³⁴ In this shift, "forms of rational argument necessary in a deliberative public sphere were largely subordinated to the dynamics of the emotion-driven, cacophonous argument characteristic of the Internet."³⁵ Rather than raising a standard of unity, an interpretive framework of events and political discussions which includes different interpretations, some media outlets are now contributing to the polarization of society and to the formation of "ideological echo chambers."³⁶ With this, the "dynamics of homophily, or the tendency to select others in one's network who are similar to oneself"³⁷ are minimizing contacts and fostering "self-isolating enclaves."³⁸ In this development, everything seems to be politicized and polarized.³⁹ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett have recently argued with view to the situation in the United States that "Partisan hostility [...]

reached a high point." At that time, the media "attained their greatest degree of autonomy and professionalization". (Ibid., p. 26) In the mid-twentieth century, "the press served as the site for developing public opinion by generating and circulating truth claims, thematizing social problems, and influencing collective belief." (Ibid., p. 26) It was equally influential in the legislative process and in governance. The old days are now largely gone when three or four major newspapers and a handful of television broadcasting networks dominated political opinion. Partisan reporting has become the new norm in the wake of this old consensus model in the United States.

32 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 26 et seq. Here they draw upon Hallin/Mancini, *Comparing media systems*.

33 Cf. Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 27.

34 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 27. For a recent evaluation of the relationship between social media and the broader issue of polarization, see Putnam/Hahn, *Afterword*, pp. 415–446. Habermas did in fact address this development in part. See Habermas, *Political communication in media society*, p. 423, nt. 3, where he writes about the "rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world" that seem to encourage "the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics."

35 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 27.

36 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 29.

37 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 31.

38 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas's account of truth in political communication*, p. 31.

39 Professor of political science at Vanderbilt University Robert B. Talisse has recently warned against the contemporary tendency of total political saturation, or what he calls

is now even more intense than racial or religious hostility, both of which have declined over the years.”⁴⁰ An important question in this context is whether rational argument about the many important questions facing us in our liberal democracies is actually being promoted in this shift to social media and the multiplication of public or semi-public spaces of discursivity. As Friedland and Hove argue, we still need to learn more about “how people might *work through contradictions* in public discourse while constrained by heuristic reasoning on the one hand and embedded in network-structured media driven discourse on the other.”⁴¹ Indeed, the strengthening of the specific process whereby we work through contradictions is an urgent need today, and this is certainly one of the great tasks for civil society. On this note, Friedland and Hove emphasize the challenges ahead for democracy: “within the bifurcated public spheres of polarized politics, considered public opinion faces extreme difficulties in becoming formed, much less being processed to conclusion at the level of society-wide agreement.”⁴² Yet we must not give up hope, and the resources at hand are sufficient to address this challenge. Furthermore, it is important to keep the dimensions of this contemporary challenge in perspective, as a problem *in the function* of democracy, a problem that can be engaged *within* democratic societies that slowly (albeit often far too slowly) self-correct and self-govern.

If this is the new situation in which we find ourselves, and I think it is an accurate description, it is necessary to ask ourselves how we should participate in the public sphere, and if the current situation may actually require a new approach, an approach different than the approach commonly employed in the mid- and later twentieth century (at a time when the public sphere was marked by very different internal qualities and external dynamics). How can we strengthen the process of *working through* disagreement today? How can we strengthen the channels of communication? And how should we understand our disagreement in the first place? There is a need today to question the approaches that have been employed in the past, not to reject them as false paths, but rather to inquire into their effectiveness given the new situation. How do we advance the fundamental impulse of Dewey’s “great community” and Habermas’s theoretical analysis of the deliberative democratic process when considering the unique hallmarks of our time? How shall we

“overdoing democracy”, namely the tendency to politicize everything and see politics in everything. Talisse, *Overdoing democracy*.

40 Putnam/Garrett, *The upswing*, p. 97. See also *ibid.*, pp. 98–107 and p. 193 et seq.

41 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas’s account of truth in political communication*, p. 35, emphasis in original.

42 Friedland/Hove, *Habermas’s account of truth in political communication*, p. 36.

approach the question of discursive validity, and seriously engage the problem of enclave homophily?

