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*Democracy After Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics*. Robert B. Talisse. New York: Routledge, 2005. x + 162 pp. \$85.00 h.c. 0-415-95018-X; \$29.95 pbk. 0-415-95019-8.

In this concise and clear assessment of contemporary political theory, Talisse reintroduces the language of truth into our democratic practices. The *truth* that Talisse is interested in, as the subtitle of the book suggests, is not the truth of the dogmatist but that of the Peircean—that is, the regulative ideal that guides the fallible investigations of the community of inquirers. This turn toward critical realism and the revision of politics on forthrightly epistemological terms, Talisse argues persuasively, is a main chance to avoid the intractable dilemma between unity and diversity into which contemporary liberal democracy has fallen.

This is a book to be read with profit by professor, student, and layperson alike. Talisse skillfully summarizes debates that fill shelves of books, providing accounts that not only are conceptually clear but also frame the debate for further investigation. Given his claim to the *critical realist* or *deliberativist* label (10), it should be no surprise that Talisse has produced a book that engenders thought more than it offers clinching arguments for his position (98). The virtue of *Democracy After Liberalism* is that it successfully clarifies the positions and the stakes of contemporary debates in political philosophy. In the end, Talisse himself cannot be said to have offered more than *one* highly plausible and engaging resolution to the confusion of political ideas in which we live. This is no mean accomplishment, and *Democracy After Liberalism* makes for rewarding reading.

The majority of this refreshingly slim book is devoted to rehearsing the dilemma of liberal democracy. That dilemma is cast as one between unity and plurality, theory and actuality. The charge is that liberalism—understood as a comprehensive theory of personhood, morality, and politics—is not viable in an environment of ideological diversity, tolerance, and privacy. Each of these conditions is a result of liberalism. In a word, *liberalism gives rise to social and ideological pluralism* that undermines the very idea of liberalism as a unified way of life. Talisse's working definition of *liberalism* is borrowed from Martha Nussbaum:

Liberalism holds that the flourishing of human beings taken one by one is both analytically and normatively prior to the flourishing of the state or the nation or the religious group; analytically because such unities do not really efface the separate reality of individual lives; normatively because the recognition of that separateness is held to be a fundamental fact for ethics, which should

recognize each separate entity as an end and not as a means to the ends of others. (1999, 62)

Liberalism is a unity that necessarily undermines itself in that its organizing principles lead to the disorganization in which each individual charts his or her own course. This core tendency of liberalism—in which we all, as Williams Galston wrote, “go our own way” (2002, 58)—has been exacerbated by historical, demographic, and sociological trends that have eroded the relative cultural homogeneity in which liberalism arose and that for a time constrained the centrifugal forces of liberal democracy.

Talisce reviews the origins of this dilemma in the philosophies of Locke, Kant, and Mill and then surveys the current state of the dilemma in the contemporary controversies among liberals, communitarians, antifoundationalists, civic republicans, constructivists, pluralists, and proceduralists. In the course of doing so, Talisce provides wonderful précis of positions that can serve as useful frames for classroom discussion. Moreover Talisce takes care to note that the dilemma of liberalism is not just a problem for scholarly debate. He provides readers with substantial political and sociological matter to chew on in the course of describing why the failure of democratic theory brings with it real political and personal consequences. The privatization of public life; decreased participation in formal politics; ethnic, racial, and ideological conflict; general political ignorance—all of these empirical facts are part of the dilemma of liberalism.

While *Democracy After Liberalism* provides a broad review of the issues and the participants in the debates regarding the viability of liberal democracy, it is fair to say that John Rawls is Talisce’s principal antagonist. Rawls, like Talisce, takes a frank assessment of the liberal dilemma. Moreover, Rawls, like Talisce again, is not ready to forsake theory altogether in order to countenance the hard facts of social and ideological pluralism. Despite these commonalities, Talisce finds in Rawls’s liberal theory—particularly *Political Liberalism* (1996)—a fatal desire to accommodate the needs of pluralism and theory without substantially redescribing the democratic project. As a result Rawls’s position becomes one of two things (55–63): (a) a strong metaphysical statement backing a liberal notion of personhood and thus a comprehensive doctrine in its own right inevitably at odds with the comprehensive doctrines of other citizens; or (b) a *modus vivendi*, empty of content or any compelling idea of the good life, that cannot compel the assent of any citizen because of its bland neutrality in which we go along just to get along. (Neither result is satisfactory either on Rawls’s terms or on any one else’s.) These charges against Rawls have been aired time and again, and the reader will be thankful for Talisce’s perceptive summaries. What is of the keenest philosophical interest is how Talisce works in light of Rawls’s failings. For Rawls’s aim is ultimately Talisce’s aim—that is, to provide a theory of democracy that is comprehensive but avoids divisiveness because it still lacks a substantial metaphysics or a strong concept of the person.

Approaching democracy on the epistemological terms of critical realism allows Talisse to grab both horns of Rawls's dilemma.

Deliberativism is, Talisse argues, an epistemology, and not a metaphysics or a substantial theory of the person. It is, as Talisse writes, "a kind of philosophical minimalism" (98). Democracy interpreted through the lens of critical realism is about the deliberative *process* and makes only the barest claims about persons and the world. Moreover, because the processes of discussion and critical engagement that are basic to critical realism seek out the truth, deliberativism is not a mere *modus vivendi*. Critical discussion and debate are not ways of privatizing or otherwise ameliorating differences but rather are means of moving through our differences toward agreements that are on the track of the truth. Talisse argues for revamping democratic society on deliberativist lines in which our civic culture is reshaped so as to embrace critical methodology, discussion, and contestation within the parameters of a common search for the truth (see his final chapter, "Toward a Deliberative Culture," 123–141). Deliberativism thus melds with civic republicanism and aims to reunite politics and the good life—the *good life* now construed as the process of inquiry and debate.

