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Response to Lever

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Annabelle Lever (2015) raises some good questions about the view presented in my ‘Sustaining Democracy’ (Talisse 2013). I shall try to clarify. But first, I should thank Lever. Much of the going criticism aimed at my version of epistemic democracy strikes me as mistargeted. This is not the case here. Lever accurately presents my view. Thus, I can directly turn to her concerns.

Lever raises a total of six ‘puzzles’; three concern my conception of epistemic agency, and three focus on my conception of democracy. I will take these up in order.

First, Lever wonders about the ‘fit’ between the ‘universally applicable’ folk epistemic norms from which I begin and the ‘highly particular’ mode of politics I aim to defend. The concern, it seems, is that politically I am committed to the ‘fact of reasonable pluralism’ (Rawls 2005, pp. 36–37) concerning citizens’ beliefs, but I nonetheless contend that there are folk epistemic norms that apply to all, regardless of what they may believe. Lever says that these commitments seem to be in ‘tension.’

My commitment to universal folk epistemic norms does not conflict with the reasonable pluralism of moral doctrines. To be sure, my view denies that there is reasonable pluralism regarding folk epistemic norms. But that does not mean that my view capriciously imposes reasonably contestable norms on citizens; rather, I argue that the norms of truth-aspiration, evidence-tracking, and evidence-responsiveness are constitutive of belief. In other words, we cannot, from a first-personal point of view, regard a belief as a belief unless we also regard it as true, in line with the evidence, and based upon the evidence. To see this, one needs only to consider how we take ourselves to be required to act upon discovering that one of our own beliefs is false or ungrounded; we think that falsity is a fatal objection to a belief, and a belief’s having an insufficient evidential basis is a serious defect. In fact, when we find ourselves continuing to believe in the wake of our recognition that what we believe is false or insufficiently grounded, we typically abandon the idiom of belief altogether, opting instead to describe our condition as something else, such as obsession, delusion, or anxiety.
Importantly, my talk of constitutive norms of belief does presuppose an overly demanding conception of rationality, as it does not deny that individuals often believe what is false and in the absence of sufficient evidence. Rather, it denies that individuals believe what they take to be false and on the basis of what they take to be insufficient evidence. The account, then, is fully first-personal; it is concerned only with individuals’ own assessments of their own beliefs. It draws only from the norms that you, as an epistemic agent, are already committed to, simply in virtue of the fact that you believe anything at all. This ‘folk’ aspect of the account renders it consistent with a due appreciation of reasonable pluralism regarding moral and religious doctrines. Indeed, the folk epistemic account fits rather nicely with Rawls’s own idea that the fact of reasonable pluralism is the result of the ‘burdens of judgment’ (Rawls 2005, pp. 54–58). Because we take ourselves to be governed by the folk epistemic norms, we acknowledge the epistemic burdens Rawls specifies; consequently, we are able to recognize the possibility of reasonable disagreement. There is no tension of the kind Lever envisions.

Lever’s second puzzle regards the relationship between the epistemic norms that govern individual doxastic activity and the norms of political justification that govern the coercive activity of democratic states. Again, the worry is ‘fit.’ But Lever runs together two distinct senses of justification, one epistemological, the other political. Epistemic justification is roughly a matter of showing that some belief squares with the available evidence and therefore remains a candidate for truth. Lever correctly says that one of the reasons why we care about satisfying the folk epistemic norms is that we aspire to be able to (epistemically) justify our beliefs to others; I agree that epistemic justification has an important social and political dimension.1 However, political justification is a different matter altogether. Roughly, the state (politically) justifies coercion when it can show that it acts in a way that is consistent with the ideal of treating each citizen as a free and equal moral person. Unlike some other epistemic democrats, I deny that the legitimacy of the state depends upon its ability to epistemically justify its actions. As I see it, the questions of political justification and political legitimacy are distinct from the question of what social and political arrangements we have epistemological reasons to support. The folk epistemic argument addresses this latter question. My claim is not that democratic societies are especially good at producing (epistemically) justifiable collective decisions (they may be); the point rather is that our individual epistemological aims are best pursued under the social and political conditions secured within a democratic order.

In her third puzzle about epistemic agency, Lever queries the nature of the entailment from our commitment to believing in accordance with folk epistemic norms to the commitment to democratic social and political arrangements. She says that as the entailment is neither ‘psychological’ nor ‘logical,’ it must be ‘moral.’ The trouble with the entailment being moral, she says, is that this would mean that our epistemological reasons must take precedence over our...
distinctively moral reasons to support democracy. Two points should be made. First, the entailment I see between folk epistemology and democracy concerns our rationality. My argument is that the fact that we are committed to satisfying the folk epistemic norms entails that we ought to also be committed to democratic social and political arrangements, for the latter are the best means we have for achieving our epistemological ends. So although the entailment is deontic (and thus normative), it is not strictly speaking moral. This occasions a second point. My argument identifies epistemological reasons that are sufficient for sustaining democracy, even when one’s moral reasons give out; the argument does not claim that those reasons must be one’s motivating reasons for being a democrat and does not require that citizens ‘care more about truth-tracking than with preventing harm to others or fostering self-government.’ The claim is only the one’s epistemological reasons suffice for sustaining democracy.

The three remaining puzzles concern my conception of democracy, and I can address them quickly. First, I concede Lever’s point about the democratic credentials of relocation; much more would need to be said here about when relocation is undemocratic. My concern would be only to defend the thought that in some cases, relocation is indeed undemocratic, not that it always is. It strikes me that Lever’s second puzzle about my conception of democracy is misguided. As my account is aimed specifically at the question of why one should pursue democratic means of effecting social change, it should be clear that I think that a society that enables us to satisfy the folk epistemic norms may nonetheless be seriously flawed from a democratic perspective. Indeed, I hold that an epistemically adequate democratic society might still be bad along many other crucial evaluative dimensions, including epistemological ones; nothing in the folk epistemic argument requires me to say that enabling the satisfaction of the folk epistemic norms is sufficient for a complete, much less a good, democracy. Third, Lever wonders about the precise nature of the democracy that I claim is entailed by our commitment to folk epistemology. Given that my account is explicitly aimed at the problem of providing democratic citizens with reasons to sustain democracy in the face of collective decisions they regard as morally unacceptable, it should come as no surprise that the details of institutional design, the nature of representation, and much else, are not addressed. As I say in the conclusion of my original essay, there is still much work to be done in showing that the folk epistemic account of why we should sustain democracy comports well with the full range of concerns within democratic theory. Yet, in light of how Lever formulates her third puzzle, it should be emphasized once again that I am not committed to the idea that the entirety of democratic theory can be conducted in strictly epistemological terms. Surely, many of the broader questions of democracy are decidedly moral questions. The folk epistemic argument need not deny that.
Note
1. My views on this issue are presented in Aikin and Talisse (2014).

References