One of the major figures of twentieth century political philosophy who has already addressed these questions is John Rawls.⁴³ Rawls and Habermas share a common tradition in Enlightenment era public reason, in the tradition of pragmatic thought, in democratic theory and a shared interest in the ideal of a “well-ordered democratic society”, as Rawls calls it.⁴⁴ In terms of his points of emphasis, however, Rawls proceeds differently. His conception of an “overlapping consensus” can help us to think about addressing the problems described above. In this, he seeks to “formulate a liberal political conception” that even “nonliberal doctrines might be able to endorse.”⁴⁵ This can be established within reasonable pluralism, as opposed to a hard consensus. He articulates this “reasonable overlapping consensus” on the principle of a higher civil conception of “reciprocity,”⁴⁶ rather than on fixed doctrinal agreements, which are determinative for specific groups. This overlapping consensus between different groups ultimately serves social and political stability, as that it is based upon the fundamental cooperation of society in fairness and in the general expectation of civic responsibility among all communities within society. The establishment of this overlapping consensus thus contributes to social unity and seeks to reduce the “conflict between political and other values.”⁴⁷ In order to realize the overlapping consensus in our shared understanding of social fairness and more broadly in the many other questions of social and political values and goals, we must have channels of communication between the different groups. Furthermore, there must be a generally accepted respectfulness for the reasonable pluralism and reasonable disagreement, and with this an appreciation for the complexities and inherent pluralism of human life and political order. Thus, the simple Rawlsian answer (or a part of the answer) to the question regarding how we work through disagreements, and how we can overcome enclave homophily, is that both phenomena are perennial to a certain degree, and cannot be overcome. The Rawlsian conception of an overlapping consensus is one in which reasonable disagreements is understood to be persistent feature of public life, and in which a certain degree of homophily and group-orientation is not viewed as fundamentally problematic. In both the case of the disagreements and in the case of the group-orientation, however,

43 Rawls, *Political liberalism*, lectures 4, 6 and 9 (his reply to Habermas); Charney, *Political Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Public Sphere*, pp. 97–110.

44 Rawls, *Political liberalism*, p. 248.

45 Rawls, *Political liberalism*, p. xlv.

46 Rawls, *Political liberalism*, p. xlv.

47 Rawls, *Political liberalism*, p. 140.

we require open channels of communication and an awareness of the elusive but real reciprocity holding the democratic society together. Addressing the challenges of social and political life today, especially when these channels of communication seem to be diminishing, and when the sense of shared destiny and mutual reciprocity seems to be more elusive than real, is the other part of the question; and Dewey, Habermas and Rawls answer it only partially. Thoughtful opinions in rational discourse, as necessary and good as they are, cannot by themselves build up these channels of communication and strengthen the sense of the great community. Charismatic intellectuals or the scions of elite academic traditions cannot alone form our shared will through discursivity, nor can the tolerant and liberal sense of open rationality alone lead us to discover our overlapping consensus. An understanding of the great community in the flow of communication (in the “give and take”), discursive common will formation and the liberal toleration of difference in reciprocity by the discovery of an overlapping consensus all describe the practice of well-ordered democracy at work and in theory. Yet this *practice* also needs and presumes broad based character formation, which emerges in our families, religious communities, educational institutions, cultures and societies, and reliable habits of reciprocal interaction at the local political level, mutual respectfulness and a sense of forbearance at all levels of society, circumspection in moments of heated conflict, humility in our public interactions, self-criticalness, reserve and long-term consequentialist (or outcome-oriented) thinking in our political opinions. In these senses, the need for the wisdom tradition today becomes evident. The great society can only emerge through a culture imbued with wisdom, and the virtues it brings to mind.

