

Review of Robert B. Talisse, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*

RICHARD GALE

University of Pittsburg

This is a courageous book for it will make Robert Talisse the most hated man in Dewey land (look for wanted-dead-or-alive posters to be posted on every lamp post in Carbondale), because he argues trenchantly that Dewey's much beloved and admired conception of democracy is self-negating in the sense that when it is put into practice it produces oppression, the very antithesis of its liberal intentions. He then argues for an alternative pragmatist theory of democracy that does not have any oppressive repercussions.

The opening chapter gives a brief but insightful history of classical American pragmatism, the conclusion of which is that the versions of pragmatism given by Peirce, James, and Dewey bear only family resemblances to each other. This is an important conclusion for Talisse, since he uses it to show that his rejection of Dewey's pragmatic justification for democracy does not preclude other types of pragmatic justifications, in particular his own based on Peirce's account of belief, although Peirce, admittedly, did not make any political use of it.

The argument for Dewey's democracy being self-negating occupies Chapter 2. "Democracy" is initially defined as "a form of politics in which the freely given consent of the governed is registered...by a means of representation" (29). But majority rule needs to be supplemented by rights that are made public, resulting in a "constitutional" or "liberal" democracy, of which there are two competing species – "procedural" and "substantive" (29). The former sees "democracy as essentially the administrative task of managing social conflict, the latter...as the moral project of crafting a certain kind of society by cultivating a certain kind of citizen" based on a substantive philosophical theory concerning the nature and good for man (33).

Because substantive theories are based on highly mooted philosophical theories there is the well founded worry that they will prove to be oppressive in practice. This oppression arises in the following way. It is a notorious fact that modern societies are highly pluralistic in that there are reasonable disagreements over these theories that are “inevitable, irresolvable, noncontingent, and permanent” (34). The disagreements are reasonable because “sincere, well-intentioned, and rational persons attending carefully to the relevant considerations and doing their epistemic best to reach reasoned agreement” will disagree, this being “endemic to the human condition” (34). But because a substantive democracy is based on a theory concerning the good about which there is reasonable pluralism, some citizens will be coerced into accepting the adoption and implementation of a theory to which they can reasonably dissent. And this is Rawlsian type oppression.

Dewey claimed on behalf of his substantive theory of democracy that “it prescribes not only a collection of dispositions and attitudes that citizens should embody, but also a model of institutional design that is intended to extend to ‘all the areas and ways of living’” (43). The educational system is to be used to inculcate in citizens the belief that values prized in common, “shared experience,” is the highest good. They are trained so that they see their happiness and self-fulfillment as inextricably linked with the happiness and self-fulfillment of everyone else. But there is reasonable disagreement about these normative issues and thus some citizens will suffer oppression because they will be coerced to attend Deweyan schools and have the ethics of shared inquiry inculcated in them, along with the evolutionary and processual naturalistic beliefs that Dewey claims are essential for there being his kind of democracy. Furthermore, the purpose of a Deweyan democracy is to realize for each of its citizens the summum bonum of growth, understood in terms of achieving ever greater self unification of one’s many projects and goals. But those who do not accept this normative goal will rightfully feel oppressed.

Talisso overstates his case for Deweyan democracy being oppressive when he charges it with “incoherence” because it “prescribes the oppression of reasonable persons” due to its being based on substantive theories about which there can be reasonable disagreement (51; my italics). This charge of “incoherence” is repeated on pages 52, 54, 55, 84, and 98. What is incoherent is not realized in any possible world, but certainly there are nonpluralistic possible worlds in which through a fortunate contingent matter of fact all citizens agree about the big, substantive issues in philosophy. Such worlds, to be sure, are very distant from the actual one in that the citizens in them have a uniformity of nature that is at odds with the way things are in the actual world.

The mere possibility of there being reasonable disagreement in one of these Deweyan societies does not render it oppressive. If it did, then everyone who parks at the curb is guilty of parking in front of a parking meter, since, even if there is not in fact one there, there might have been. Talisse seems to realize the non-inevitability of oppression in a Deweyan democracy when he writes: “It is my contention that Deweyan democracy is deeply flawed in a way that renders it nonviable as a philosophical conception for modern democratic societies” (23); and, “I shall argue that this inability [to accommodate reasonable pluralism] renders Deweyan democracy nonviable in practice” (23; my italics).

