

Robert Talisse

Democracy and Moral Conflict.

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In this book Talisse offers a timely and highly readable contribution to the debate surrounding moral pluralism in a democracy. Suitable for both academic audiences and the wider interested public, it carefully blends rigorous analysis of modern scholarship with an acute awareness of the state of today's political culture and discourse. To what 'conflict' does Talisse's title refer? It is not (to the chagrin of some readers) that liberals have corrupted our country's traditional moral values. Nor is it that conservatives won't stop imposing their outdated rules on the rest of us. In fact, democracy's true moral conflict, he argues, has very little to do with moral values at all. The real issue is not *what* we believe but *how* we argue about these beliefs. It centers less on what citizens believe to be morally right, and more on how citizens can live in a society where people hold opposing and conflicting moral and religious doctrines. It is this moral problem, the problem of 'deep politics', that Talisse addresses with urgency: 'Unless we can formulate a compelling reason why citizens ought to pursue democratic means to their political ends in cases in which democracy threatens to fail to reflect their deepest commitments, we should expect increasing instances of exit' (41).

But isn't moral compromise an expected and necessary condition of living in a pluralistic society? And shouldn't democracy be praised for guaranteeing peace, fairness, and stability for its citizens, even though it cannot guarantee full agreement with the outcomes? It's the cost of doing business, right? The first section introduces the reader to the most pertinent objections to this classical proceduralist view of democracy. For one, Talisse argues, the proceduralist view imposes unreasonable demands on its citizens. It asks religious believers to 'regard their deepest value commitments as bargaining chips with which to attempt to strike the best political deal they can in light of their interests' (27). To characterize one's moral and religious commitments as mere 'interests' is absurd, he claims, especially since these convictions more often than not reflect categorical imperatives or divine mandates, not chips that can be easily exchanged or bargained for. Second, the proceduralist view presupposes that peace should be privileged over all other values (e.g. truth or obedience to divine authority). What makes *peace* the ultimate moral trump card? Regardless of the answer, a larger question looms: Can a society reasonably expect its citizens to agree on a set of moral principles?

The second section deals with a prominent attempt by John Rawls to answer this question. Talisse examines the doctrine of political liberalism, the plea for a public discourse marked by 'public reason'. In this version of political debate, citizens are asked

to refrain from appealing to comprehensive religious and philosophical doctrines to make their case. Instead, they are required to frame their argument in a common moral language, i.e. in language each could reasonably expect that their fellow citizens might endorse as consistent with the shared principles of freedom and equality. Talisse is quick here to object to what he labels the ‘politics of omission’. The main problem, he argues, is that political liberalism falls into the same trap as the proceduralist view: it implicitly assumes a privileging of moral values, in this case the values of freedom and equality. The common mistake that these proposals make, he explains, is

in presuming that the justification for democratic politics must lie in a *moral* principle. But not all commitments are *moral* in character, and not all normativity is essentially moral. There are other kinds of commitments that may prove both sufficiently non-controversial and substantial to provide a justification for democracy. I contend that there is a core of sound *epistemic* commitments that satisfy the description; that is, I hold that there is a set of basic and non-controversial epistemic principles whose substance entails a commitment to democratic politics (78).

Talisse devotes Section 3 to outlining his ‘five principles of folk epistemology’: 1) To believe some proposition, *p*, is to hold that *p* is true; 2) To hold that *p* is true is generally to hold that the best reasons support *p*; 3) To hold that *p* is supported by the best reasons is to hold that *p* is *assertable*; 4) To assert that *p* is to enter into a social process of reason *exchange*; 5) To engage in social processes of reason exchange is to at least implicitly adopt certain cognitive and dispositional norms related to one’s epistemic character (87-8). In short, to be a ‘proper believer’ is to be prepared to articulate and defend one’s beliefs to others. The key to solving the problem of deep politics, then, is not for a society to assume or impose a set of shared moral values among its citizens, but to work from—and out of—its citizens’ implicit affirmation of fundamental epistemic commitments.

