Robert B. Talisse: *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, 206 pp.**

The scenario of this new book by Robert Talisse is undoubtedly engaged with contemporary authorship in politics and political philosophy. Unlike the previous book: "A Pragmatist Theory of Democracy" (New York and London, Routledge 2007), which was more focussed in the dismissal of what he called a Deweyan proceduralist account, the idea of this new book is to cope with a systematic account of the epistemic perfectionist strategy and overcome the problem of pluralism posted by Rawls' proceduralist view -but maybe without the label of "pragmatist theory of democracy". The book, thus, presents a substantive view of Democracy based on epistemic perfectionism capabilities for a "dialogical democracy" that empowers the folk epistemology we already endorse in the fixation of our beliefs. Nonetheless, as we will note later on, the book is on the same line of Talisse's previous opinions but from a deep perspective.

From the first chapter on, the book ties some laces with the contemporary debate: In order to show how the challenge posted by John Rawls concerning the non reducibility of moral conflicts it is first demanded to show how the problems set a complication to deep politics, he asserts: "The presumption of moral pluralism, then, comes to this: for every citizen holding a plausible doctrine, there are other citizens holding opposing but also plausible doctrines." (p. 13)

The problem of deep politics includes, accordingly, a paradox of moral disagreement: On what extent a moral doctrine opposed to the state policies must be tolerated without going against the liberties? Talisse answers: "It seems, then, that the very liberties that constitute the core of democracy render the democracy's own conception of legitimacy unsatisfiable. This is the paradox of democratic justification." (p. 15)

The recognition of moral pluralism does not imply either moral relativism or scepticism, but renders the possibility of "honest moral error" plausible. So, the honest moral error can be overcome through reasoned debate. Now, the problem of deep moral disagreement in the democratic assessment of moral issues within a plural society is a constant in liberal

democratic societies: Talisse shows us several vibrant problems of contemporary politics needed of engagement and also involving an utterly notorious disagreement such as: the science curriculum, gay (homosexual) marriage, pharmacists on emergency contraception, and the like. Reasoned debate is needed to make our minds clear and prove ourselves capable of convergence and a rational and straightforward answer to them. Nonetheless, the standard solution in the proceduralist tradition from Churchill to Posner (2003. *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.) is fond of a deep moral idea that liberal democracy is in its own right a moral desirable state of affairs.

But why the proceduralist view is not enough, despite his thinness in conceptual and consensual requirements? Talisse writes: "To repeat, there are important differences among the cases, but all share the following logical structure: each is a case in which the democratic process has produced a result that violates some value that one party to the dispute takes to be the *sine qua non* of democratic legitimacy. In such cases, the fact that the democratic process had been applied properly is not enough to settle the question of justification." (p. 31)

To be more specific, the liberties of conscience secured by a democratic constitution lead to a pluralism of moral commitments among the democratic citizenry. Yet, wherever there is a pluralism of moral commitments, there will be a plurality of moral conflicts, and accordingly some of these conflicts will engage the values and commitments that citizens take to be fundamental and hence non-negotiable. (p. 35)

However, any kind of moral principle, even if consistent with a vast majority and, as we have seen, morally thin, will turn out eventually contestable and puts minorities in crisis if blocks the discussion by imposition. Just as Hischman did (1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), Talisse puts forth the options when these scenarios happen to be: either the system has contestation of the dissentical or antagonist group or the group radicalizes its positions by some sort of peaceful or violent exit of the regime.

The book, thus, is looking for a non moral approach to the problem of pluralism, a challenge to the accounts of John Rawls of the "duty of ci-

vility" (2005 *Political Liberalism*, paperback edition. New York: Colum-
bia University Press. p. 217), Jeffrey Stout (2004,*Democracy and Tra-
dition*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p. 5), and many others
quoted on the book could not fulfil inasmuch as proceduralism merely
relocates, and does not respond to —much less resolve— the paradox of
democratic justification. This unsatisfactory way out of the problem is
recognized as a "politics of omission". Thereupon politics of omission is
a strategy used by the proceduralist by exiting the conditions of political
debate or omitting one side's moral deep convictions. The salient pro-
blem of this is that from any existing proceduralist account one moral
commitment is privileged.

According to Talisse, from the politics of omission the public reason
behaves "epistemic exclusionary" (p. 55). Notwithstanding, no matter
how universally presented a moral commitment could be, there is always
a permanent possibility of reasoned disagreement against it. The upshot
of the conundrum might be the group polarization: despite any account
of civility, it is not enough to show courtesy to others views insofar as
polarization is not avoidable when dialogical capabilities are not develo-
ped. The recommendation of "keeping the conversation going" among
divided citizens in the politics of omission strategies is based on a moral
principle, but for all that Talisse says: "Any moral principle is substantial
enough to generate a democratic politics will be controversial across di-
vided comprehensive doctrines, and any moral principle minimal enough
to win consensus across deep moral divides will be too thin to support
democratic commitments" (p. 78)

Thence, plainly, a politics of engagement is needed, something dif-
ferent from every weak or strong moral principle to justify democracy.
Talisse address that the norms of epistemic dialogue, included in any ac-
count of inquiry, will be the only safe place to engage with other's reasons
and beliefs. He uses an analogue of the already common expression of
"folk psychology", trying to remember us of the common connotation
of the former in the latter: "folk epistemology".

