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Book Review: Democracy after Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics

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Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy after Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 162 pp. ISBN 041595019X (pbk). Hardback/Paperback: £50.00/15.99.

This is an ambitious, complex and compact book which deserves a wide readership. Talisse argues that two of the desiderata of liberal democratic theory are incompatible. On the one hand, liberals are committed to social pluralism, diversity, and toleration of different views of the good life. This is identified with a commitment to 'political neutrality', that is, to the impartiality of the state with respect to the various views of the good life possessed by its citizens. On the other hand, liberals seek to show that liberalism is superior to non-liberal, non-democratic ways of organizing political life, and so possesses a legitimacy that the latter lack. Liberalism must either aim to provide a robust account of this legitimacy, and so frustrate their commitment to pluralism, or accommodate pluralism at the price of giving up a robust account of the superiority of liberal values. Talisse traces and pursues this tension in several recent and prominent statements of liberalism, including John Rawls's theory of justice and later 'political liberalism', William Galston's value pluralism, and Richard Rorty's claim for the 'priority of democracy to philosophy'. The line of criticism is vigorous and readable (and worth comparing with the more elaborate treatment of liberalism's justificatory strategies in Gerald Gaus's *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism* [SAGE, 2003]), even where the subject has been heavily trodden over by previous commentators.

Talisse then turns to theories of deliberative or discursive democracy to relieve this tension. Such theories hand over controversial issues of public policy to democratic politics, but argue that the latter must be conceived as a process of collective reasoning and argument. It is the quality of this reasoning and argument, rather than merely voting, which confers legitimacy on the outcomes of democratic politics. On one understanding, this theory reproduces the tension that Talisse identifies. For the 'liberal deliberativist', what counts as public deliberation or properly conducted collective discussion is defined in liberal terms, particularly in the sense that what counts as a 'public reason'—one that can justify legislation and state action—is interpreted in terms of liberal political morality. So representatives of this position, such as Rawls, Joshua Cohen, and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, argue that religious reasons for state action are necessarily non-public. In that case, however, the author argues, the commitment to public deliberation becomes itself a commitment to a particular morality. Furthermore, it is a rather attenuated conception of political morality, since it takes off the political agenda a fuller engagement with the particular beliefs and values of other citizens. Michael Sandel is quoted: '[o]n the liberal conception, we respect our fellow citizen's moral and religious convictions by ignoring them' (p. 92). It implies a mutual estrangement among citizens and alienation from the political process of those who do not accept the liberal restraints on deliberation.

At this point, Talisse briefly considers communitarian or civic republican critics of liberalism such as Sandel, who respond by rejecting political neutrality and arguing that the state ought to undertake the 'formative project' of cultivating the civic virtue of citizens. Against them he levels the familiar liberal criticism that this style of politics opens the door to majority tyranny and oppression in the name of communal values.

His own alternative is to develop a conception of democratic deliberation that draws on pragmatist sources. He argues for an epistemic view of democratic deliberation as 'aiming to track the truth, or arrive at correct political policies; the epistemic quality of the results of democratic deliberation generates their legitimacy' (p. 102). He draws on and develops an argument recently set out by Cheryl Misak (in *Truth, Politics and Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* [New York: Routledge, 2000]), who in turn takes her inspiration from Charles Sanders Peirce. On Misak's account, to hold a belief is to be committed to justifying it and to exposing it to reasons and arguments offered by others. And this, both Misak and Talisse argue, means that to hold a belief is to be committed to democratic deliberation, in some form, to viewing others as fellow deliberators and seeing deliberators as 'equal participants in the discussion, with equal access to the conversation, whose voices must be listened to and whose considerations must be addressed' (p. 105). Talisse, together with Misak, offers a clear and contemporary statement of an intuition about the relationship between pragmatist epistemology and political philosophy that has murky hung around Peirce's (and rather more John Dewey's) work for a long time. For democratic deliberation to achieve 'politically wise results' (p. 112) requires that it be undertaken in the right spirit. Talisse outlines a set of deliberative virtues which tend to foster in individuals the intellectual dispositions requisite for deliberation and hence wise beliefs, including honesty, modesty, charity and integrity.

