

## **Epistemic Democracy for the Real World**

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The claim that expertise confers the right to rule is a staple of the anti-democratic arsenal. Yet the general idea that epistemology and politics are intimately entangled has attracted many traditional democrats. Rousseau held that democracy is authoritative precisely because its products are correct. Others have been less sanguine, but still committed. Mill and Dewey both held that democracy's primary virtue lies in its ability to harness socially distributed intelligence.

Such views invite the epistocratic challenge: If politics aims to get things right, then experts should rule. In response, Mill bit the bullet straightaway in advocating a system of plural voting that favors "graduates of universities." He affirmed that this captures "the true meaning of democracy." Dewey took a less direct tack by proposing a revisionist epistemology according to which only democratic publics could be experts. Of course, the trouble is that we need a highly-trained philosopher to tell us *that*. This is epistocracy by other means.

The epistemology-politics entanglement still thrives. We are all deliberativists now, broadly speaking. The mainstream theories all place at the core of democracy some

ideal of public reasoning, variously described as communication, contestation, deliberation, reflection, discourse, or engagement. These views claim that public reasoning yields distinctive epistemic benefits, and they cite those benefits as central reasons to favor democracy.

Theorists divide over where to locate democracy's epistemic benefits. Many hold that public reasoning increases the epistemic value of collective decisions and thus makes the system of political authority more "rational"; others look inward, claiming that public reasoning develops the cognitive capacities of citizens and helps to make their views more coherent. Most go further to claim that these epistemic benefits trigger distinctive goods of other kinds: better citizenship, stronger communities, enhanced accountability, more cooperation, and much else that is undeniably valuable.

Yet we know that in the real world, large-scale public reasoning is epistemically a mixed bag. For one thing, our vulnerabilities to various cognitive distortions are well-documented, and they seem to be punctuated in group settings. Further, some research suggests that public deliberation is strongly correlated with a *disinclination* to vote. Finally, there is a clear sense in which our current political environment is the product of expanded

communication and increased number of "pro and con" debate forums. It's hard to see these developments as a boon to democracy. Arguably, the proliferation of occasions for public political argument is ruining democracy.

Deliberativists have responded with increasingly stylized views of public reasoning. We now have highly-developed theories of what should count as a proper reason, a proper question, a properly-formed agenda, and a proper forum. Indeed, some propose that true democracy needs professional management-- trained deliberation facilitators and highly-orchestrated deliberation events. One theorist has even argued for a constitutional amendment establishing a fourth branch of government devoted to deliberation.

Such maneuvers look suspicious. Professional academics try to make public reasoning look attractive by imposing external constraints and restrictions on everyday democratic talk. This naturally raises the worry that democracy is being rigged to guarantee the policy outcomes favored by academic political theorists. Those who embrace the epistemology-politics entanglement still face the challenge of epistocracy.

Today, I will embrace the entanglement. I will argue that epistemological reasons are among our most compelling reasons for democracy. However, I think that by

repositioning the interface between democracy and epistemology, I can evade epistocracy. Accordingly, I look neither to the epistemic value of outcomes, nor to the cultivation of epistemic capacities. Instead, I will argue that democracy is the political correlate of our *epistemic self-conception*. That's cryptic, I know.

### I. *Democratic Justification: Three Queries*

When philosophers propose a "philosophical justification of democracy," they are most frequently involved in one of two familiar queries. The first examines the relative merits of democracy as compared to other possible regimes. The question is: What reason do we have to *establish* a democracy? The second query has to do with the *authority* of democracy. Central to this line of investigation is the question of whether citizens ever have a duty to obey the law.

But there's a third query we may be engaging when we're looking for a "philosophical justification of democracy," one less often addressed, yet, I think pressing given our current political culture. It is this: What reason can be given to democratic citizens to pursue *democratic* means of social change when they are confronted with a democratically-produced result which seems to them

grossly mistaken and perhaps intolerable? This query does not aim to find reasons to establish or obey a democracy; rather it looks for reasons for *sustaining* democracy. It asks this: When democracy decides, someone loses; if you lose and the loss seems especially significant, why not give up on democracy? Why not pursue non-democratic means of getting what you want?

