

Epistemic Perfectionism and Liberal Democracy

JAMIE T. KELLY AND KRISTOFFER AHLSTROM-VIJ

Abstract: Robert Talisse's recent attempt to justify liberal democracy in epistemic terms is in many ways a breath of fresh air. However, in the present paper we argue that his defense faces two inter-related problems. The first problem pertains to his defense of liberalism, and owes to the fact that a commitment to the folk-epistemological norms in terms of which he makes his case does not commit one to partaking in liberal institutions. Consequently, our (alleged) commitment to the relevant epistemic norms does not justify liberal democracy. The second problem pertains to his defense of democracy. The problem is that, if Talisse provides what we take to be the most plausible response to the first problem, framed in terms of his acceptance of a form of epistemic perfectionism, he is able to maintain his commitment to liberal institutions, but at the price of leaving democracy behind in favor of what we will refer to as a liberal epistocracy.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, epistemology has not been a friend of democracy. At least since Plato's *Republic*, inviting considerations about the epistemic competence of people has often been at the expense of the idea that everyone, and not just the wise, should have a right to participate in the political process. In recent years, however, several political philosophers have attempted to make epistemology safe for democracy, to paraphrase David Estlund.¹ In his recent book *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, Robert Talisse goes one step further, in arguing that, not only is epistemology safe for democracy, epistemology provides the tools necessary for justifying democracy, and liberal democracy in particular.² Talisse's ambition is to thereby justify liberal democracy in a manner that avoids John Rawls's problem of reasonable moral pluralism, i.e., the problem that modern societies contain a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible fundamental moral commitments, and that

consequently it is unlikely that a moral justification of democracy can be found that all reasonable citizens are able to accept.³ Talisse's strategy for avoiding this problem is to justify liberal democracy, not by reference to any *moral* principles, but by reference to certain *epistemic* principles, which, he argues, are universally accepted. The principles, which Talisse takes to "collectively constitute folk epistemology,"⁴ are as follows:

- (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.⁵

In other words, as Talisse sees it, our being *proper believers*—or *proper epistemic agents*, as he sometimes puts it⁶—implies that, when we believe something to be true, we take our belief to be supported by the best reasons, and ourselves to be such that we can assert its content, and thereby enter into a social context where we will be exchanging reasons with others. Moreover, in so doing we will adopt certain norms relating to epistemic character that require us to "play fair" in our exchanges with others, in that "we must be earnest, precise, and explicit; we must try to make our case in the clearest terms possible, avoiding obfuscation, equivocation, and sophism."⁷

This much follows from our being proper believers that adhere to (1)–(5), according to Talisse. But what does any of this have to do with liberal democracy? What Talisse wants to suggest is that the kind of reason exchange that we engage in on account of adhering to (1)–(5) requires, and so commits everyone to, decidedly liberal-democratic practices. This is so because "proper believing requires a social context in which reasons can be freely exchanged, compared, criticized, and challenged."⁸ As such, "proper believing requires that familiar democratic institutions should be in place, such as those institutions associated with the First Amendment of the United States Constitution: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and association, and protections for critics, skeptics, dissidents, and whistleblowers."⁹ In addition, Talisse writes, "the activities of believing and asserting require us to acknowledge each other as *equal participants* in the epistemic enterprise of justification," which is to say that we must "treat each other as *epistemic peers*" who "recognize that they owe to each other reasons, and acknowledge that cogent criticism may come from anyone."¹⁰

In other words, our being proper believers or agents involves a commitment to certain folk-epistemological norms, and the kind of reason-exchange we engage

in on account of this commitment requires a number of liberal institutions and practices, including those associated with freedom of speech, freedom of the press, protection of dissenters, and an epistemic enterprise where people treat each other as epistemic peers. In what follows, we will argue that Talisse's argument in support of liberal democracy faces two inter-related problems. The first problem pertains to Talisse's commitment to *liberalism*, and owes to the fact that a commitment to aforementioned epistemic principles does *not* commit one to partaking in liberal institutions and practices like those just mentioned. Consequently, our (alleged) commitment to the relevant epistemic principles does not justify liberal democracy. The second problem pertains to Talisse's commitment to *democracy*. The problem is that, if Talisse provides what we take to be the most plausible response to the first problem, framed in terms of his acceptance of a form of *epistemic perfectionism*, he is able to maintain his commitment to liberal institutions, but at the price of leaving democracy behind in favor of what we will refer to as a *liberal epistocracy*.

