

Robert B. Talisse, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 166 pages. ISBN: 9780415770880 (hbk.). Hardback/Paperback: \$ 140/39.95.

In this provocative and engaging book, Robert Talisse builds on some of the main themes developed in *Democracy After Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), and goes on to forcefully argue for two crucial theses: 1) John Dewey's conception of democracy ought to be abandoned because it is unable to accommodate the fact of reasonable pluralism; and 2) Charles Sanders Peirce's conception of inquiry provides the resources to construct a successful alternative pragmatist conception of democracy. In this review, I will outline the arguments for these two claims and then offer a brief critical evaluation of the book as a whole.

Talisse starts by setting himself the task of demonstrating that the tradition of classical pragmatism is not as cohesive as many contemporary pragmatists tend to suppose. Thus, in the first chapter of this book, Talisse goes to some lengths to suggest that the standard historical narrative, according to which classical pragmatism developed continuously from Peirce down to William James and Dewey, is actually incorrect. Much in line with what Talisse has argued elsewhere (see 'Two Concepts of Inquiry', *Philosophical Writings* 20: 69-81), he contends that 'the pragmatisms of both James and Dewey, represent, in their own ways, radical departures from pragmatism as it was originally proposed by Peirce' (p. 19). In essence, Talisse contends that Dewey and James 'over-reached' by developing and endorsing more substantive philosophical theses and thus failed to remain committed to the philosophical modesty he takes to be at the core of Peircean pragmatism.

In the second chapter, this charge of philosophical immodesty is put to work to show that Dewey's conception of democracy cannot accommodate the fact of reasonable pluralism. Here Talisse draws on John Rawls' characterisation of this fact, claiming, 'there is no single comprehensive philosophical, religious or moral doctrine upon which reason converges' (p. 35). In other words, Talisse thinks that 'reasonable people – sincere, honest, and intelligent individuals carefully attending to the relevant considerations and doing their epistemic best— nonetheless disagree at the level of Big Questions' (p. 80). In addition, Talisse endorses Jeremy Waldron's legitimacy principle, according to which, the state must be able to justify its use of coercive power 'to every last individual, at least in principle' (pp. 37, 83). Put together, these commitments entail that the use of state power for reasons that are not potentially acceptable to all reasonable citizens is oppressive.

The core of Talisse's attack on Deweyan democracy consists in claiming that it is a comprehensive doctrine harbouring the ambition to 'reconstruct' society (and thus political institutions) according to its preferred conception of the good (pp. 44–45). In other words, he contends that Dewey's conception of democracy is not an appropriate social ideal, because reasonable people can legitimately reject some of its core philosophical commitments (most crucially, its conception of human flourishing). To support the claim that Deweyan democracy is reasonably rejectable, Talisse proposes a sophisticated argument drawing on the commonly used distinction between procedural and substantive conceptions of democracy. I would reconstruct the argument thus:

- P1: 'substantivists see democracy as an intrinsically valuable social ideal, inseparable from the good life itself' (p. 33).
- C1: Thus, substantive conceptions of democracy seek to further a particular conception of the good.
- P2: Particular conceptions of the good rely on a comprehensive doctrine.
- C2: Thus substantive conceptions of democracy rely on comprehensive doctrines.
- P3: Not all reasonable citizens can agree on a particular comprehensive doctrine.
- C3: (from C2 and P3) Thus, substantive conceptions of democracy are reasonably rejectable.
- P4: Deweyan democracy 'is driven by a distinctive conception of human flourishing' (p. 44).
- C4: Thus, Deweyan democracy seeks to further a particular conception of the good.
- C5: (from C1 and C3) Thus, Deweyan democracy is a substantive conception of democracy.
- C6: (from C2 and C4) Thus, Deweyan democracy is reasonably rejectable.

Talisse therefore concludes that Deweyan democracy can but fail to justify itself to all citizens in a genuinely free society and that it is thus condemned to be oppressive. That is why, he claims, we must 'bid farewell to the Deweyan ideal of democracy as a way of life' (p. 53).

In the third chapter, having purportedly demonstrated the inevitable failure of Deweyan democracy, Talisse sets about developing an alternative pragmatist conception of democracy based on Peirce's conception of inquiry. From the outset, Talisse aptly sidesteps a potentially lethal objection to his project: well aware of the notorious fact that Peirce, the philosopher, hardly said anything about political philosophy and that Peirce, the man, had more scorn than respect for democratic values, Talisse is quick to stress that he does not intend to 'discern what Peirce would have thought about democracy had he bothered to explore topics in political philosophy' (p. 54). Rather, Talisse aims to creatively construct a Peircean conception of democracy based on the epistemic norms expressed in Peirce's characterisation of the method of science, as found in the essay 'The Fixation of Belief' (p. 56).