Now, this way of stating things is too coarse. If the worry were simply that in a democracy some people won't get what they want, we could dismiss it. You can't always get what you want. But the problem is more sophisticated than this. The problem emerges from two familiar features of contemporary democracy. First is the fact that the liberties and rights secured in a democracy give rise to a pluralism of moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines that are consistent with liberal democratic citizenship yet inconsistent with each other. The second is that many of the questions of social policy we face invoke not merely our preferences but our deep moral commitments -- our fundamental conceptions of justice, dignity, sanctity, and freedom. Debates over nearly every major policy controversy today -- abortion, healthcare, same-sex marriage, stem-cell research, the biology curriculum -- invoke the fundamental moral commitments of citizens. The

issue is not simply that some people won't get what they want; rather, it is that in a democracy, reasonable people will sometimes confront democratically-produced decisions that not only strike them as undesirable, but unconscionable. In such cases, what should citizens do?

Consider an obvious example. Some say that abortion is morally equivalent to murder; they claim that legal abortion is an American Holocaust. Others say that legal restrictions on abortion would violate equality. On both sides, part of what's at issue is the government's legitimacy. One side says that no government that permits the murder of innocent people can be fully legitimate; the other says the same thing about a government that seeks to control the bodies of half of its citizens. Each side thinks that government jeopardizes its claim to legitimacy unless it enacts its own favored policy. And it's difficult to see how there could be a compromise position. Yet *some* policy must be decided. So, democratic governments must enact an abortion policy that will lead some segment of its population to regard it not only as mistaken about abortion, but possibly illegitimate. And the laws of an illegitimate regime are not morally binding.

When confronted with what they regard as a legitimacy-dissolving policy, citizens must decide what to do. The

mere fact that the government has enacted a morally unacceptable policy is typically not sufficient to justify rebellion. We tend to think that except for the most egregious moral errors, democratic citizens have an obligation to pursue democratic means of correction. But why should they?

Typically theorists identify some moral desideratum said to be uniquely satisfied by democracy, and then argue that the importance of realizing this desideratum outweighs the badness of the legitimacy-dissolving policy. A common version has it that democratic processes instantiate political equality, and that is offered as a reason to uphold democracy. But since we're thinking of cases which invoke our *deepest* moral commitments, it seems that an appeal to equality is unlikely to succeed. Why should equality trump, say, the protection of innocent lives?

In short, any moral response to the question must produce an argument for thinking that the moral values which recommend democracy should take priority over all others in cases of conflict.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to see how such an argument could avoid begging the question.

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<sup>1</sup> In addressing this, Rawls simply asserts that "under reasonably favorable conditions" democratic political values will "normally outweigh" opposing values (2005: 209; Cf. 2005: 146).

Another common answer proposes *prudential* reasons for upholding democratic commitments in the face of serious moral error. It is said that revolt is too costly, and that upholding democracy is necessary in order to keep *peace*. Democracy is, the thought runs, civil war by other means. But this reply is fragile. After all, once we concede that democracy is a kind of war, we might as well ask: why not employ the usual means?

It will help to introduce some more detail. For many citizens, the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* would represent not merely a bad policy decision; it would represent a moral error which yields a significant lapse in our democracy's legitimacy. Here are the main lines of response that are available (there are others):

*Relocation.* Relocate to a country in which the desired rights and policies are in place.

*Rebellion.* Engage in acts of uncivil disobedience, including violence, threats, riots, destruction of property, unlawful protest, terrorism, and so on, and resist legal punishment for crimes.

*Civil Disobedience.* Resist and engage in protest within circumscribed moral constraints, but publicly and openly disobey the law, and willingly accept legal punishment for crimes.

*Petition.* Obey the law, but engage in all available legal measures to effect a change in the law, including voting, campaigning, lawful protest, lobbying, coalition-building, activism, and so on.



