

In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy

Eric Beerbohm

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Are the citizens of a democratic state morally responsible for the actions of their governments? This is, in very few words, the question to which Eric Beerbohm tries to find an answer in his book, focusing for most part of it on the problems of democratic citizenship and concluding proposing some constitutional reforms and pointing out the different senses in which we can say a democratic government can act 'in our name'.

Beerbohm addresses the problems regarding political ethics in a democracy along three lines: at first, he assesses (chapters 1-2) what he calls 'ethics of democratic participation' where democracy is a 'system of shared liability' (p. 21) and investigate the role of the citizens, who *horizontally* relate to each other (p.25), within the democratic procedures, and their ability to influence the political process and the subsequent decision not just with the marginal power of their vote, but also thanks to individual action, commitment and participation based on their care of the individual subject to the political institutions they sustain and on complicity. Beerbohm, indeed, rejects the swing-vote interpretation, as voters, actually, would not normally defend their electoral choices on the basis of the probability they would have their

favourite policies enacted, and because, anyway, it is not clear, but rather open to debate, the way every single citizen conceives how he or she makes a difference with his or her vote (pp. 47-48). Furthermore, there is a diversity of ways citizens can participate (or cannot) to be acknowledged and considered.

Secondly, Beerbohm's book deals with democracy's ethics of belief (chapters 3-7), i.e. the way a citizen manages his or her political beliefs, guarding against biases in reasoning and trying to realize when he or she is permitted a certain level of ignorance in current political affairs or in politics in general, since the obligation citizens have in playing their role in democratic life is partly inseparable from cognitive and epistemic considerations. The author criticizes the idea of citizen described or implied in the theories of distributive justice and of deliberative democracy: as regards the former, Beerbohm disagrees with the description of citizens as a sort of philosophers-citizens (pp. 82-104), as it would fail to recognize the gap existing between some ideal, 'Absolute Ethics' – in Henry Sidgwick's words – and the living, actual society we live in and all its cognitive and epistemic implications; when it comes to the deliberative democracy theory, the author maintains that it would wrongly consider citizens as 'Superdeliberators' (pp. 105-124) and would be, substantially, implausibly demanding. So, what is it like to be a citizen? Beerbohm draws upon his criticism against distributive justice and deliberative views and recognizes the existence of cognitive and epistemic limitations we have to deal with in sketching a democratic theory able to take them into due account without losing substantial philosophical significance. Hence, a certain degree of ignorance is morally permitted to the citizens of a democracy and in some occasions they may also be held somehow non-responsible (for example on matters of technical or very specific content), however democratic citizens should all be maintained their responsibility for having political convictions and ideals. A concerns the problem of competence in some specific issues – e.g., how can we form our convictions on economic and social policies without being an expert in the field? - Beerbohm sketches

some strategies aimed to proper and reasonably informed judgements and decisions.

The third problem Beerbohm addresses in his work is what he defines 'ethics of delegation', i.e. the problem of political representation under the citizen' perspective (chapters 8-9). As concerns the classical distinction between the *trustee view* and the *mandate view* in theory of political representation, the author of the book dismisses both as unsatisfying, since they both would treat the citizen as a beneficiary rather than a moral claimant (pp. 193-225) and describes the citizens as co-principal in delineating the forms and the terms of their interactions, and they may still bear responsibility for unjust actions even if only a small part of a democratic people is involved or complicit in them (pp. 226-251).

Beerbohm's solution to these issues is an attempt to devise institutional reforms able to address the moral problems connected to modern democratic citizenship as outlined in this book. At the beginning of his book, the author asks «Why would you see yourself as sharing in the responsibility for a political decision?» (p. 3), and, after a long and detailed philosophical and political research and reflection, at the end his main aim is to separate citizen's moral responsibility from that of their state. Among the legislative mechanisms the author proposes, there are opt-outs, petitions, crowd sourcing as «an attempt to take seriously the idea that we can rely heavily on peers» (p. 267); Beerbohm also very briefly sketches other executive and judicial mechanisms.

Democratic institutions constrain and amplify the reach of our individual agency» (p. 285), therefore Beerbohm seeks to devise a democratic constitutional theory in which the citizen is somehow allowed to disconnect himself or herself from the moral responsibility lying on the democratic state's actions – on the fact that a democratic state acts and takes decisions 'In our name'.

Beerbohm's democratic design takes into account various aspects of the political process occurring within the debating (and often antagonistic) arena and the decisional bodies of a democratic state: cognitive limits as well as empirical ones, different scale of moral responsibility, forms of complicity and, more in general, the acknowledgement of an interconnected system in which a number of levels of government and citizens' interaction and inevitable (and fallible) influence over the others.

This book is a commendable and highly valuable work in the field of political theory and of political ethics applied to democratic theory: it clearly outlines the main moral issues affecting democratic citizenship, possible objections are taken into due consideration and proper counter-objections are brought forward, and it does not seem to ignore the multifaceted aspects involved in the investigation of the subject.

