Sustaining democracy: folk epistemology and social conflict

Robert B. Talisse*

Department of Philosophy, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

When political philosophers ask whether there is a philosophical justification for democracy, they are most frequently concerned with one of two queries. The first has to do with the relative merits of democracy as compared with other regimes. The second query has to do with the moral bindingness of democratic outcomes. But there is a third query we may be engaging when we are looking for a philosophical justification of democracy: what reason can be given to democratic citizens to pursue democratic means of social change when they are confronted with a democratic result that seems to them seriously objectionable or morally intolerable? In this paper I develop an epistemological response to the third query. The thesis is that we have sufficient epistemological reasons to be democrats. The epistemological norms that we take ourselves to be governed by can be satisfied only under certain social conditions, and these social conditions are best secured under democracy.

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Introduction

Democracy involves the moral requirement that citizens must accept the authority of a democratically produced law or policy, even when they have good reason to believe it mistaken, incorrect, or even seriously immoral. Of course, this requirement is not absolute. Democracy also recognizes that, under certain conditions and within certain constraints, disobedience is morally permissible. Yet for democratic decisions, authority is the default, and disobedience always stands in need of justification. Indeed, on many views of these matters, disobedience is morally permitted only when it is necessary to effect social change in the direction of more, or better, democracy. In order to be justified, then, disobedience must serve the broader political values endorsed by democracy, such as equality, liberty, or justice.

As is commonly observed, modern democratic societies are marked by a pluralism of moral doctrines, each proposing its own general conception

*Email: robert.talisse@vanderbilt.edu

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of the moral life, and its own understanding of how the great values of democracy should be understood. Given this pluralism, citizens may find themselves morally unable to abide by a given democratic law or policy, but also unable to explain this inability in terms of democratic values. Consider Abby. Abby is a responsible democratic citizen, and she agrees that the values associated with democracy are indeed of great import. Yet Abby’s religious faith involves a commitment to a particular conception of the moral value of life which requires opposition to abortion, and this conception of the moral value of life is formulable only in the language of her faith. Consequently, Abby is morally obligated to oppose abortion, but she cannot express this opposition explicitly in the language of democratic values. On standard accounts, Abby is thus morally required to acknowledge the authority of a law permitting abortion. Yet, given her religious conviction, this is morally disallowed. Abby hence finds herself in a deep moral conflict between the democratic values she embraces and other moral values which she also takes to be greatly significant. What is she to do?

The democrat responds that Abby has several options. She may petition, demonstrate, and organize in ways designed to effect a change in the laws governing abortion; she may speak freely to her fellow citizens about the evils of abortion, she may use whatever political influence she has to encourage officials to adopt her position, and so on. In short, the democrat says that Abby may employ a range of legal means for effecting social change in the direction of her moral conviction.

This response is likely to strike Abby as insufficient. She recognizes the many obstacles to sweeping social change, and sees that, in this case, achieving the desired result by legal means would require an enormous and prolonged investment of time and energy. More importantly, Abby also finds the democrat’s response unsatisfying because she takes the fact that her government permits abortion to constitute a serious challenge to its legitimacy. She wonders why she should confine her political activities to the legal means prescribed by a government which upholds morally intolerable laws. Why should she uphold her commitment to democratic modes of social change in light of the morally abominable policy of allowing abortion? In Abby’s view, by permitting abortion, her government has not only enacted a morally incorrect policy; it has called into question its moral legitimacy.