I trust that *Civil Disobedience* and *Petition* represent *democratic* responses, whereas *Relocation* and *Rebellion* do not. Of the nondemocratic options, *Relocation* is typically morally superior to *Rebellion*, though *Relocation* usually is not open to all, and in some cases may not be open to any.

Our question, then, is, why should a citizen who sincerely believes that a given democratic outcome runs afoul of a condition for legitimacy nonetheless sustain his commitment to democratic means to social change?

## II. *The Epistemological Argument Sketched*

The moral and prudential approaches seem unlikely to succeed in such cases. The alternative strategy I propose offers *epistemological* reasons to uphold democratic commitments even in the face of serious moral error.

The argument begins from a folk conception of what beliefs are, and then argues that there is a kind of normativity governing our doxastic lives *from the inside*. These first-personal epistemic norms are then employed in an argument for certain social epistemic norms, which in turn provide a case for what I'll call *Open Society* norms. Then I argue that these are best satisfied under democracy. In short: Our interest in the correctness of our beliefs provides a case for sustaining democratic conditions.

I begin with belief. In calling this conception *folk*, I mean to call attention to two features. First, it is not a full theory of belief; in proposing it I am not denying that there is more to say about belief. Second, it aspires to capture certain features of belief which are not matters of serious contention among the more robust views.

The folk conception of belief is constituted by three commitments. The first is obvious. Beliefs have contents. This is simply to say that when you believe, you believe *something*; you believe some content. Second, to hold a belief is to take the content of the belief to be true. Third, when we believe, we take ourselves to be responding appropriately to our evidence and reasons.

It is worth noting that the latter two features of belief make reference to the *first-personal* perspective we have on our beliefs. When we believe we *take ourselves* to believe what's true and we *take ourselves* to be responding to our evidence and reasons. To be sure, there are many cases in which we in fact believe on the basis not of evidence or reasons, but rather on the basis of biases or other cognitive distortions. But the folk conception does not deny this; it only says that when we believe on the basis of, say, prejudice, we do not *take ourselves* to believe on that basis. We *assess* our beliefs as properly

formed. When we envision cases of improper belief, we are typically *ascribing* such beliefs from a *second- or third-personal* perspective. Cases of fanatical, delusional, paranoid, conspiratorial, or otherwise corrupt belief are for us cases of *someone else's* belief.

One way to evaluate this folk conception is to consider cases of violation. Consider Moore's Paradox:

(1) I believe that  $p$ , but  $p$  is false.

To assess oneself as believing what is false is typically to dissolve one's belief, no matter what the content. We say that beliefs aim at truth; though it would be better to say that when we believe, we aim to believe what's true. This is the fundamental norm that attaches to believing.

From this core norm of truth-aspiration, two other norms come into view. Consider an assessment like this:

(2) I believe that  $p$ , but all of my evidence counts against  $p$ .

The way we try to satisfy the truth-aspiration norm of belief is by believing in accordance with our evidence. Of course, the assessment that one believes *against* one's evidence does not automatically result in the dissolution of the belief. The truth-aspiration norm is stronger than the evidence-tracking norm. But still, assessments like (2) are signals of failure. When we discover that our

evidence counts decisively against our belief, we typically feel the need to take action: we revise, reformulate, confabulate, rationalize, or self-deceive. And when we find ourselves retaining the belief in light of the realization that it is not favored by our evidence, we sometimes come to regard the belief as a *symptom* of some deep cognitive malady; *that* we sustain belief in such cases often calls for diagnosis.

In addition to the evidence-tracking norm, we can identify the closely-related norm of evidence-responsiveness. Consider the following assessment:

- (3) I believe that  $p$ , but my evidence favors neither  $p$  nor  $not-p$ .

To assess one's belief in this way is typically to come to regard the belief as unhealthy and in need of attention. We want our beliefs not only to *not contradict* our evidence, but also to *respond* to the evidence available to us. We want our evidence to in part *explain* why we believe as we do; and this means that when we believe that  $p$ , we want not only to be able to provide evidence for  $p$ , but also to be able to say how our belief would change in light of new evidence or reasons. It's not enough to believe what's true and what our evidence suggests, we also must assess our beliefs as being *governed* by our evidence.

