

Symposium:
Robert B. Talisse's *Democracy and Moral Conflict*

Précis of *Democracy and Moral Conflict*

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Democracy and Moral Conflict is an attempt finally to get right an idea that I've been fixated on since starting in philosophy.¹ That idea, roughly, is this: Democracy is about epistemology, and epistemology, being about conduct, is a normative enterprise. My central claim is that each of us has sufficient epistemological reasons to be democrats, even when our moral reasons for democracy run out. I admit that this is a striking thesis. Most often the case for democracy is presented as a *moral* case, and many have found the very idea that there are *epistemological* reasons to endorse democracy far-fetched. Accordingly, I've been pressed on the details. With the help of Joe Biehl and Chris Herrera, I here have another opportunity to attempt to get this right. These opening remarks sketch the main thread of argument in *Democracy and Moral Conflict*.

Democracy and Moral Conflict proceeds in four stages. First, I identify a *political* problem that has received little attention from theorists: the *Problem of Deep Politics*. Second, I argue that this *political* problem gives rise to a *philosophical* problem: the *Paradox of Democratic Justification*. Third, I argue that leading democratic theories are *unable* to resolve this paradox. Fourth, I develop a *folk-epistemic* view of democracy that resolves the Paradox of Democratic Justification and addresses the Problem of Deep Politics. I will not here rehearse the critical arguments that comprise the third phase of the argument, but instead focus on the others.

First, the Problem of Deep Politics emerges from the fact that we can no longer see democracy simply as a procedure for making collective decisions by fairly aggregating individuals' preferences. Proceduralism fails because we can no longer see *preferences* as the *currency* of collective decision-making. For a range of complicated reasons, we now recognize that

¹ Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

democracy decides in matters about which citizens' most fundamental *moral* commitments are at stake. We get a *problem* from the fact that it is frequently the case that when democracy decides, some citizens lose; democracy presents them with a collective decision that they must regard as not only disappointing or suboptimal, but morally intolerable. But democracy also claims the authority to identify which reactions to such outcomes are morally permissible; indeed, democracy claims the authority to punish severely those who respond to morally intolerable democratic outcomes in forbidden ways.

When this is combined with a leading feature of liberal democratic theory, we get *The Paradox of Democratic Justification*. To explain: Democratic authority owes to the ability of democracy to *justify* itself to its citizens. That justification typically proceeds in moral terms, but the liberties secured by liberal democracy ensure the emergence of a plurality of moral commitments among citizens. In the Deep Politics cases, it is not clear that any *moral* justification for democratic authority could succeed; proposed justifications of this kind will often look strikingly question-begging. So it seems that democracy produces the conditions for its own demise. It upholds a conception of political justification that it cannot satisfy precisely in those cases where a justifying story is needed most.

I propose, then, a set of *epistemological* reasons why citizens should sustain their democratic commitments even when democracy delivers a collective result that strikes them as morally intolerable. The claim is that there is a set of *folk-epistemic* norms governing belief as such. By describing these norms as *folk*, I mean to convey, first, that they're not the *products* of philosophical reflection, but comprise in large measure the data that philosophical theories of epistemology must try to preserve and explain. Second, I also mean to convey that the *folk-epistemic* norms are normative *for the folk*. That is, we *take ourselves* to be governed by them. The argument here is that there are certain epistemic norms such that, when you assess one of your beliefs as being in violation of any of them, either the belief dissolves or your comportment toward the belief significantly changes. The most obvious case is when you assess one of your beliefs as violating the *truth norm*: "I believe that *p*, and *p* is false." As G. E. Moore observes, this first-personal assessment typically has the effect of *undoing* the belief that *p*.² My folk-epistemic argument attempts to build on to the *truth norm* other norms governing our beliefs, particularly with respect to evidence and supporting reasons. So consider the self-assessment, "I believe that *p*, but all of my reasons support *not-p*" or "I believe that *p*, but my reasons for *p* fail." To be sure, this is not as strong an indictment of the belief that *p* as the Moorean case, but it's an indictment nonetheless. To assess oneself in any of these ways is to acknowledge some kind of epistemological shortcoming: One has failed to track one's evidence. Finally, consider a self-assessment like this: "I

² G. E. Moore, "Moore's Paradox," in *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 207-12.

believe that *p*, but I systematically ignore all of *p*'s critics," or "I believe that *p*, but all of my evidence has been carefully rigged by the Minister of Truth." Again, such assessments are probably not enough to undo the belief by themselves, but they do signal that something's amiss epistemologically. When we encounter a belief that we hold and assess in this way, we feel compelled to tell ourselves a story about the aptness of the belief, and if such a story fails, we find ourselves revising, adjusting, or abandoning it.

From these a case can be built for there being three basic folk-epistemic norms: *Truth*, *Evidence-tracking*, and *Evidence-responsiveness*. The case for democracy emerges from the consideration that these norms can reliably be satisfied only within a certain kind of social-epistemic environment. For example, one can take oneself as satisfying these norms only if one can assess oneself as functioning within an epistemic environment that permits reasons and evidence to be exchanged freely and assessed openly. Democracy is the political order that most reliably secures that kind of environment.

The upshot, then, is that the folk-epistemic commitments *we already endorse qua believers* provide reasons to sustain our democratic commitments—including, crucially, our commitments to pursuing only democratic means of effecting social change—even when confronted with collective decisions that we must regard as morally unacceptable. The appeal to folk-epistemological norms resolves The Paradox of Democratic Justification, since it enables a justification for democracy that appeals to a kind of normativity that is not subject to the "fact of reasonable pluralism."³ But the folk-epistemic argument also points the way toward addressing the *political* problem of Deep Politics, as it identifies, *on the basis of epistemological norms already in place*, a mode of political engagement appropriate for free and equal democratic citizens. It seems to me that it also allows for compelling arguments concerning the need for democratic states to enact policies aimed at maintaining a healthy social-epistemic environment (including the protection of public spaces and political campaigns from commercial encroachment, and much else). Accordingly, the folk-epistemic argument points to a unique variety of perfectionism: *epistemic perfectionism*. This is the view according to which the democratic state may indeed promote a certain kind of good among its citizens, namely, the epistemological goods associated with capacities for open inquiry, the free exchange of reasons, and reasoned debate and criticism.

In short, the folk-epistemic argument attempts to show that, despite all of the important respects in which we are deeply divided at the level of our moral convictions, we nonetheless share a set of epistemological norms that are robust enough to provide an independent and compelling case for sustaining our democratic commitments, even when democracy produces

³ See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 24 n. 27.

collective decisions that we must regard as seriously morally flawed. That, in any case, is the hope.