2. The First Problem: Questioning Talisse's Commitment to Liberalism

Let us start by presenting the first problem facing Talisse. In so doing, we will grant Talisse's premise that the following claims are universally accepted, in accordance with (1)–(5) above: to believe something is to hold that it is true; to hold that something is true is to hold that it is supported by the best reasons; and to hold something to be supported thus is, in effect, to enter into a social practice of reason exchange that involves the adoption of certain norms that require us to play fair with our interlocutors. Even so, any sufficiently diverse society is likely to contain fundamental epistemological disagreements owing to epistemological diversity, i.e., diversity with respect to views on *how* truths may be attained, *what* constitutes reasons, and consequently also *with whom* one can reasonably be expected to exchange reasons. By way of illustration, a devout Christian might recognize means of arriving at true beliefs, as well as kinds of reasons, which an atheist does not accept, namely, means and reasons pertaining to religious insight. This, naturally enough, makes each of them unwilling to include the other in the social exchange of reasons on a number of highly consequential issues, including educational, social, and environmental policy. But, we may ask, does that render either of them unreasonable in their epistemological outlook?

One way to argue that it does would be to maintain that one of them, as a matter of epistemic fact, is looking at the world from a grossly mistaken epistemological point of view, and so to that extent actually has no right to discount the epistemology of the other. This would amount to taking a third-person perspective on the relevant epistemological disagreements. However, Talisse is explicit about seeking to understand the relevant epistemological questions from a first-person perspective:

I am . . . interested in examining our folk epistemic concepts and their interrelations. Consequently, I ask you to consider the matters we are to discuss from a *first-personal* perspective. When considering everyday beliefs, one should consider *one's own* everyday belief, or, more precisely, everyday beliefs in *one's own case*.¹¹

Talisse continues by noting that the task thereby is “to get a grip on the epistemic commitments we intuitively endorse” and that, “since we each assess ourselves as at least passable epistemic agents, I will proceed by asking you to consider matters *from your own perspective*.”¹² After all, only by insisting on us taking that perspective can he make plausible the idea of universal acceptance of the above epistemic principles without committing himself to the highly implausible view that anything approximating full rationality is a universal trait. As he argues, we may acknowledge that “among the general population various forms of irrationality and epistemic corruption prevail,”¹³ while still maintaining that (in the non-pathological case, at least) it never seems like that from the inside.

Still, that Talisse takes the first-person perspective has consequences for his suggestion that the principles in question commit us to paradigmatically liberal institutions. In particular, taking the first-person perspective has implications for the idea that we should in general be open to engaging in a practice of freely exchanging, comparing, and challenging reasons, in a manner which is sufficiently inclusive to expose our views to the scrutiny even of those with whom we are in fundamental epistemological disagreement—all in an effort to treat everyone as epistemic peers, and thereby “recognize that [we] owe to each other reasons, and acknowledge that cogent criticism may come from anyone.”¹⁴ To spell out the relevant implications, return to the example of the devout Christian and the atheist. At the heart of the disagreement between secular and religious people is in some cases not simply a moral matter but also the very idea that scientific enquiry sets the standard for the acceptability of belief.¹⁵ That is why the relevant kind of epistemological disagreement is rightly called *fundamental*. However, this does not imply that either the Christian or the atheist is unreasonable; both may be fully committed to the idea that beliefs should be based on reasons, and that reason exchange should be guided by norms of fair play. But a commitment to playing fair *with one's interlocutors* does not imply a commitment to play *with anyone in particular*, nor consequently to being in any way inclusive when it comes to whom one considers to fall within the domain of one's epistemic peers, i.e., the domain of those whom one acknowledges as possible sources of the kind of criticism that would need to be taken seriously. After all, disagreement over the standard of belief implies disagreement about what constitutes reasons in the first place. Consequently, from the first-person perspective, devout Christians have as little reason to exchange arguments with atheists, or otherwise subject beliefs based on religious insight to the scrutiny of the atheist, as the sighted have reason to subject their visual beliefs to the scrutiny of the blind.¹⁶

