

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT: *Folk epistemology—the idea that one can't help believing that one's beliefs are true—provides an alternative to political theorists' inadequate defenses of democracy. It implicitly suggests a dialectical, truth-seeking norm for dealing with people who do not share one's own beliefs. Folk epistemology takes us beyond Mill's consequentialist claim for democracy (that the free array of opinions in a deliberative democracy leads us to the truth); instead, the epistemic freedom of the democratic process itself makes citizens confident that evidence for one's beliefs have not been distorted by a corrupt system. Since the starting point of folk epistemology is the meta-conviction that people believe that what they believe is true, it should also serve as a starting point for more rigorous scholarship that seeks to understand why people believe what they believe, instead of dismissing them as "irrational" if one disagrees with their beliefs.*

As is often observed, modern democratic societies are marked by a pluralism of moral doctrines, each proposing its own general conception of the moral life. Given this pluralism, citizens may often find themselves morally unable to abide a given democratically produced law, raising the question of why they should obey such laws. For instance, one side of the abortion controversy claims that abortion is morally equivalent to murder; they claim that legal abortion is an American Holocaust. The

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other side of the debate holds that legal restrictions on abortion would place intolerable constraints on privacy and violate equality. On both sides, part of what is at issue is the government's claim to legitimacy. One side says that no government that permits the murder of innocent people can be legitimate; the other says that a government that seeks to control the bodies of half of its citizens is illegitimate.

It is difficult to see how there could be a compromise position. Nevertheless, *some* policy must be enacted. So democratic governments must adopt an abortion policy that will lead some segment of its population to regard it not only as seriously mistaken about abortion, but illegitimate. And the decisions of an illegitimate regime are not morally binding, whatever their prudential force may be.

The mere fact that the government has enacted a morally unacceptable policy is typically thought to be insufficient for justifying violent 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, democratic theorists answer by identifying some moral desideratum said to be uniquely or best satisfied by democracy, and then arguing that the importance of realizing this desideratum outweighs the badness of the legitimacy-defeating policy. In the most common version of this view, democratic processes instantiate a kind of political equality that is said to justify democratic commitments. But in cases that invoke our deepest moral commitments, it seems that an appeal to some moral value such as political equality is unlikely to succeed. Why should political equality trump, say, the protection of innocent life?

One might reply that any citizen who is dissatisfied with a democratic decision may protest it, argue against it, petition against it, demonstrate against it, and, of course, vote against it. But there are many obstacles to sweeping social change by using such means, and one may also find oneself in a distinctly minority position that is unlikely ever to be reversed. Value commitments, after all, are deeply rooted and hard to upend.

Another reason to obey a democratic ruling even if one believes that the ruling is wrong is prudentialist: The cost of rebellion is too high. But the question is not whether it would be instrumentally rational for citizens to rebel against what they consider an unjust policy; assume that they had access to weapons that could make them victorious at little cost.

The question that would remain is whether they *should* pursue only peaceful, democratic means to their political ends.

Folk Epistemology

The alternative I propose offers *folk-epistemic* reasons to uphold democratic commitments even in the face of democratically approved injustices.

By “folk epistemology,” I mean something analogous to what philosophers of mind call “folk psychology.” *Folk psychology* is the “prescientific, common-sense conceptual framework that all normally socialized humans deploy in order to comprehend, predict, explain, and manipulate the behavior of humans and the higher animals” (Churchland 1994, 308). Folk psychology is manifest in the “everyday psychological discourse we use to discuss the mental lives of our fellow human beings” (Dennett 1996, 27). It employs a collection of familiar concepts, such as *belief*, *intention*, *desire*, and *understanding*, which the man on the street wields with amazing facility. He will with remarkable confidence attribute to himself and to others such complex states as “believing that Bush lied,” “wanting to go to sleep,” and “intending to read the paper.”

Folk-psychological categories are so entrenched that they are frequently taken as the *explananda* of the philosophy of mind. Thus, accounts of the mind that deny that there is, for example, a “what it’s like” to see the color red are, in the eyes of many philosophers, *ipso facto* inadequate.

The folk-epistemic argument for democracy begins from a minimal conception of what beliefs are, and then argues that there is a kind of normativity governing our beliefs. These epistemic norms, in turn, provide a case for certain democratic political institutions.

A minimalist folk conception of belief is constituted by three elements. The first is almost too obvious to be worth mentioning. Beliefs have content. 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 for thinking that the content of our belief is true.

The latter two features of belief are *first-personal*. When we believe something, we believe that it is true, as established by what we *take* to be good evidence and sound reasoning. To be sure, there are many cases in which we actually believe on the basis not of evidence or reasons, but on the basis of biases or other cognitive distortions. But the folk conception does not deny this; it claims only that when we actually believe on the basis of, say, prejudice, self-delusion, or bias, we do not *understand ourselves* to believe on that basis. We *assess* our beliefs as properly formed.