Combining norms (2) and (3), we can say that a kind of *modest evidentialism* attaches to beliefs as such. To be sure, evidentialism is a controversial view; however, *modest evidentialism* seems unobjectionable. It simply says that when we believe, we typically take ourselves to have satisfied the norms of evidence-tracking and evidence-responsiveness. When we assess ourselves as failing to satisfy these norms, we take ourselves to have fallen short of our epistemic goals. Admitting this much need not commit us to Cliffordian principles concerning belief-suspension and the like.

These first-personal epistemic norms should strike you as commonplace. Things get interesting, though, once we consider that these first-personal norms implicate what we might call *social-epistemic* norms. That is, the modest evidentialist norms point us in the direction of *sharing* and *exchanging* our evidence with others. Our beliefs are frequently the products of our interactions with others; given the limitations of our individual cognitive resources, we *must* depend on others for information, including reasons and evidence. And in the course of gathering and evaluating our evidence, we inevitably come to realize that others disagree with us. We say, then, that, in addition to the first-personal norms we just

discussed, there are also *dialectical* norms attached to belief. To see this, consider the following assessments:

- (4) I believe that *p*, but have never consulted those who deny *p* and have no idea why they reject *p*.
- (5) I believe that *p*, but whenever I engage with those who reject *p*, I find my reasons come up short.

Surely both are consistent with sustaining the belief that *p*. However, once we assess ourselves as not having an adequate grasp of the available evidence pertaining to *p* -- or having only a limited command of the reasons that speak to *p* -- it is difficult to assess ourselves as satisfying the modest evidentialist norms noted above. Insofar as we aim to believe in accordance with our evidence, we aim to believe in accordance with *all the evidence that's available*; and this requires us to take seriously the reasons of those with whom we disagree. Accordingly, when we find ourselves unable to respond to objections or account for counter-evidence, we assess our belief as deficient; unless we can successfully revise, reformulate, rationalize, or dismiss, our belief is jeopardized. Some degree of *dialectical* success is necessary for first-personal epistemic success.

Similar considerations give rise to social epistemic norms that are *institutional* rather than dialectical.

Consider assessments such as these:

- (6) I believe that  $p$ , but all evidence against  $p$  has been suppressed, and all of  $p$ 's critics have been silenced.
- (7) I believe that  $p$ , but all information pertaining to  $p$  has been carefully vetted by the Minister of Truth.

In order to assess ourselves as having proper beliefs, we must be able to assess ourselves as functioning within a cognitive environment that is at least not systematically distorted. Accordingly, the first-personal epistemic norms entail institutional norms of free expression, open inquiry, freedom of association, freedom of conscience, and protected dissent. We can then build an epistemic case for further institutional norms, including a free press, public education, and the protection of public space, though I will not explore this here.

The point is that first-personal and social epistemic norms give us compelling reason to endorse what we might call the *Open Society*. Now, an Open Society is not yet a democracy. But we can find an epistemological route from the Open Society to familiar democratic norms. We aim at truth by aiming to follow our best evidence. But the task of following our best evidence confronts us with the fact

of our unavoidable *epistemic dependence* on others and on institutions. When our epistemic dependence is coupled with a well-functioning social epistemic system, great stores of information are available which would otherwise be inaccessible. However, like all dependence, epistemic dependence is risky: We could depend on a dysfunctional social epistemic system. Again, in order to assess ourselves as satisfying the first-personal norms, we must be able to assess ourselves as forming our beliefs within a reliable social epistemic system. But in order to be able to assess our social epistemic system as reliable, we have to be able to see it as something that can be *monitored, critiqued, and corrected*; that is, a reliable social epistemic system is one in which breakdowns can be detected, diagnosed, and addressed.