After a series of interpretive moves – many of them considerably influenced by Cheryl Misak's *Truth, Morality and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004)— Talisse claims that the method of science is the only reasonably acceptable method of inquiry, because it is the only one that systematically succeeds in upholding a constitutive norm of belief formation, namely: that it be responsive to 'reason, evidence and argument' (p. 60) According to Talisse, this entails that the scientific method is not coherently disputable. Because all believers take their beliefs to be true and a true belief is a belief formed in response to all the relevant considerations (that is, on this account, reasons, arguments and evidence), all believers must therefore endorse the idea that they hold their beliefs in light of all the relevant considerations. They thus cannot coherently endorse a method of belief formation which systematically excludes some of the relevant considerations. Or, as Talisse acerbically puts it, 'No one who practices [non-scientific methods] takes himself to be doing so' (p. 62).

In order to construct a conception of democracy that can be justified to every last individual, Talisse sets about constructing his ‘substantive epistemic conception of democracy’ (p. 70) based on this apparently inescapable commitment (upon reflection) to the method of science. In brief, Talisse conveys his vision in two broad strokes. First, he argues that ‘proper inquiry can only be practiced within a democratic political order’, because it is the only system of government which guarantees access ‘to forums in which inquiry can be engaged’, ‘to reliable sources of information and news’, and ‘to processes by which [inquirers] can hold their representatives, and their government more generally, accountable’, and which also upholds ‘the freedom to engage controversial ideas and to speak, write, and express [oneself] freely’ (p. 66). Second, in chapter 4, he argues that his conception of democracy, despite being substantive and thus relying on a (partially) comprehensive doctrine, escapes being reasonably rejectable because the epistemic norms upon which it is founded ‘are not themselves reasonably rejectable’ (p. 87).

In the subsequent chapter, Talisse considers and dismisses Richard Posner’s ‘every day pragmatist’ account of democracy on the grounds that it is ‘pragmatically untenable’ (p. 99). The final two chapters of the book constitute a return to more historical considerations. In chapter 6, Talisse makes a compelling and informative case for rekindling interest in the political philosophy of Sidney Hook. And in chapter 7, he concludes the book by pleading for pragmatists to overcome their ‘principled insularity’ (p. 138), in order to engage more thoroughly with non-pragmatist philosophers.

This book is clearly an important contribution to pragmatist scholarship, virtue epistemology and political philosophy and this is reflected in the rich debates it has generated. The most remarkable features of the book, I think, are: a) its relentless engagement with a broad and disparate literature, resulting in a work of very impressive scope; and, b) its polemic tone, thanks to which the full force of each argument is brought to life and the reader’s attention kept enthralled.

More generally though, upon finishing the book, I was persuaded that Talisse was saying something fundamentally right, namely, that the Rawlsian project of finding a neutral ground for political justification could be satisfyingly fulfilled by the epistemic norms inherent in the method of science. Yet, I was also left with a rather strange sense of uncertainty about what this justification actually justified. Other than the protection of traditional civil liberties and the provision of appropriate levels of education for citizens, it is not clear to me what kind of institutional arrangements are required by Talisse’s pragmatist philosophy of democracy. For example, I was left wondering whether this conception of democracy requires further provisions on behalf of the state to foster equality amongst citizens than simply formal equality and equal access to education. Although justifying any notion of democracy may be seen as an achievement in its own right, I would have been interested in reading a more detailed account of the political and moral entailments of our epistemic commitment to the method of science.

To be sure, this is a very interesting and important book. But my own view is that its critique of Deweyan democracy is misguided. I, for one, do not see Dewey’s democratic ideal to be inescapably over-ambitious, as Talisse supposes, since I take its core political commitments to be translatable into public reasons. But, more deeply still, I want to resist Talisse’s demand for a thoroughgoing conversion to philosophical modesty; for I am left unconvinced by the idea that all state coercion must be justifiable, at least in principle, to every last individual. As I see it, there are simply too many points of reasonable controversy

in policy setting and implementation to expect *any* practicable government to be able to justify, even in principle, its every decision to all reasonable citizens. At best, I think, we can only hope the Rawlsian principle of neutrality to be applicable in public discussions relating to matters of basic justice and constitutional essentials – topics upon which, I would argue, Deweyan democracy is closely aligned with Rawlsian and potentially Peircean views.

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