When we discuss cases of improper belief, we are always adopting an *ascriptive* or *second-personal* stance. Cases of fanatical, delusional, biased, or otherwise irrational or even incorrect belief are always presented in cases of *someone else's* beliefs. This is because thinking that one's own belief is false is incompatible with maintaining the belief. The falsity of *p* is, as Bernard Williams (2002, 67) noted, a “fatal objection” to the belief in *p*, no matter what the content of *p*. We capture this feature by saying that beliefs aim at truth; though perhaps it would be more correct to say that when we believe, we *unavoidably* aim to believe what is true. This aim is the fundamental norm of belief.

From this core norm of truth-aspiration, two other norms emerge. One way we try to satisfy the truth-aspiration norm is to believe in accordance with our assessment of what we take to be the relevant evidence. The assessment that one's belief does not track the evidence thus far available does not necessarily dissolve the belief. Yet if one assesses oneself as believing *p* against the evidence, one signals to oneself that there is an epistemic problem. Thus, when we discover that our evidence counts decisively against our belief, we typically feel the need to take action: we revise or reformulate the belief or seek out exculpatory evidence for it.

Closely related to the evidence-tracking norm is the norm of evidence-responsiveness. We want our beliefs not only to *not contradict* our evidence, but also to *respond* to the evidence we have. We want the relevant evidence in part to *explain* why we believe that something is true; this means that when we believe *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 bearing on *p*. That is, it's not enough to believe what's true and what our evidence suggests, we also must assess our beliefs as being *governed* by the evidence. The same goes for non-evidentiary (logical) reasoning: we want our beliefs to be logical.¹

Epistemological Norms in the Second and Third Person

First-personal folk-epistemic norms imply what we might call *social-epistemic* norms. That is, our desire to have good evidence and sound reasoning behind our beliefs implies that we should *share* and *exchange* our evidence with others. Given the limitations of our individual cognitive resources, we *must* depend on others for information, including reasons and evidence (Buchanan 2004). And in the course of gathering and evaluating our evidence, we inevitably come to realize that others disagree with our beliefs. This should strike someone who is oriented toward believing in what is true as a challenge: she must now inquire into whether her beliefs or those of her opponent are, in fact, true.

We can say, then, that there are certain *dialectical* norms associated with belief. Insofar as we aim to believe in accordance with our evidence and other reasons, we aim to believe in accordance with *all the evidence and reasons that are available*, not merely those we happen to know about. This requires us to take seriously the evidence and arguments of those with whom we disagree. Accordingly, when we find ourselves unable to respond to objections or account for counterevidence, we assess our belief as deficient; unless we can successfully revise or reformulate our belief or find new reasons for it, it is jeopardized. Some degree of dialectical success is necessary for epistemic success. Our first-personal norms entail dialectical social norms.

Similar considerations give rise to social epistemic norms that are *institutional* rather than dialectical. In order to assess ourselves as having formed our beliefs properly, we have to be able to assess ourselves as functioning within a cognitive environment that is not systematically distorted. Otherwise, the evidence and reasons that we have gotten from this environment may be misleading us. Accordingly, first-personal epistemic norms imply institutional norms of free expression, open inquiry, freedom of information, and protected dissent. With a little more work, we can build social-epistemic cases for further institutional norms, such as freedom of the press.

An Open Society or a Democratic One?

The epistemic argument thus far makes a case for an “Open Society”—a freethinking, tolerant, and open-minded society of inquirers equipped

with liberal institutions. But an Open Society is not necessarily a democracy. A monarch might allow free inquiry to flourish, and could even consult his subjects on matters of moral importance, yet still rule as king.

In short, there appears to be nothing particularly *democratic* about the folk-epistemic argument. It offers no justification for universal suffrage, or political equality, or government accountability. Indeed, if we are so concerned with basing our beliefs on good evidence and sound arguments, shouldn't this concern extend to public policy? This might incline us toward technocracy, rule by experts.

The challenge just stated should sound familiar to any student of democratic theory. It enjoys a distinguished pedigree going back to Plato, and it is especially forceful against conceptions of democracy that feature an epistemic dimension. Accordingly, there is a stock response on behalf of democracy. The stock response calls to mind the dangers of rule by experts, leading to some version of Churchill's quip about that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others.

To be sure, there are contexts in which practical arguments of this kind should carry the day. But I want to see if the epistemological argument can go all the way, as it were. Can it produce a case for decidedly democratic political norms?