It should be stressed that none of this goes to show that adherence to Talisse's epistemic principles in epistemologically diverse societies is *incompatible* with liberal practices. To put the point differently, what has been argued so far does not suggest that fundamental epistemic disagreements commit the disagreeing parties to *denying* liberal principles. The point is simply that, if a devout Christian were not to treat an atheist as an epistemic equal, she would not be doing anything that is incompatible with her commitment to the folk epistemological principles discussed by Talisse. As such, the discussion above calls into question his claim that adherence to those principles commits us to, and hence serves to justify, liberal practices. Again, even if we grant Talisse the premise that there is universal agreement on the relevant epistemic principles, this is not going to rule out the possibility of there being a diversity of views on *how* truths should be attained, *what* counts as a reason, and *with whom* one can reasonably be expected to exchange reasons. Consequently, as far as Talisse's argument goes, it is not clear that there are any uncontroversial or otherwise universally acceptable epistemic arguments of the kind he seeks for favoring social arrangements that promote open and inclusive reason-exchange, and take seriously the epistemic perspectives and scrutiny of people with different conceptions of what counts as a reason in the first place.

In the light of this, Talisse seems not to meet the Rawlsian challenge of providing a justification of liberal democracy in terms of principles which can be universally accepted, which brings us to the first problem that we would like to pose for Talisse's view. The problem is that, if the above is on point, Talisse would have to admit that our (allegedly) universal commitment to aforementioned folk-epistemic norms does not commit us to the kind of liberal institutions that he imagines his case to support. As such, he would have to give up on the idea of providing a justification of *liberal* democracy. Next, we will consider what we take to be the most promising way for Talisse to avoid this problem. We will argue that the relevant response has him facing a second problem, in that it calls into question his commitment to democracy, and has his account favor what we will refer to as a liberal epistocracy.

3. The Second Problem: Questioning Talisse's Commitment to Democracy

Talisse has at his disposal a fairly straightforward response to the objection pressed above. He can deny that there *ought* to be any substantial diversity regarding how truths should be attained, what counts as a reason, or with whom one is willing to exchange reasons. This is a normative point. He can grant that, as a matter of fact, some people actually do reject liberal practices, but he may claim that, when they do, they err. In particular, Talisse can reject as unreasonable the epistemic practices of the religious believer considered above, on the grounds that our epistemic commitment to having true beliefs obliges us to accept a particular set of norms for belief,

justification, and assertion, and that these norms leave no rational room for the rejection of liberal practices, given our epistemic commitments as proper believers.

This response would make good on Talisse's avowed commitment to liberalism: although some religious believers might actually reject the institutions of liberal democracy, they would be doing so mistakenly (for it would be contrary to their commitments *qua* proper believers). Moreover, because they are implicitly committed to these institutions, we might on Talisse's account be permitted to coerce these mistaken believers into complying with the liberal institutions necessary for proper belief or agency. How so? First, according to Talisse, his justification of democracy "requires an *epistemically perfectionist* state."¹⁷ This is so because, "in order for democracy to endure in a healthy condition, a social epistemic system must be maintained by a state that takes positive steps to cultivate and enable proper epistemic practice."¹⁸ Second, that Talisse's epistemic perfectionism leads him to endorse the promotion of citizens' epistemic agency by *coercive* means, is evidenced by his response to the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Mozert v. Hawkins*.¹⁹ In *Mozert*, the Supreme Court held that parents could not alter the public school curriculum so as to prevent their children from being exposed to a diversity of religious worldviews. Talisse agrees with the Court's decision:

Insofar as they intend for their children to take up the role of democratic citizen, the *Mozert* parents cannot be permitted to shield their children from the training requisite to that task. As we have said, responsible democratic citizenship requires the exercises of certain epistemic capabilities, the cultivation of which requires exposure to a diversity of arguments and worldviews.²⁰

As suggested by this passage, as well as by his discussion of the *Mozert* case at large, Talisse's argument seems to permit us to coerce people to do or refrain from doing something when this would serve to advance the epistemic agency of citizens. Thus, this sort of epistemic perfectionism would justify Talisse's commitment to liberal institutions guaranteeing freedom of speech, assembly, and association, even if these institutions are opposed by, for example, some religious believers, since those institutions, according to Talisse, are required for maintaining citizens' epistemic agency.