Before considering Talisse’s Peircean version of democracy, some possible Deweyan responses to the charge of oppression will be briefly sketched without any attempt to evaluate them. Dewey’s summum bonum of growth is so nondescript that it places almost no restrictions on how an individual achieves self-unification. A case could be made out for there not being reasonable disagreement about some of Dewey’s key substantive doctrines that are foundational for his kind of democracy. For example, there is ample empirical evidence that shared inquiry employing a generic type scientific method is our best means for solving the problems of men in society. Furthermore, one cannot reasonably dissent from Dewey’s claim that education should “create an interest in all persons in furthering the general good, so that they will find their happiness realized in what they can do to improve the conditions of others” (quoted from p. 44). There is good empirical evidence that the very survival of our species depends upon this. Talisse is right to point out that several of Dewey’s philosophical doctrines that Dewey claims are essential for democracy, such as that there is no dualism between the mental and the physical and that there is nothing fixed or eternal, are reasonably contested (45). There are counter-examples to Dewey’s linkage claims lurking behind every bush, such as A. O. Lovejoy who was both a dualist and a strong defender of Dewey’s liberal causes. Fortunately, these linkage claims are fifth wheels that can be exorcised without any harmful consequences for the Deweyan conception of democracy. The principle of charity, to wit, that an interpreter should not make a great philosopher out to be a greater schmuck than he is, enjoins Talisse to save Dewey from himself by “charitably” dropping these linkage claim, for even a great philosopher can have an occasional bad day at the office.

Now for Talisse’s Peircean inspired epistemological version of a substantive democracy, which he develops in Chapter 3 and attempts to show is nonoppressive in Chapter 4. The springboard for Talisse is Peirce’s “The Fixation of Belief,” of which he gives a very searching exposition according to which “we cannot deliberately and self-consciously

inquire in any way but the scientific way” (61). This is some kind of necessary truth based upon the very meaning of what we mean by “inquiry” as a truth-directed activity. Now it is only in a democratic society that there can be “self-controlled and properly-conducted inquiry” (65). Thus, “there are certain identifiable epistemic commitments...that are philosophically thin enough not to beg important philosophical, moral, and religious questions over which we are deeply divided, but nonetheless substantive enough to bear the burden of providing a compelling justification for democratic politics” (68). Talisse does a good job of showing why an epistemically responsible agent requires a responsible epistemic community of fellow inquirers, such as is found only in a democracy (73). No matter how much reasonable pluralism there is, the disputants are all committed to the epistemic norms that are conceptually contained within Peirce’s concept of scientific inquiry. “There is no fact of reasonable pluralism at the level of our fundamental epistemic commitments; there is no reasonable way to deny that our beliefs aim at truth, or to deny that in order to aim at truth, one must have access to reasons, evidence, arguments, other forms of information, and processes of reason-exchange” (98).

In Chapter 5, Talisse defends his substantive concept of democracy against Posner’s realist objections, and, in Chapter 6, presents Sidney Hook as an exemplary defender of his type of democracy and laments the fact that Hook has been sadly neglected by contemporary pragmatists. (Thus, it is anomalous that there is no entry for Hook in American Philosophy: An Encyclopedia that he co-edited with John Lachs, although there are for many philosophers that are not worthy of erasing Hook’s blackboard.) A brief final chapter reverts back to the issue of the “eclipse narrative” from Chapter 1.

The major question is whether Talisse has succeeded in showing that his Peircean version of democracy, unlike Dewey’s, is nonoppressive. It will be argued that he fails to do so. First, it will be shown that Talisse presents two versions, a weak and a strong one, of a Peircean democracy. It then will be argued that each is oppressive in practice. According to the weak version, which is the one that usually is given, the underlying epistemic norm of a Peircean requires us to seek beliefs that “are responsive to reasons, evidence, and argument” (61). This description of the norm is repeated verbatim on pages 66–68, 70, and 96. It is a misnomer for Talisse to call this norm pragmatic, since it places no restrictions on how the meaning of a belief or proposition is to be determined. The pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey, whatever else it might have been, was at least a theory of meaning that identified the meaning of a concept with a set of conditionalized predication that specify what experiences one will have upon performing certain actions.