To be able to assess our social system as epistemically reliable, we have to be able to see it as *self-monitoring* and *self-correcting*; that is, an epistemically reliable social system is one in which various kinds of epistemic breakdown can be detected, diagnosed, and eventually corrected. Since political power shapes the epistemically necessary institutions—a free press, for example, and freedom of speech can be snuffed out by being defined too narrowly in law—the rule of law, universal suffrage, regular elections, and the like may be necessary to maintain a truly Open Society; otherwise we have less assurance that what we take to be an Open Society really is one. We need democracy in order to monitor and maintain the integrity of the open epistemic system.

This is because we need to be assured that the overarching political institutions and agents are responsive to questions about the epistemic adequacy of extant, legally enforced definitions of free speech and so on. In one era, nobody might defend “speech” as including flag burning, so it might not be counted among legally protected forms of speech. In another

era, flag burning might have taken on symbolic importance for some people. Political equality, as manifested in equal voting rights, allows these people to try to advance challenges to the prevailing definitions of Open Society institutions as canonized in and enforced by the law. In short, an Open Society requires representative and accountable *political* institutions to preserve and perfect epistemically desirable *social* norms.

Imagine a Platonic monarch who sustains a reliable social–epistemic system, which he consults when ruling; suppose further that he rules well and that his policies generally reflect highly competent reasoning in light of the available facts. The Platonic kingdom nonetheless fails to satisfy first-personal epistemic norms because it provides no mechanism by which its subjects can *assure themselves* of the epistemic reliability of the system, since it is not responsive to concerns about this reliability that anyone might raise. In the absence of accountable political institutions that are able to monitor the social–epistemic system, I am less able to assess myself as successfully satisfying the epistemic norms internal to belief, because I have no assurance that I am getting facts and reasons from a truly Open Society.

The Social Epistemology of Facts and of Values

Perhaps it may seem that folk epistemology applies only to beliefs about facts. Not so. Our practices of *moral* belief and discourse also square with folk epistemology, too.

People who disagree about, say, abortion or the justice of a war do not typically take themselves to be simply expressing different preferences, or prescribing attitudes, or trying simply to persuade. Moral argument aims to win agreement *for the right reasons*; that is, moral argument aims to *convince* by means of reasons and arguments that indicate the *truth* of some judgment. When we discover that we disagree about some moral issue, we may of course elect to bracket the disagreement or change the subject, but, again, this is *not* an *epistemic* requirement. Quite the contrary: When we discover that we disagree, each of us infers that the other has made some kind of mistake, a mistake that reason, evidence, and argument could, at least in principle, correct. And if the setting is right and the issue important, we proceed to engage each other's reasons.

Thus, first-personal epistemic norms give even those of us who are convinced that a democracy is engaged in injustice compelling reasons to

endorse a range of social institutions that are characteristic of liberal democracy. Pro-life and pro-choice activists take their views about abortion to be *correct*; those who advocate or oppose homosexual marriage view their opponents as committing a moral *error*. The depth of these conflicts is parasitic on the judgment of the conflicting parties that their own position comports best with a proper evaluation of the evidence. But these second-order judgments imply dialectical and institutional norms that can, arguably, best be realized under liberal-democratic conditions. Our folk commitment to sound belief entails a commitment to those conditions.

Beyond Mill

In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill ([1859] 1991, ch. 2) advanced a series of epistemological arguments for the “liberty of thought and expression” that are unabashedly consequentialist: Mill argued that a free society must respect, even prize, civil liberties because they are the surest ways available of promoting truth and avoiding falsehood. Mill’s view is that the truth is likeliest to emerge after we have heard and evaluated a wide array of opinion. The desirable consequence of civil liberties is epistemological progress: progress toward the truth.

Since Mill’s procedure is consequentialist, it is ultimately dependent on empirical claims that are open to empirical question. The basic claim is that “the truth will out.” Perhaps Mill is right about that, but Mill identifies no truth detector in the human mind that would sustain his claim. The folk-epistemic view, in contrast, while compatible with Mill’s claim, does not depend upon it. The folk-epistemic view holds that the liberties associated with free thought are implications of the attitudes we must take with respect to our own beliefs if we are to regard those beliefs as epistemically healthy (or at least not epistemically deficient). The claim is not that a society that recognizes and protects the requisite liberties is one in which people will improve the epistemic quality of their beliefs; rather it is that if we are to assess the content of our beliefs as true, we should endorse a social order that supports dialectical and social norms that are sustained by liberal institutions. Whether such a social order also promotes truth is a different question.