3 **The Prophetic Tradition and the Wisdom Tradition in the Public Sphere**

Any contemporary perspective on events in our past is always blessed with the full benefit of hindsight, and thus an abstract distance, one which enables fuller reflection and a wholeness of perception that does not rely upon intuition and speculative argument. By contrast, making judgments on events and claims as they happen contemporaneously has no such luxury, and thus the lived reality of sociopolitical life in all its ethical and religious dimensions must work with the few given knowns in a world of many unknowns, must operate within a state of interrelatedness, in which the inseparable fluctuations of truth, half-truths and lies coexist, vying for status within the evaluative frameworks of human reasoning. The honest jury of civil society, aided by experts,

intellectuals, representatives of interest groups, and our media outlets, with all their strengths and weaknesses, must work through these claims regardless of the ambiguity, yet it must do this in a way that *acknowledges the ambiguity as a condition of the judgment itself*. The challenge of self-government is brought to expression in this realization, for it is enacted in the realm of the known and unknown, and within the limitations of human existence. It is carried out in the hopes that those things which are known and the power of common sense are ultimately sufficient resources to be employed in the enterprise of free, democratic government, as it is structured within the framework of unalienable rights, liberty and the rule of law.

Truth claims or assertions of validity in the various spaces of discursive reflection run along a scale of certainty when scrutinized. At the highest levels of certainty, we have empirical facts that have been demonstrated multiple times by multiple instances of critical analysis. At the lower levels of certainty, we have a conglomerate of circumstantiality, or a mixture of impressions or mere assertions, and in some cases an accompanying interpretive framework to hold these together. Below this set, we have the phenomenon of theoretical speculation, and below this the fictional substratum of imagination, both in its positive moment of optimism and in the negative moment of pessimism. Our shared spaces of discursivity, in the various nodes of bodily social life and in the supra-localities of medial existence and information exchange, are places of reflective evaluation in which claims to truth are situated subconsciously and consciously on the scale of certainty. On the surface, we see only momentary appearances of this process of evaluation, at the subconscious level, however, it is unfolding continually in one direction, or the other, or simply suspended in a state of tension.

The function of humor and the classical role of comedians and court jesters in this phenomenon of sociality is to push the scales in both directions beyond the comfortable limits, thus disturbing the subconscious states of suspension or the movements in their inherent momentums. Religion, if one presumes a general sense of the term roughly common to the theistic traditions, has a different role in this phenomenon. It plays with a fundamental and somewhat exclusive insight into reality itself, and presumes a specific view of reality in which, as the prophet Amos records, the “one who forms the mountains” and who “creates the wind” also “reveals his thoughts to morals”.⁴⁸ Religious thought expands the imaginative framework to a wholly new level of reflection, grounds the scale of evaluation in a deeper logic of being or supra-personality, narrativity or human meaning, and thus casts our view to a

48 Amos 4:13 (NRSV); the following citations are from Amos.

higher level of inherent human desire, the hopes of the final reconciliations, of peace and divine blessedness, when the conflict is over, when the “mountains shall drip sweet wine” (9:13), when the “fortunes” (9:14) are restored, when the destroyed cities are rebuilt, and again vineyards and gardens flourish (9:14). This hope comes, however, only after the “day of the Lord” (5:18), when the final instance of authority inaugurates the resolution and determines the ultimate judgment. It is a moment characterized by “darkness, not light” (5:19), “gloom with no brightness in it” (5:20), a terrifying moment of human existence and sociopolitical crisis: “Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord?” Those who “trample on the poor” (5:11) will come under judgment, as well as those who “hate the one who reproves in the gate”, and those who “abhor the one who speaks the truth” (5:10). How terrifying it will be for those who “push aside the needy in the gate” (5:12), or for those who make the consecrated voices of truth to muddle up their thoughts and “drink wine”, or who command the prophets that they “shall not prophesy” (2:12).

If one thinks of these matters in terms of Weberian ideal types, Amos is characteristic of the “prophetic tradition.” The prophetic voice is embodied in this essential paradigm, and it remains an important part of our contribution to the public sphere. It is not, however, in the first instance, concerned with a specific precision in its articulation of judgment, nor does it seek in the analysis of judgment the cultivation of impassionate neutrality. It is not the voice of reasoning and reflection, weighing out the options and speaking to two sides of issues. It does not situate itself on the horizon of measurement, or habitually draw upon the language of weights and scales. It is concerned with a specific judgment, a rejection, an assertion of the divine voice on a specific issue *without ambiguity*. Arguments are not postulated against one another, as if both sides actually spoke some of the truth. Arguments are rather presented as if only one side is truth and the other error (“darkness, not light” 5:19). This moment in the prophetic tradition is necessary to awaken us, but it cannot help us to work through the disagreements. For this, we need the wisdom tradition – something essential for the “good life”, for “shalom” in all its dimensions, for functioning public spheres and for character formation.⁴⁹