*Democracy After Liberalism* forthrightly builds on the work of Cheryl Misak (2000) and David Estlund (1990, 1993), and readers will be interested to see Misak's and Estlund's arguments for themselves. (On the general topic of the relation of pragmatism to democracy, readers will also want to consult Singer [1999].) The position that Talisse crafts, beginning with these materials, is one that is wise, well reasoned, and compelling if not decisive. His model of deliberativism, however, raises many questions, a few of which are worth noting in that they likely bear on the further discussion this book will provoke.

First, Talisse introduces the language of truth into politics so as to avoid (a) the interpretation that deliberativism is a *modus vivendi* and (b) the problems of proceduralism in which political results are deemed acceptable because of the integrity of the process followed and not necessarily the conclusion reached. Yet Talisse is vague about what he means by *truth* and *political truth*. (He is clearer on the nature of belief, e.g., where he develops Misak's habits of responsible or virtuous belief, [112–116], but he appears to want to distinguish truth from justified belief.) Even if Talisse wants to be a minimalist, little *t* truth is an important matter and needs clarification. One can glean that he considers truth to be the result of full and open deliberation among a sufficiently representative body of virtuous deliberators. But because Talisse writes that he only draws *inspiration* from pragmatism in general and Peirce in specific (10–13), we cannot assume he signs on for the full critical realist project and thus he needs to fill in the matter of what political truth will look like in terms of its form and perhaps even content. Lacking such clarification, deliberativism begins to look a lot like proceduralism, and that is a conclusion Talisse surely wants to avoid.

Second, there is a question of the basis of Talisse's criticism of liberal deliberativists such as Bruce Ackerman, Joshua Cohen, and Amy Gutmann. There is confusion across *Democracy After Liberalism* regarding how wide-ranging deliberation and criticism should be and what, if any, truths will be spared constant critical assessment. Ackerman, Cohen, and Gutmann are roundly criticized for declaring that some political conclusions are not subject to debate (86–92). But Talisse himself concedes elsewhere that all deliberation must proceed according to certain premises (e.g., 108). Every good pragmatist understands that inquiry has to be conducted on a retail and not wholesale basis. In order to sort out what are legitimate premises and what are not (as well as what can always be subject to criticism and what cannot), we, again, need to hear more from Talisse on what he means by truth. In this context, it might be helpful to clarify the meaning and function of political truth in terms of the standard distinction of *constitutional* and *normal* legislation. This is a difference that most democrats understand and it is a useful starting point for putting into theoretical terms what we undoubtedly attest to as a matter of practice—that is, we provisionally set aside certain truths and use them as the means and not make them the objects of criticism.

Third, it is not clear what justifies deliberative democracy or even if Talisse has come to a satisfactory conclusion as to what, in general, counts as justification. Democracy is considered preferable to other modes of political order because it supports deliberation (108). We prefer deliberation, in turn, because (a) it seeks truth or (b) it supports democracy. If we prefer deliberation because of reason (a) then we certainly need to hear more from Talisse on what truth means in the context of deliberativism. If the reason is (b) then we appear to have a circle. Elsewhere Talisse writes that the pragmatic justification of deliberative democracy is found in “the practice of seeking justifications for political and moral claims” (105). But this begs the question as to why we seek justifications. To answer the question is of course dangerous because it puts us on track to offer some substantial description of persons. If we avoid offering a theory of the person, then we are in the position of saying that, as a matter of sociological fact, we early twenty-first-century democrats seek justifications and so we accordingly value political systems that support the search for justifications. Talisse seems to prefer this account, which he borrows from Misak, in which the force of justification is that we seek it and yet no grand claims are made about the ultimate value (epistemological or metaphysical) of justification itself (103–7). But this nontranscendental Habermasianism appears remarkably like Rorty's “ethnocentric” arguments, from which Talisse elsewhere distances himself (73–74, 98; the paragraph on p. 98 where Talisse states how his position is different from ethnocentrism is likely the one unclear statement in the whole book). In the end, in order to offer some reason for why deliberativism is justified we will likely need to say something more substantial about the person.

Fourth, and as the final question to be raised, there is the matter as to whether Talisse has overreached rhetorically when he titled the book *Democracy After Liberalism*. Talisse's claim is that his turn toward critical realism marks a postscript to liberalism and thus makes his approach not a case of "antiliberalism" but places it "after liberalism."

Therefore, I call for a conception of democracy that is not simply antiliberalism but after liberalism. That is, 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. Many of the political commitments of liberalism will be retained in some form or another, while liberal theory will be criticized and rejected. (8)

There is no doubt that his recommendation to conceive our politics on epistemological terms is a refreshing break from the disputes between liberals and antiliberals, metaphysicians and antimetaphysicians. But it is hard to argue that the compelling novelty of Talisse's outlook marks a *new epoch* in thought or practice. As the quotation illustrates, Talisse conserves many of principal commitments of liberalism. Moreover, the very epistemological model that he introduces—i.e., critical realism—is closely connected to the idea of the scientific community (107–9). The language of rights embedded in liberalism is also current in the scientific community and freedom of inquiry, freedom of expression, and freedom of belief are all as basic to the political enterprise as they are to the scientific enterprise. Liberalism is not finished yet—not in fact and certainly not within the form of deliberativism set forth in Talisse's excellent book.

Michael J. McGandy

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