This account of democratic deliberation, the author argues, resolves the tension in liberalism. It should be acceptable not only to anyone who seeks or believes she holds the truth. In other words, it is *qua* believer as such that each of us is committed to the virtues and canons of democratic deliberation, not *qua* believer in a particular liberal political morality. Furthermore, this conception overcomes the problems of mutual estrangement and alienation thrown up by liberal deliberativism without imposing a coercive communitarian vision of the common good. For citizens engage 'fully', as it were, with one another in the political process, rather than *a priori* constraining what can come on to the political agenda. At the same time, 'basic rights' are protected 'as well established means to the realization of a properly deliberative community' (p. 119): freedoms of speech, assembly, and conscience, for example, are guaranteed as necessary for full participation in deliberation. Talisse does share with liberalism's civic republican and communitarian critics a concern with the cultural conditions for democratic deliberation, and a view of mainstream liberalism as neglecting them. And he argues for a 'formative role' for the state in enabling and cultivating the deliberative virtues, a role that is justified on epistemological rather than (inevitably contentious) moral grounds.

This is a nicely written study that covers a great deal of ground in a brisk but lucid way and which displays its own professed virtues in carefully registering and discussing objections and difficulties that lie in the argumentative path. It furnishes a good introduction to recent debates around liberal public reason and deliberative democracy, which is both rigorous and sensitive to a wider array of philosophical and political questions. And I think that the tasks of trying to elucidate the 'epistemic' dimension of democracy, and of the significance of pragmatism for it, is a genuinely worthwhile one—and all the more so when dominant models of political theory tend to stress that political argument is either 'cheap talk' or the rhetorical imposition of power.

Whether it is altogether persuasive is another question, however. It seems to me that the approach in this book could fruitfully address at least these two points. The first is how much we want to derive from the commitment to pursue true beliefs. It may be true that well-grounded beliefs are what we are after, if we view ourselves principally as inquirers, but it is much more contentious to think that we chase true beliefs at the expense of pursuing other interests and goals. Political agents may put other considerations, such as building coalitions, flattering friends and avoiding embarrassment ahead of adhering to the conditions for the production of a true belief. Furthermore, one of the contexts in which we may question whether the epistemic virtues should be paramount in guiding political action is when (we know that) these virtues are unevenly diffused across deliberators. For you to deliberate conscientiously with integrity, honesty, charity and modesty, while I energetically pursue my narrow self-interest, may result in a worse political outcome (which may be an epistemically worse outcome) than if you were equally energetic on your own behalf. In response, the deliberative democrat may rely on an appeal to ‘endogenous mechanisms’ within the social psychology of public discussion that make the energetic pursuit of self-interest awkward: so it is meant to be difficult in public deliberation to offer as a reason for all to adopt a policy that just suits *me*. However, I am not sure that this is a line that the epistemic deliberativist such as Talisse should invoke. If what is at stake is the cognitively best political outcome, this kind of repositioning on the part of deliberators in the face of what (they think) other deliberators will find acceptable isn’t an obviously cognitively beneficial strategy—or if it is specifically in *political* deliberation then that needs some further justification.

The other point concerns how much space really lies between this line of argument and more confessedly liberal approaches. A dyed-in-the-wool fundamentalist is unlikely to be swayed by the thought that her claim to possess the truth in moral and religious matters commits her to the kind of open and responsible deliberation recommended by Talisse. Rather, she may suspect that what has been squeezed out of political morality has been smuggled back via epistemology. She may sensibly appeal to one of Peirce’s other ways of ‘fixing belief’, such as the method of authority, as an altogether more comfortable epistemological outlook. Or, more modestly, she may argue that where her moral and religious beliefs are concerned pragmatist epistemology has no grip (perhaps they are a matter of faith). And if this epistemological approach to democracy doesn’t provide the kind of justificatory neutrality sought then the other horn of the liberal dilemma looms for Talisse’s epistemic deliberativist. My own view is that this can’t be dodged. Nevertheless, Talisse offers an excellent statement of a fresh path in democratic thinking.

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