The strong version, which alone deserves to be called “pragmatic,” unlike the weak one, requires that we form beliefs by the use of scientific method, which is explicitly required by Peirce at two places in his “The Fixation of Belief.” The following quotations from Talisse give expression to the strong version.

For Peirce, pragmatism was essentially an anti-metaphysical strategy, a way of dismissing ‘make-believes’...of previous philosophizing and of keeping open the road of proper inquiry. Once the road of inquiry is swept clear of ‘meaningless gibberish,’ what would remain is ‘a series of problems capable of investigation by the observational methods of the true sciences’ (6).

Peirce argues that the method of science...is the only inquiry procedure which satisfies his evaluative criterion” of not occasioning doubt. (13).

Peircean pragmatism is essentially the imperative to keep open the way of inquiry both by clearing away meaningless concepts [as determined by his pragmatic theory of meaning] and by subjecting our meaningful claims to the test of proper inquiry (19).

It now will be shown that each version, beginning with the strong one, is oppressive in our contemporary American society. The major source of pluralism in our society is due to a clash between theists and naturalists (or humanists) as to the nature of and good for man. Theists conceive of man as an essentially spiritual being, possessed of an immortal soul, created by God in his own image, which has the consequence that human life is sacred and that the meaning and purpose of our life is to achieve sanctification so that our souls will eternally survive the medical demise of our bodies in an intimate loving union with our Creator. In contrast, naturalism holds, as the title of a Brecht play has it, that a man’s a man, meaning that we are essentially human organisms, continuous with the rest of nature, with all of our projects and values being dependent upon our organic nature. These differences in metaphysical beliefs issue in sharp moral differences in practice concerning the legalization of abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia, extraordinary means for prolonging life, and the like.

Is the pluralism about these metaphysical and normative issues reasonable? If we accept the strong Peircean epistemic norm, requiring us to use scientific method, coupled with his pragmatic theory of meaning, to form beliefs, it will turn out that it is not, since the theist’s beliefs about the sacredness of human life and thus the moral impermissibility of abortion, etc. will be epistemically discredited. The reason is that a

major source of epistemic justification for theistic beliefs concerning the sacredness of human life is derived from mystical experiences of the presence of God. These experiences, along with those that are alleged to be caused by a God-implanted *sensus divinitatis*, as in the reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga, will not check out as veridical objective experiences according to scientific criteria since no verifiable predictions can be made from them. The theist, of course, will challenge Talisse's scientific thesis that scientific method alone can warrant belief.

The weak version is immune to the charge of being unduly scientific, since its requirement that we seek beliefs that "are responsive to reasons, evidence, and argument" places no restrictions on the form that they take. Nevertheless it turns out that the weak version merely relocates the point at which the theist suffers oppression. The weak version, unlike the strong one, allows for there to be a tie between the theist and naturalist over the sacredness of human life and the moral issues that hang in the balance. But the default position when there is such an epistemic tie, supposedly, is to have the legislature do nothing. But what is not legally prohibited is legally permitted. Thus, our society can and will have abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia, etc., which is anathema to the theist, being a type of society in which they would not want to live and raise their children.

Maybe every concept of democracy, even every concept of a state, is oppressive, and we must choose to have that sort of society that is the least oppressive. Thus, Talisse has more work to do in showing that his Peircean democracy, in either its strong or weak version, is less oppressive than other forms of society. Although Talisse has not finished his task, he deserves our praise for the able way in which he begun it. I love the way he writes philosophy, like the guy who sticks his head through the hole in a canvas at a state fair and asks those who have paid their quarter to throw baseballs at him. He is one of my heroes, and his book will prove to be a major player in subsequent discussions.

Richard M. Gale
University of Pittsburgh, Professor Emeritus