The democratic institutional norms -- equality, rule of law, universal suffrage, regular elections, and the like -- are the political mechanisms by which the social epistemic system can be scrutinized and monitored. The result is that in order to satisfy the Open Society norms, there must be political institutions and practices in place which monitor and sustain the conditions necessary for the satisfaction of those norms. This in turn requires political institutions and agents to be *responsive* to



challenges and *sensitive* to problems and breakdowns within the social epistemic system. In short, the satisfaction of the Open Society norms requires *representative* and *accountable* political institutions. To see why, consider:

- (8) I believe I am functioning within a well-ordered social epistemic system, but I have no reason to believe that I am.
- (9) I believe that I am functioning within a well-ordered social epistemic system, but should I come to discover some reason to believe the system to be dysfunctional, there are no mechanisms by which I could press for correction.

In the absence of political institutions by which we are able to monitor and scrutinize the social epistemic system, I cannot assess myself as successfully satisfying the epistemic norms internal to belief. Consequently, the Open Society norms call for democratic political norms.

#### IV. *Conclusion*

I've argued -- briskly -- that familiar democratic norms and institutions are the social-political complements to our fundamental epistemic aspirations. And this, I think, gives us some traction in responding to the third justificatory query with which we began. Recall that we were looking for reasons to sustain democratic commitments in light of policy outcomes that seem morally odious. It is important to note that what gives rise to this problem

is our concern to see public policy reflect what we regard as the truth (or at least not reflect what we regard as serious error). And this very concern with the truth gives us reason to sustain democracy even when it goes wrong: we should employ democratic means of social change, even in the face of serious error, because we depend upon the kind of social epistemic system that democracy facilitates.

I've claimed that this version of epistemic democracy is fit "for the real world," and I want to speak briefly to that characterization. First, note that the argument is non-comprehensive in the Rawlsian sense; it presupposes no particular conception of the good life and prescribes no moral ideals. It is also *non-committal* on the question of which statements are truth-apt and which are not; it says only that, no matter what you think it's possible to get right, your interest in getting things right gives you compelling reasons to endorse recognizably democratic social institutions. In this sense, the argument is *non-rivalrous*: it can stand alongside reasons of other kinds for upholding democracy. Further, the argument is decidedly *modest*: it makes no appeal to the Millian assumption that "the truth will out" under conditions of liberty, it involves no estimation of the cognitive abilities of citizens, and it makes no claims about the

epistemic value of democratic outcomes. The epistemological character of the argument lies elsewhere; it says that the epistemic self-conception we already have is bound up with a certain system of norms and institutions that are characteristic of a democracy. We each have epistemological reasons *from the inside* to sustain democracy. Thus the view maintains the epistemology-politics entanglement, but avoids epistocracy.

There's another sense in which I hope that the account I've sketched is suited to the real world. We live in an age of moral combat. Our public political discourse is dominated not only by moral disagreement, but by conflict that looks so deep that opposing parties tend *condemn* one another, rather than merely disagree. It is increasingly the case that disputants see each other not merely as *mistaken* or *wrong*, but *stupid*, *benighted*, *wicked*, *treasonous*, or worse. *Moral combat* differs from moral disagreement in that the former involves the judgment that one's opponents are too far gone to be worth talking to.

The phenomenon of moral combat will be familiar to anyone who pays even slight attention to the world of popular political commentary. Recent bestsellers in the genre tell the story: One conservative claims that *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*, and a popular liberal

writer warns of the *Republican Noise Machine*. Moral combat makes for entertaining political theater, but it strikes at the heart of democracy, and threatens one of its most precious commitments, namely, that it is possible for a community of free equals to govern themselves civilly on the basis of reasons, despite the fact that they disagree, sometimes strongly, over life's Big Questions.

The intriguing sociological fact is that the rise of moral combat has been accompanied by a heightened popular appeal to proper epistemological standards: fairness, balance, truth, sanity, reason, straight-talk, "no spin," and so on. Of course, in popular forums, these appeals are merely rhetorical. But the gold standard in rhetoric is effectiveness: the epistemic appeals are pervasive because they *work*. And they work precisely because they resonate deeply with our epistemic self-conception. The view I have offered begins from that shared self-conception and tries to wrest it away from those who deploy it opportunistically in the service of ends that are political in the wrong way.