49 The following remarks are both addressing and extrapolating upon the wisdom tradition, thinking of it as a collective impulse of practical thought, one embodied especially in Proverbs but also represented chiefly in Job and Ecclesiastes (which are not addressed here, nor are the older traditions reaching back to the reports about Solomon, or the later traditions in the New Testament, such as James). Crenshaw’s magisterial study *Old Testament Wisdom* distinguishes the general concept into two moments, one more practical, the other more philosophical or religious. On this reading, the remarks above would be emphasizing the practical dimension. Crenshaw also sees a unified purpose, however:

In wisdom – which cannot be reduced to purely operationalist pragmatism or entirely separated from the abstract realm of human knowledge⁵⁰ – we have a specific analytical and critical pattern of thought, one which stands alongside the prophetic voice, but which is ultimately independent of it.

The “wisdom tradition”, if one thinks of it in a unified sense, operates not only in the moment of judgment, but also considers the moral implications of the potential outcomes of events. It raises a mirror up to itself, and also up to the prophetic voice. It does not remain in the diastasis of objective evaluation, but also turns the critical eye onto itself as a part of the religious dimension of discursivity. The prophetic ideality in the shared spaces of discursivity – in which the evaluative energies are released and the moments of full diastatic opposition, or the idealistic visions of possible futures, are realized – is itself called into question in its finality by the moral thought of the wisdom tradition. Reinhold Niebuhr was enacting this when he criticized a one-sided optimistic view of humanity that ignores the negative dimensions of self-interest: “the children of light are foolish not merely because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the children of darkness. They underestimate this power among themselves.”⁵¹

The prophetic voice, in its righteousness, in its speaking the truth, always runs the risk of hiding its own self-interest, of forgetting the blind spots of its criticism and of situating itself as the final instance of judgment within the discursive space it shares with others – others who are also plagued by self-interest. The contradictory impulses in which human sociality is established invalidate, as Niebuhr argues (with view to the specific political discourse of

“The goal of all wisdom was the formation of character.” (*Old Testament Wisdom*, p. 3.)

McLaughlin also grasps this holistic sense. In his introductory chapter on the “Nature of Wisdom” in *An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Traditions*, he emphasizes the purpose of “wisdom” (ḥokmâ) as going beyond mere theoretical knowledge. Indeed, it is about the mastery of life that leads to the classic concept of “shalom”, ultimately a state of flourishing and well-being. In this regard, wisdom is essential to the solutions to the problems addressed above in the public sphere. It is one moment within the broader “Old Testament conception of the good life”, as R. Norman Whybray describes with the terms “(1) security; (2) a land to live in; (3) power; (4) food and sustenance; (5) a long life; (6) wealth; (7) family; (8) justice; (9) laws; (10) wisdom; (11) pleasure; (12) trust in God.” Whybray, *The Good Life in the Old Testament*, p. 6.

50 While the practical wisdom of Proverbs is fundamentally experiential and pragmatic in orientation, and embedded in this more general conception of the good life, it cannot be entirely separated from the more abstract realm of knowledge, as Bruce K. Waltke argues: “Wisdom and knowledge are inseparable, for mastery of life’s experiences demands knowledge of the divine moral order, the nexus between cause and consequence.” Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15*, p. 178.