The Canard of “Irrational” Citizens

Some might say that the folk-epistemic argument is utopian in its conception of the rational capacities of democratic citizens; or, to be more specific, that the argument drastically overestimates the ordinary citizen’s interest in the epistemic character of her beliefs. In this view, most people really do not care about having beliefs that accord with norms of proper believing and epistemic responsibility; while they have beliefs and want to see them reflected in public policy, they simply do not care about the evidence and reasons for (or against) these beliefs. In short, they don’t care if their beliefs are reached for irrational reasons; and they may even prefer it that way (Caplan 2006).

Those who raise this objection often cite religious fanatics or fundamentalists as a paradigm case of willful epistemic disorderliness (e.g., Caplan 2006, 15ff; Festenstein 2010, 38ff). Some go so far as to assume that their own economic beliefs are so obviously true that anyone who disagrees with them must not care about the truth (Caplan 2006). Yet none of these critics would allow that their own beliefs—including their beliefs about the irrationality of others’ beliefs—are based on a willful inattention to evidence and argument.

It’s easy to caricature other people’s beliefs; indeed, these caricatures are often the bread and butter of politics. But politics is not scholarship; we should demand a higher standard. The scholarly critics of their fellow citizens never produce statements or any other evidence showing that their “irrational” fellow citizens do not *think* that their beliefs—however outlandish they may seem to the critics—are true. This, of course, is not to say that they *are* true, or even that they were reached by rational processes. They may *in fact* be false beliefs; and they may be false beliefs that are based on self-deception, prejudice, bias, or wishful thinking. But nobody can be *deliberately* irrational, as suggested by the term *self-deception* to cover all the varieties of irrational means of reaching beliefs: the irrational believer is said to deceive herself about the rationality of those means. This deception would hardly be necessary if it were possible to *knowingly* hold a false belief.

The impossibility of deliberate irrationality is suggested by Williams’s point: To believe that *p* is false is to explode one’s belief in *p*. By implication, to *perceive* that one’s reasons for believing *p* are deficient jeopardizes the belief, too. Incorrect beliefs and those reached for

irrational reasons cannot therefore be *perceived* by the believers as being false or as resting on dubious grounds. They would not be able to believe things that they did not think were, on balance, likelier than not to be true.

In the political arena, it is true that much of the dialectical engagement between opposing moral, religious, and ideological camps is driven not by reasons and evidence, but by caricature, character assassination, and dogmatism. But these facts *strengthen* the argument I have been making. Were it not the case that we took our moral and political beliefs to be true, we would have no reason to impugn our opponents as believing in falsehoods—let alone would we accuse them of *deliberately* believing in falsehoods. This accusation implies that the opponents' beliefs are so *obviously* false that nobody could honestly believe them. But why would this matter, if not for the truth-seeking nature of the audience of citizens observing these disputes? In caricaturing an opponent as deliberately (in the first person) believing in falsehoods, we mean to shock an audience into rejection of the opponent's belief by implying that nobody in their right mind could accept its truth. Similarly, when we internalize debate (as we should), it is not uncommon for us to meet good arguments or evidence against our beliefs with confabulation, rationalization, or retrenchment. Nothing in the folk-epistemic argument denies this. But if truth were unimportant to us, and if we did not equate truth with responsiveness to evidence and argumentation, we would have no need for these defense mechanisms against potentially *falsifying* evidence and reasons.

By the same token, then, modes of popular political discourse are couched in strikingly truth-centric terms. In the United States and elsewhere, television news channels profess to offer “no spin zones” and “fair and balanced” reporting that is “accurate” and “trusted.” Popular books of political commentary, the publication of which is now a multi-million dollar industry, claim to expose “lying liars” and various other agents of “fraud,” “illusion,” and “deception.” Similarly, critiques of the media target “bias,” “slant,” and “propaganda.” Politicians and pundits are commonly criticized for being blindly loyal to a prefabricated party line and thus unresponsive to the valid arguments and sound reasons offered by the opposition. The new mode of political activism practiced by Michael Moore and other documentarians is compelling precisely because it claims to use directly observed truth as a weapon against power. All of these claims to epistemic fairness, trustworthiness, and

honesty may function as slogans that serve marketing objectives. But they would serve such objectives only if citizens tend to hold that reasons, evidence, argument, and truth are, indeed, desirable.

So there is nothing utopian about the folk-epistemic argument. It does not require us to overestimate, or even to favorably regard, the epistemic powers of democratic citizens. In fact, it is consistent with decidedly negative assessments of the deliberative capacities of ordinary citizens. It is an argument about the epistemic ideals presupposed by our beliefs; it is not an assertion that we live up to those ideals.

NOTE

1. None of this entails any positions in the central debates of contemporary epistemology, which concern the legitimate bases of knowledge and justification. Even the most ardent “externalist” can admit that having evidence and reasons support one’s belief is desirable even if, in the end, it is not necessary for justification.

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