The Folk epistemology seems not an odd place to begin with; it is
a universal point of departure of ongoing dialogue over plural interests

and convictions. Every subject (a participant in a dialogue) holds beliefs, and from a first-person perspective a belief is fixed rationally if and only if she builds it upon a method of compare evidence and reasons to hold it for either true or false. Obviously moral and political beliefs are not simply fixed, but nonetheless this does not mean that they are in a different cognitive space apart of our common sense or scientific beliefs, so to speak. In addition to this, the conception to be a believer and a democrat at once means a commitment to regard 'A belief, in order to be a belief, must come with a commitment to give reasons' (Misak, Cheryl 2000 *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge. p. 162, n.41). Following Sunstein (1996, *Democracy and the Problem of Free Speech*. New York: Free Press.) Talisse advocates for a "republic of reasons". This folk epistemology includes five principles that Talisse shows with a pretention of universality:

(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. (pp. 87-88)

These principles are integrated in a proposal for dialogical democracy, and some utterly overriding positions like deliberative democracy: "the folk epistemic conception of democracy works at a level that is analytically prior to that at which the deliberativist are working. On the folk epistemic view, the question of what policy and institutional arrangements best reflect and enable our democratic aspirations is one that can be settled only by democratic processes of reasoning and argument" (p. 139). Summarizing these principles, we might say that to be a believer is to be a truth-seeker, to be a truth-seeker is to be an inquirer, to be an inquirer is to be a reason-giver, and last but not least, to be a reason-giver

is to be a reason-exchanger, *i.e.*, a participant in a community of inquirers and therefore a participant in reason exchanging substantive democracy.

The position of the democratic deliberativist is, thereupon, not mistaken, but is not enough; it reflects the idea that in a democracy the holder of the truth is privileged, whereas the Dialogical democrat is rather in the position of a "truth-seeker". Consequently, Dialogical Democracy is actively a "politics of engagement".

An objection raised to the universality of this principles, and their payoff, could be flesh out from the critique by Nicholas Wolterstoff (1997, "The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues," in *Religion in the Public Square.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield p. 98), who accuses these epistemic principles of strongly committed with the conceptions of reasons from the Enlightenment. Even though these epistemic norms were so committed, Talisse does not think of this as a substantive problem because the Enlightenment may well have been just addressing some universals features of reasons, though with its overtones.

The core idea of the book, so far, is around engaging what is being labelled as "epistemic perfectionism". The ever present folk epistemology, necessary for any kind of settlement of beliefs, is to be polished within a systematic process of improving folk epistemic capabilities brings us on the epistemic perfectionism.

In the same line of Martha Nussbaum's proposals for a capabilities approach to reasoned dialogue, the character of epistemic perfectionism includes the next kinds of capabilities (see Nussbaum 2007. *Frontiers of Justice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Talisse 2009: p. 175-176): communicative, formal, informational, methodological and interpersonal. The capabilities as habits are a sort of confirmation of the improvements of a community where the State fulfils rightly its commitment with an active engagement with epistemic perfectionism.

In addition, coincidences with Dworkin are notorious towards the end of the book, Dworkin has been very prone to the establishment of institutions and means of dialogical democracy, his policy proposals are strikingly in the line of a reasoned debate (see Dworkin, Ronald 1985.

A Matter of Principle. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). Ta-
lisse articulates reasons and convergence with Dworkin's proposals but
also remarks that "However, that Dworkin attempts to identify moral
commitments that fill this role seems to me misguided for all of the la-
ter Rawlsian reasons concerning the fact of reasonable pluralism that we
canvassed in Chapter 2." (p. 186).

Facing public ignorance and how epistemic perfectionism is meant to
shed light on actual politics, Talisse presents the Mozert and Yoder cases
in the recent history of hard law cases in the United States. Those cases
came about avoiding political engagement with others political reasons.
Both are two examples of how a problem of deep politics can be faced
fairly, on the one hand, and overcome by purely epistemic shared com-
mitments, on the other. Discourse failure on different strains of fallacies
is surpassed when some capabilities (I rather say epistemic virtues) are
achieved. Consequently, epistemic perfectionism is neutral, gives ever-
yone the same opportunities in a constant engagement with the fair dia-
logue.

It is worth noting that the language Talisse is using in this book tends
to label less and less his theory as "Pragmatist" or "Peircean". My point
of view is that this does not really mean a substantive change, presumably
might be just the pretension to have a less technical language and address
a broad public. Peircean scholarship has heartly critic with Talisse's book
on Peircean democracy, but it looks as though some Peircean scholars
were trying to say that it has to be wholly Peircean using the language
and Peircean methodeutic thorough and through. We might say he is a
Peircean of the early period of Peirce's writings, those utterly concerned
in a theory of self-controlled inquiry. It follows that this book might be
Peircean in spirit; inasmuch has also the same kind of pragmatism that
privileges engagement in action and inquiry, but somehow avoids Peirce's
late positions on vital matters. Talisse has shown us that we can formulate
a substantive theory of democracy but still being naturalistic for he is
not keen to adopt a sort of transcendental proof of the principles of
democracy apart that the fact that we all are beliefs-holders.

I think the book achieves success in the way that proposes a truly feasible account facing the problem of irreducible pluralism and trying to step aside of foundation on morals, it can be said that conditions of responsible epistemic agency turn out to be inseparable from the conditions of responsible moral agency, from this we must in the end cope with the difficult problems this throws up because, nonetheless, the book seems as well uncommitted with a broad historical view that forgets how the very term democracy is moral theory laden. On other issues, the book, confident in epistemic perfectionism, does not say anything about the conception of reality that supposes the convergence on truth via the inquiry. If we can build a dialogical democracy we suppose that the agreement eventually will converge in something pervasive if we inquire well enough and long enough, and this supposes regard an underlying realism on a basis of a recalcitrant experience. In this sense Talisse's proposal, along with his recognition of the merits of Sidney Hook (Cf. Talisse 2007, 114-130) is quite substantive and long distanced —while still being pragmatic— from procedural Dewey-like of contemporary so-called pragmatist approaches[1].

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