51 Niebuhr, *The children of light*, p. 11.

his time), “the simple distinctions between good and evil, between selfishness and altruism, with which liberal idealism has tried to estimate moral and political facts”,⁵² He claims: “the egoistic corruption of universal ideals is a much more persistent fact in human conduct than any moralistic creed is inclined to admit.”⁵³ The wisdom tradition neither transcends the prophetic nor butresses it (as if it were merely a servant to it), it rather answers it, and thinks after it, integrating it within the framework of the limitations of life, seeking to enable the implications of the prophetic and draw them into their fulfilment, but also to ensure that there will always be a free prophetic voice in the new networks of interdependency that are created. Prophetic thought calls us to judgment, calls us to justice and calls us to the divine perspective on our sinful existences; but the voice of wisdom reminds us of our inherent egocentricity, the fragmentation of human life and conduct and casts our view to the potential canalization of the prophetic impulses for the survival of the shared life together. It aims not for an idealistic elimination of the egocentricity but rather toward its restraint and limitation, whereby the energy of survival and self-interest is made to bend into the service of higher principles and shared needs. The moral thought of the wisdom tradition seeks to enable the process of developmental transformation and assist it in its self-realization for the higher aims of shared human existence in all contexts of society and politics. It is a fundamentally universalistic approach to human life, yet one situated not on the horizon of ideality, but rather under the oversight of situational judgment, prudence and outcome rationality. The wisdom tradition seeks to illuminate the prophetic, and seeks to understand the voice of the prophetic not as an emotional whim but as truth, truth which must be embraced and accordingly responded to in the practical operations of social and political relations.

Mixed in with the counsel to seek justice and truth, the call to protect the rights of the poor, to resist immoral behavior, such as the strong arguments against adultery, the book of Proverbs returns again and again to the theme of practical judgment, prudence and rational thought, one which considers the consequences and underlying realities of human life in its deep tensions and contradictions. The fool and the wise, the haughty and the humble, the reckless and the careful are not simply different personalities but really, at a deeper level of analysis, alternative paths of life which every individual may or may not take in the course of their own life. The wisdom tradition teaches that fear of God, prudence and judgment are the key to success in the fullest sense of the good and fruitful life, both individually and collectively. Indeed,

52 Niebuhr, *The children of light*, p. 21.

53 Niebuhr, *The children of light*, p. 22.

“prudence will watch over you”⁵⁴ and therefore “keep sound wisdom and prudence” (3:21). It is embodied above all in a sense of humility in judgment and the self-critical moments of reflection,⁵⁵ which implies a slowness to judgment, a criticalness towards one’s own words and a prudent resistance to an argumentative spirit.⁵⁶ The humility is expressed in calm, cool and collected cautiousness, carefulness in speech and slowness to speech and to action.⁵⁷ Subjectively, it encourages the search for the underlying dimensions of conflicts, including the warning against quick judgments, false conclusions and the ever present foolishness of naivete.⁵⁸ It is deeply self-critical, calling for one even to overlook misplaced insults leveled against them, and conversely to take corrections to heart.⁵⁹ In turn, it sees the limitation of the individual perspective and thus affirms the necessity of the plurality of opinions in counsel, and thus the wisdom and security of counsel.⁶⁰ Ultimately, it aims for the

54 Proverbs 2:11 (NRSV); the following citations are from Proverbs.

55 “do not be wise in your own eyes”, 3:7; “wisdom is with the humble”, 11:2; “the wicked put on a bold face”, 21:29; “do not associate with hotheads”, 22:24.

56 “do not quarrel with anyone without cause”, 3:30, for those “caught by the words” of their own mouth should “go, hurry, and plead with your neighbor”, 6:3, “save yourself like a gazelle from the hunter”, 6:5.

57 “the prudent are restrained in speech”, 10:19; “whoever belittles another lacks sense, but an intelligent person remains silent”, 11:12; “rash words are like sword thrusts”, 12:18; “one who is clever conceals knowledge”, 12:23; “the clever do all things intelligently”, 13:16; “the wise are cautious”, 14:16; “a harsh word stirs up anger”, 15:1; “one who spares words is knowledgeable; one who is cool in spirit has understanding”, 17:27; “those with good sense are slow to anger”, 19:11; “the clever see danger and hide”, 22:3; “with patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones”, 25:15; “a fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back”, 29:11. These matters are in no way limited to the Jewish or Christian traditions alone. There are striking parallels to be found in very ancient Egyptian traditions: “Great is the reverence paid to the master of his temperament; the vociferous man is unjust in all eyes. [...] Patience is a man’s monument. Quietness is excellent, [calmness] is good.” “The ‘Loyalist’ Teaching,” p. 12 et seq.; in Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian poems*, p. 241. See also “The Teaching of the Vizier Patahhotep,” p. 474 et seq.: “Be composed! [...] Do not respond with uproar!” Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, p. 261.