For this reason, we also think that Talisse's epistemic perfectionism provides a plausible response to the challenge posed by epistemic agents who endorse illiberal institutions, as that challenge was spelled out in the previous section. We believe that Talisse should be prepared to say about such agents that they are mistaken about what their epistemic commitments actually entail, and that, in certain situations, this may permit the state to use coercive means to promote the epistemic agency of the citizenry. This, we hope, preserves the liberal (in the sense of being open and inclusive) character of Talisse's conclusions. Unfortunately, it may do so at the expense of the democratic content of his argument. In what follows, we will argue that Talisse's argument, because of its focus on epistemic agency rather

than on moral values, can in some circumstances justify non-democratic political institutions. In particular, where conditions threaten to undermine the epistemic integrity of political societies, Talisse's folk epistemological argument seems to justify a kind of liberal epistocracy, or rule by the wise.²¹

On Talisse's account, a properly functioning democracy seems to involve at least two elements: the first is a forum for public dialogue and deliberation,²² the second is a mechanism enabling citizens to make collective decisions.²³ We contend that Talisse's folk epistemological argument can, under certain conditions, require that we sacrifice democracy in order to secure our epistemic agency. That is, our commitment to proper belief and epistemic agency might demand that a society abandon political self-determination in order to preserve or improve the character of public deliberation. For example, Talisse must be concerned that, if democratic decisions undermine the liberal conditions of openness and exchange so important to deliberation, this might require that we remove political issues from the control of the people, and thereby prevent a polity from ruling itself.

To see how this problem comes about, imagine a direct democracy where political speech has been repressed by popular decree. Provided that the political decision-making leading to the restriction of political speech was free and fair, Talisse has a problem on his hands. He argues that any political arrangement where political speech is repressed is incompatible with epistemic agency because it does not provide a proper forum for belief formation and revision. In the condition described, however, the decision to compromise our epistemic agency is, by assumption, fully democratic. In such a condition, it would seem that Talisse's folk epistemological argument commits him to rejecting democracy, since he cannot tolerate the restriction of political speech. His rejection of the decisions of a democracy in this case is prompted by his acceptance of epistemic perfectionism. As suggested by Talisse's discussion of the Mozert case, when our status as proper believers and epistemic agents is at risk, the folk epistemological argument licenses those who are in the know to use coercive means to safeguard our epistemic agency.

For a context that is slightly closer to home, consider the example of catastrophic climate change. For the sake of argument, imagine that current environmental practices in industrialized and developing countries will, if unaltered, result in catastrophic environmental changes that pose an existential threat to liberal societies. That is, imagine that the consequences of continuation of the status quo will be the destruction of all liberal political institutions. From Talisse's point of view, this would be an epistemological tragedy, and we all should be willing to go to great lengths to avoid it. But imagine that, for various psychological reasons or due to problems of collective action, citizens of democracies prove incapable of adequately responding to the threat posed by climate change.²⁴ Under these conditions, Talisse's argument ceases to be a justification of democracy, and becomes a justification of non-democratic alternatives capable of protecting our epistemic

agency. In particular, it would seem that these conditions would, again, commit Talisse to a liberal epistocracy, where the wise are entrusted with doing whatever is necessary to protect institutions of free speech, association, etc., even if this prevents citizens from playing any role in the political decision-making process.

Because Talisse's folk epistemological argument construes democratic institutions as being instrumentally valuable just insofar as they promote our epistemic agency, the example sketched above must call into question his commitment to democracy under non-ideal circumstances. For Talisse, democratic decision-making is valuable only in so far as it supports epistemic agency, either directly or by promoting the liberal institutions and practices necessary for such agency. According to Talisse, the benefit of staying clear of moral values in the justification of liberal democracy, and instead framing such a justification exclusively in epistemic terms, is that it enables us to avoid the problems posed by the fact of reasonable moral pluralism. However, as we have tried to illustrate, the cost of this strategy is that the justification of political self-determination becomes entirely dependent upon democracy promoting our epistemic interests, which in turn makes for a more fragile justification than Talisse seems to acknowledge.

