

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Democracy after Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics.* By Robert B. Talisse. New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. ix + 162.

Democracy, argues Robert Talisse, has fallen on uncertain times: threatened from without by “antidemocratic forces such as nationalism, tribalism, and fanaticism” and from within by a “bewildered, disconnected, uninformed, and apathetic public” (2). This uncertainty persists and even deepens despite the apparent triumph of democratic ideals in the wake of the cold war, and despite the recent “explosion of information and communication technologies” (3), technologies that would seem to lend themselves especially well to the creation of an informed and engaged citizenry. The struggle of democratic ideals in a world that is otherwise uniquely favorable to democracy suggests, says Talisse, that “democracy must be rethought at the most fundamental levels” (5).

Despite the disheartening observations with which he begins, Talisse’s aim is to sustain rather than chasten our democratic hopes. He attributes the shortcomings in current democratic practice to what he sees as a misguided alliance between democratic and liberal theory, or more precisely between democracy and a particular brand of liberal theory—one that is committed to the proposition that the liberal state should remain “neutral” between the various moral and ethical commitments that its citizens hold, and should therefore refrain from taking sides in disagreements about the nature of the good life. Talisse does not mean to call into question fundamental liberal institutions, such as individual rights and the rule of law. He argues instead that “we must disentangle liberalism as a series of political commitments from the various liberal theories that have been proposed as philosophical articulations and defenses of liberalism”; we should seek “a conception of democracy that is not simply antiliberalism, but after liberalism” (8).

Talisse lays out his criticism of neutralist or “political” liberalism in chapters 2 to 4. He argues that liberals of this kind are caught on the horns of a dilemma: either they must seek to avoid controversial philosophical and moral premises, in which case they will find themselves unable to defend the legitimacy of liberal government itself, or they must provide a “robust” defense of liberal principles, in which case they must abandon their aspirations (or pretensions) to neutrality (e.g., 8–9, 37, 62–63, 79–80). This line of argument will be familiar to those who have followed recent debates in liberal theory, although Talisse’s discussion is distinguished by an especially thoughtful exploration of the moral foundations of liberal thought (chapter 2) and an unusually broad

engagement with the various liberal and antiliberal efforts to respond to the theoretical dilemma that it poses (chapters 3 and 4).

Talisso, like most theorists who have wrestled with this issue, seizes the second horn of the dilemma: he argues that the liberal democratic state is and must be engaged in a substantive (and therefore controversial) “formative project,” but he insists that we should think of this project as being “epistemological and not moral” in character (10). On this account, it is the responsibility of the liberal democratic state “to develop in [its] citizens the capacities and dispositions characteristic of excellent deliberation” (121), and this requires, among other things, that we establish “a constitution under which citizens are entitled to equal treatment and equal access to the political process; a system of political representation under which citizens elect representatives who are accountable to their constituents; a legal system that provides guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly, and association; a free press and open access to diverse sources of information; a public system of education; and a guarantee of some degree of economic and material security” (108).

In pursuing these epistemological concerns, Talisso shifts his focus in the later chapters from liberal to deliberative democratic theory. After providing an overview and criticism of existing approaches to deliberative democracy in chapter 5, he lays out his own “epistemic” defense of democracy in chapter 6. He appeals here to a theory of belief and inquiry that is drawn from the work of the pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and has been refined and extended more recently by Cheryl Misak (2000). As Talisso summarizes this line of argument, “to be a believer is to be a truth seeker, to be a truth seeker is to be an inquirer, to be an inquirer is to be a reason giver, and to be a reason giver is to be a reason exchanger, a member of a community of inquirers” (104). This “community of inquirers” is, moreover, necessarily a democratic community: to seek the truth is, Talisso holds, to commit oneself to “hearing and responding to objections and challenges from all quarters,” so that “[t]he commitment to debate and deliberation is a commitment to the basic features of democracy.” In particular, all citizens must be treated as “equal participants in the discussion, with equal access to the conversation, whose voices must be listened to and whose considerations must be addressed” (104–5). To refuse or otherwise fail to provide the conditions necessary for the creation of a deliberative democratic community is, then, to betray our own overriding interest in pursuing and discovering the truth. This chapter concludes with a useful discussion of the deliberative virtues that citizens must display in order to achieve this aim, and the final chapter, chapter 7, examines some of the practical challenges facing a deliberative polity of the kind that Talisso envisions.

The “epistemic” defense of deliberative democracy that Talisso provides is similar in form, as he acknowledges, to Jürgen Habermas’s defense of deliberative democracy as an entailment of the use of language: both arguments appeal to features of a practice in which all human beings are undeniably engaged—the belief in and assertion of propositions—in

order to leverage a commitment to a set of substantive political ends. Talisse, following Misak, distinguishes his position from Habermasian discourse ethics by arguing that it rests not on a transcendental (or, as Habermas prefers, “quasi-transcendental”) claim about the inescapable presuppositions of language use but rather on a defeasible empirical claim about actual practices of belief and assertion. The thought here is that there may be some interlocutors—Talisse suggests the Thrasymachus of Plato’s *Republic* as an example—whose “beliefs aim not at truth but at power and domination.” So long as such people refrain from the appeal to truth they are not, argues Talisse, guilty of any inconsistency, and so are not logically compelled to admit the superiority of democratic practices (106; cf. Misak 2000, 41–47, 106–7). This retreat from transcendentalism does not, however, oblige us to call our own democratic commitments into question: if antidemocrats do assert the truth of their beliefs, then we may spring the Habermasian trap; if they do not, then they simply fall into the category of people “with whom the pragmatist might reasonably refuse to engage” (106). In either case, the claims of deliberative democracy remain beyond the scope of legitimate inquiry.