58 “there is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death”, 14:12; “the simple believe everything, but the clever consider their steps”, 14:15; “sometimes there is a way that seems to be right, but in the end it is the way to death”, 16:25; “the purposes in the human mind are like deep water, but the intelligent will draw them out”, 20:5; “do not speak in the hearing of a fool, who will only despise the wisdom of your words”, 23:9; “when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it”, 26:25.

59 “those who hate to be rebuked are stupid”, 12:1; “the prudent ignore an insult”, 12:16.

60 “where there is no guidance, a nation falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety”, 11:14; “the wise listen to advice”, 12:15; “without counsel, plans go wrong”, 15:22;

highest ideal of precision in judgment, or critical and reflective thought,⁶¹ and strives for *utter impartiality*.⁶² The virtues of the wisdom tradition described in these summarizing remarks, and taken together with the prophetic voice, can help us to work through our disagreements, and cure many ailments in the public sphere today. Wisdom can help maintain the channels of communication in our homophilic public sphere today, in which a broader overlapping consensus can be achieved. Of course, wisdom has its own dangers as well, especially when the cunningness and the cool and calculating moments within wisdom overwhelm the prophetic voice, seek to silence it, or distract from its penetrating criticism.

4 Conclusion

With view to our contemporary situation, the moral tradition of wisdom thought offers important resources for the strengthening of democratic thought and culture today, for helping us to work through disagreement. The prophetic voice must not be neglected in a new emphasis on the importance of the wisdom tradition. The prophetic tradition is brought to expression today in many ecclesial and theological discourses (in both liberal and conservative forms of Christianity) and with view to public issues of moral debate. It is, however, a voice that can also contribute to polarization itself, if the wisdom tradition is neglected. Indeed, a part of the prophetic tradition is precisely this, the polarization of argument and the polarization of judgment in the interests of justice. The media-climate of the mid-twentieth century, and its essentially mediating wisdom-like function at that time, could be presumed by the prophetic voices of the mid- and later 20th century. Today, however, the new media-climate is no longer characterized by this dominant wisdom-like function. The older form of a moderating media has been replaced by a new media of positionality.

“wage war by following wise guidance”, 20:18; “by wise guidance you can wage your war”, 24:6.

61 “I, wisdom, live with prudence [or ‘inhabit cunning’], and I attain knowledge and discretion”, 8:12.

62 “a false balance is an abomination to the Lord”, 11:1; “whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence”, 12:17; “honest balances and scales are the Lord’s”, 16:11; “partiality in judging is not good”, 24:23. See also “The Teaching of the Vizier Patahhotep,” pp. 435–439, in Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, p. 259; “If you have the rank of a gentleman who belongs to the council, someone commissioned with appeasing the masses, shun negligence in judgement! You should speak, but do not distort!”

Especially in this new context, the prophetic voice needs to be accompanied with the voice of wisdom.

Obviously, the above remarks about these traditions are working with ideal types. There are moments in the prophetic tradition that resemble the wisdom tradition, and vice versa. These two traditions are in fact deeply entwined in the Biblical tradition, and they can also be seen in a way that emphasizes their complex plurality rather than in these moments of ideal form. In terms of application, the prophetic and the wisdom traditions clearly strengthen one another when joined together and thus exemplify a case of synergy, whereby the simultaneous collective effect is greater than the individual effect subsequently joined. This power of synergy in the combination of these traditions can strengthen the underlying cultural and social frameworks of democracy as ecclesial voices participate in the formation of public opinion. With this, another more fundamental issue deserves renewed attention today, namely the indispensable value of *forward moving disagreement*, or the positive dynamic of party interest and debate within a free society. There is not space to address this matter here, but it is also essential for understanding and responding to the problems addressed above. In societies ruled by the deliberative process of democratic representation and legislation, the fundamental problem of faction and disagreement must be harnessed and limited so that it does not destroy the political body or separate it into two. The cultivation of the virtue of wisdom, and wisdom's virtues, is a cure to many ailments in our public discourses today, but it will not change the fundamental reality of faction, nor should it try to. There is a need to reevaluate the liberal tradition from the standpoint of disagreement and faction, seeking to understand how this faction can be both a curse and a blessing.

Biography

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