This is not to say that adhering to these principles will ensure all citizens get their way. Lawmakers will still enact laws that oppose their constituents’ moral and religious convictions. So what are citizens to do when their government reaches a decision that they find morally repulsive? Talisse argues that democracy provides them a few possible responses, of which civil disobedience and petition are the most democratic. But while democracy may not ensure that citizens always get their way, it’s better than the alternatives. And if Talisse is right that the five epistemic principles are already implicit in the way citizens engage in moral and political discourse, then democracy may serve as the least worst option for a morally pluralistic society.

Section 4 makes such a case. Democracy, Talisse argues, does not require a solution to the problem of deep politics. Why? Because democracy at its epistemic best *is* the solution. ‘The strength of our commitment to our moral and religious doctrines,’ he

writes, ‘should be *directly* proportionate to the strength of our commitment to democratic politics’ (150). As long as citizens see themselves as ‘reason-responsive epistemic agents’, they must endorse the only form of government that ‘makes it possible to exercise proper epistemic agency’ (126). This does not mean, however, that democracy *as citizens now practice it* is best suited to address its deep moral disagreements. Indeed, *something* must change. So what is it?

Talissee’s call for a ‘politics of engagement’ grounded in an ‘epistemically perfectionist state’ appears in the fifth section of the book. Talisse criticizes the recent deliberative democracy literature for focusing too much on the need for increased *access to* or *participation in* political discourse. He sees no such lack of political involvement today. The real problem, he argues, is an epistemic one. When average citizens lack the elementary skills to recognize, evaluate, and defend arguments, democracy suffers as a result. As such, a ‘dialogical democracy’ requires a society to cultivate in its citizens a certain combination of epistemic virtues (e.g. communicative capabilities, critical thinking skills, broad knowledge of politics and other subjects, the ability to accept criticism and tolerate disagreement). Epistemic perfectionism (as opposed to moral perfectionism), therefore, does not seek to impose a certain version of morality, but ‘to promote habits and capabilities that enable citizens to engage fruitfully in moral and political deliberation’ (172).

Some may dismiss Talisse’s argument as just another call to civility in the public square. But to do so would be to miss his point entirely. Talisse is not so concerned about teaching citizens better manners as he is with ensuring that every opinion is heard and—more importantly—placed under the realm of public criticism. This serves as a formidable attack on those who expect religious believers to check their convictions at the door. Yet it also reminds religious groups that their beliefs are not, contrary to popular etiquette, immune from critical scrutiny. (Talissee gives a brave example of what dialogical democracy might look like in the case of a biblical inerrantist opposing a school board’s world religions curriculum.)

Perhaps this is the book’s greatest contribution: it provides a framework for debating today’s fiercest moral controversies, especially when one’s moral beliefs are rooted in religious conviction. But this can only happen if citizens are willing to recognize—and embrace—the complex, ambiguous, and nuanced nature of morality. Perhaps, then, the deeper problem—even deeper than the problem of ‘deep politics’—is the presence of, and craving for, moral and spiritual certainty. Talisse does not overlook this. In fact, likely he has this exact issue in mind when discussing the doctrine of moral pluralism. ‘To deny moral pluralism’, he writes, ‘is to deny that there is a distinction between being *wrong* and being out of one’s mind. Only the most extreme fanatics take such a view’ (14). These ‘fanatics’ are the real problem, the ones who stain moral and religious debate. As a result, the reader is left to wonder whether Talisse’s proposal, or *any* proposal, can adequately equip citizens to embrace the spiritual and moral humility

necessary for proper civil discourse.

At the end, Talisse never promises that an epistemically perfect society will lead to better manners or better policy. In fact, it does not even lead to an end to disagreement. And it shouldn't. In the words of political philosopher Michael Sandel, debate is the 'sound and spectacle of democracy'. To call for an end to disagreement is to call for an end to all human striving and moral growth. This book, then, is less a plea for peace than a passionate defense of the messy, imperfect, obnoxious, and yes, even sometimes morally repugnant institution we call democracy.

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