Once we see that Talisse's folk epistemology licenses the use of coercive force to secure the epistemic agency of citizens, we see that his argument justifies whatever institutional setup is most productive of epistemic agency, even if this comes at the cost of political self-determination. As far as we can see, there is no role in Talisse's argument for the conventional *moral* values of collective self-determination or political autonomy because he denies that they are universally accepted.²⁵ As a result, when voters err in ways that compromise their epistemic agency—e.g., by rejecting liberal institutions that, according to Talisse, are required for the proper exercise of such agency—this would seem to justify rule by the wise, where the wise are entrusted with preserving the epistemic agency of citizens. Thus, we should worry that, on Talisse account, even mundane failures of voters' decision-making (e.g., decisions to defund public education, to prohibit some forms of political speech, or to limit the rights of minorities) might suffice to switch Talisse's argument from endorsing democracy to endorsing a non-democratic alternative.

The actual functioning of democracies seems to involve widespread trade-offs between epistemic and moral values. That is, we ought to realize that democracy is often not the most epistemically valuable system of collective decision-making, but that its epistemic deficiencies ought to be counter-balanced by moral considerations like political autonomy and collective self-determination.²⁶ Talisse's affinity for epistocracy, we claim, results from his unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of such moral values for the justification of democracy. Given the problems posed by reasonable moral pluralism, this unwillingness is perhaps understandable. The fact remains, however, that Talisse's strategy of turning away from the moral and focusing exclusively on the epistemic leaves him unable to explain why even minor

epistemic deficiencies in actual democracies ought not undermine our commitment to democratic institutions. As a result, Talisse's epistemic justification of democracy proves too thin, given the well-documented failures of human decision-making in the real world.

4. Conclusion

Talisse's epistemological justification of democracy is in many ways a breath of fresh air in democratic theory. In particular, his attempt to justify the institutions of liberal democracy without relying on moral principles is a genuinely novel contribution to the field. In this paper, however, we have attempted to show that Talisse's argument faces two inter-related problems: If he is willing to acknowledge a diversity of reasonable epistemological norms and practices, then he seems unable to generate a justification for liberal norms of inclusion and openness. If, on the other hand, he wishes to reject such diversity, his acceptance of a form of epistemic perfectionism throws into question the democratic credentials of his argument.

Jamie T. Kelly, Vassar College

Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, University of Kent

Notes

1. See David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), who talks about making truth (qua the primary epistemic good) safe for democracy.
2. See Robert Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). All page references in the text are to this book, unless otherwise is stated. The idea that epistemology contains the resources to justify democratic practices is, of course, not without historical precedent. Just consider J. S. Mill's epistemological defense of freedom of speech in *On Liberty* (e.g., in *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. S. Collini [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.], 1989; originally published in 1859).
3. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993).
4. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, 87.
5. *Ibid.*, 87–8.
6. See, e.g., *Ibid.*, 121.
7. *Ibid.*, 106.
8. *Ibid.*, 123.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 124.

11. Ibid., 87.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 124.
15. See Philip Kitcher, "Science, Religion, and Democracy," *Episteme* 5 (2008), for a discussion.
16. In fact, there is a sense in which this analogy does not fully capture the epistemic chasm between the devout Christian and the atheist. The blind might have *some* epistemic access to the target domain of the visual beliefs of those who see, e.g., by tactile means. Consequently, the sighted might have some reason to consider the input of the blind. In the case of the devout Christian and the atheist, however, the atheist has *no access whatsoever* to the religious domains that Christians have access to by way of religious insight, on the assumption that such insight provides the only epistemic pathway to the relevant domain.
17. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, 156.
18. Ibid., 191–2.
19. See *ibid.*, 177–85. For more on this case, see Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Talisse frames his account as a response to Macedo's Rawlsian analysis.
20. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, 184.
21. "Epistocracy" is David Estlund's term (in his *Democratic Authority*). Talisse prefers "epistemarchy" (*Democracy After Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics* [New York, NY: Routledge, 2005], 79) for the same thing, but Estlund's term seems to be the one that has caught on.
22. Talisse associates these conditions with a "politics of engagement" (*Democracy and Moral Conflict*, 150–5).
23. Otherwise, Talisse's argument could justify any institutional arrangement that protected individual speech and political participation (*Democracy and Moral Conflict*, 159). In this respect it may be interesting to consider a nation like Singapore.
24. For an idea of the problems posed by catastrophic climate change, see Cass Sunstein's *Worst Case Scenarios* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
25. See Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, 78.
26. For an account of democracy that seeks to account for these sorts of trade-offs, see Jamie Kelly's *Framing Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).