It seems to me that the pragmatic theory of belief upon which Talisse relies requires that the epistemic defense of democracy be stated more cautiously than this. A belief is, for Peirce and the other founding pragmatists, a rule of action; it establishes a habit, and so to believe a proposition is simply to be prepared to act upon it. It is from this conceptual premise that Peirce derives his pragmatic maxim that “different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise” (Peirce 1934, 255). It follows that the mere assertion of a belief does not commit one to further inquiry on its behalf, because belief is, as Peirce puts it, “thought at rest” (1934, 255). The origins of inquiry lie for Peirce not in belief but in its opposite, doubt, and doubt follows not from habit but from the privation of habit. As long as our habits, our rules of action, reliably serve our purposes, as long as “the premises are not in fact doubted” (1934, 233), then we need not and will not conduct further inquiry into their adequacy. To hold otherwise is to put the pragmatic cart before the horse.

It seems unlikely, then, that Peirce would agree that the mere assertion of a belief commits one to “hearing and responding to objections and challenges from all quarters” (104). This would be equivalent to saying that all objections and challenges to one’s existing beliefs provide sufficient grounds for doubting them, and thus for conducting further inquiry on their behalf. Peirce urges us, on the contrary, not to pretend to doubt what we do not in fact doubt. Indeed, this injunction provides the basis for his rejection of Cartesian skepticism and of the entire epistemological tradition to which it gave rise. After all, to say that the assertion of a belief commits one to defending it against “objections and challenges from all quarters” is to say, *a fortiori*, that it commits one to answering the Cartesian skeptic, which is exactly the position that pragmatism was designed to avoid.

According to Peirce we are obliged to (and will in fact) conduct inquiry only if our existing beliefs have been placed into doubt *so far as we are concerned*, and this kind of doubt does not always or even usually follow from the mere fact that some people happen to disagree with us—regrettable though this may sometimes be. Our beliefs will typically be placed in doubt only by those whom we consider to be epistemically reliable; in Peirce's words, "[T]he mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle to alter belief," but "if disciplined and candid minds carefully examine a theory and refuse to accept it, *this* ought to create doubts in the mind of the author of the theory himself" (1934, 232, 157; emphasis added). Needless to say, once we admit the necessity of distinguishing between epistemically reliable and epistemically unreliable interlocutors—once we face up to the problem of determining who has a disciplined and candid mind and who does not—then we must also admit that a commitment to democracy (or more precisely, to strict egalitarianism in inquiry) is not and cannot be an entailment of the mere fact of holding and asserting beliefs. In other words, it seems that the epistemic defense of democracy, if it is to be expressed in pragmatic terms, must rest on an empirical claim about the fruitfulness of egalitarian procedures of inquiry, and not on a conceptual claim about the nature of belief.

How, then, are we to defend *liberal* principles and institutions? I would argue that the political liberal's claim that we should seek to justify our political beliefs to our fellow citizens in terms that they can accept is best defended not in epistemic but rather in moral terms: that this is a matter of showing them the respect they are due as human beings. Does this frankly moral claim not violate the liberal commitment to neutrality? Here I think that Talisse misstates the sense in which political liberals are committed to the principle of neutrality: they do not, despite some occasional careless language to the contrary, claim to be neutral between all *possible* views about the good life, or to have forsworn *all* appeals to controversial moral or philosophical propositions. Rather, they seek to defend traditional liberal values—the principle of showing equal respect for persons, the norm of reciprocity, the regard for individual autonomy, and so on—in terms that do not presuppose the validity of any *particular* philosophical point of view (such as Kant's conception of moral personhood), or of any *particular* conception of the good life (such as Mill's defense of individuality). In other words, political liberals seek to be *as neutral as they can* between the views that are actually held in a given polity, but when these views come into conflict with basic liberal commitments—when they are found to be "unreasonable," in John Rawls's terms—then it is the former, not the latter, that must give way.

There are of course any number of objections that might be raised against this position—Talisse himself accuses it, not unreasonably, of begging the questions that it claims to answer (e.g., 105)—but it is not self-contradictory or incoherent. Indeed, Talisse, with his insistence that there are some views with which we may reasonably refuse to engage,

seems at times to be quite close to it in spirit. The interesting questions arise over the issue of how we are to justify such exclusions to ourselves and to our fellow citizens, and I heartily agree with Talisse when he says that “[a] consistent liberal theorist would . . . allow public deliberation itself” to answer these kinds of questions (91). The “epistemic” line of argument that he advances provides an ingenious way of thinking through this problem, and although I have tried to cast some doubt upon its logical coerciveness when seen from a pragmatic point of view, I also believe that it holds considerable promise when regarded as an empirical hypothesis about the nature and limits of public inquiry.

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*C. I. Lewis: The Last Great Pragmatist*. By Murray G. Murphey. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. Pp. x + 477.

The work of Clarence Irving Lewis occupies a central place within the history of twentieth-century American philosophy. His training in idealist philosophy and early developments in formal logic led to his creative synthesis of neo-Kantianism and empiricism within a pragmatist conception of human knowledge. This interest in formal logic yielded Lewis's various systems of modal logic that helped contribute to the modern development of that field. In response to the increasing influence of logical positivism, he developed a more technical semantic theory to support his epistemology of empirical knowledge, and argued further for the empirical status of value judgments. In addition to these various intellectual achievements, Lewis's professional style and work habits served as a model for the emerging profession of academic philosophy. His publications reflect the careful attention to detail and specialized