What reason can a democrat give to Abby to encourage her to sustain her democratic commitments under such conditions? Why should Abby recognize the moral bindingness of a law that she must also regard as morally unbearable, and the moral authority of a government that endorses such a law? In this paper, I suggest an epistemological account of why citizens should sustain their democratic commitments even in cases where a democratic decision must strike them as seriously objectionable or even intolerable. The thesis that we have sufficient epistemological reasons to
uphold our moral commitment to democracy will no doubt strike many as surprising, perhaps even quixotic. Perhaps the pall of implausibility will subside slightly with the following clarification. My strategy is not to argue that democratic citizens or governments are especially wise; nor shall I claim that they are epistemically better than non-democratic alternatives. Rather, the argument will be that the epistemological norms that we take ourselves to be governed by qua believers can be satisfied only under certain social conditions, and these social conditions are best secured under democracy. In short, insofar as Abby cares about the truth of her moral judgments (including the judgment that legal abortion is a grave moral error), she has reason to uphold democratic modes of social change and to reject anti-democratic styles of social action. To put the matter in a rough way, my thesis is that each of us has epistemological reasons to recognize the moral bindingness of democratic outcomes – and the corresponding moral authority of democratic government – even when we find particular outcomes morally intolerable.

Again, I admit that this is a surprising claim. In order to make it even remotely plausible, I will have to back up a bit, and take up the matter from the beginning. The essay begins, then, by distinguishing three different ways in which one might understand the task of providing a philosophical justification of democracy. After clarifying the version of this task that the proposed account undertakes, I will introduce the idea of folk epistemology, and elaborate on the epistemic norms that attach to belief as such. Following that, I will argue that these folk epistemic norms entail social epistemic norms which are best satisfied under democratic political conditions. I bring the paper to a close by considering two objections the epistemological argument occasions.

**Democratic justification: three queries**

When political philosophers ask whether there is a philosophical justification for democracy, they are most frequently concerned with one of two queries. The first has to do with the relative merits of democracy as compared with other regimes. The question is: what reason do we have to establish a democracy, rather than some other kind of regime? This task is familiar to readers of Plato and Aristotle. The virtues and vices of various regimes are considered, and then a judgment is offered with respect to where democracy ranks on a scale of best to worst. Those who pursue this line of inquiry can often be found mixing ideal and non-ideal considerations, as when Plato compares real-world democracy with ideal-world monarchy and then – to no one’s surprise – finds democracy seriously lacking. On this view of the matter, democracy is justified only if it can be shown to be superior to competing modes of governance. Importantly, this
The problem of justification

This paper pursues the third query regarding the justification of democracy. To help focus the issue, we might put the question this way: when democracy decides it is often the case that someone loses; if you lose and the loss seems to you especially morally unbearable, why not just give up on democracy? Why not pursue non-democratic means of getting the outcome that you want?

This way of framing the issue is surely too coarse. If the worry were simply that in a democracy some people will not get what they want, we could dismiss it. As John Rawls (paraphrasing Isaiah Berlin) claimed, ‘there is no social world without loss’ (Rawls 2005, p. 197). But the problem that the third query aims to address is not so easily dismissed. The problem emerges from two features inherent within contemporary democracy. First is what Rawls identified as the ‘fact of reasonable
pluralism’ (p. 36), which is the fact that the liberties and rights secured in a liberal democracy give rise to a pluralism of moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines that are consistent with liberal democracy yet inconsistent with each other. The second feature is that many of the questions of social policy we face invoke something deeper than the desires and preferences of citizens; they concern our deepest moral commitments — our fundamental conceptions of justice, dignity, sanctity, and freedom. This is especially evident in the United States today, where debates over nearly every major policy controversy — abortion, healthcare, same-sex marriage, stem-cell research, the biology curriculum in our public schools — invoke the deepest moral commitments of citizens. Hence the issue is not simply that in a democracy some people will not get what they want; rather, it is that in a democracy, reasonable people will sometimes confront democratic decisions that not only strike them as undesirable, but unconscionably incorrect and immoral. In such cases, what should citizens do?

Consider the example with which this paper began. One side of the abortion controversy claims that abortion is morally equivalent to murder; they claim that legal abortion is an American Holocaust. The 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 which seeks to control the bodies of half of its citizens is illegitimate. Each side thinks that government loses its claim to legitimacy unless it enacts its own favored policy. And 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 which will lead some segment of its population to regard it not only as seriously mistaken about abortion, but non-authoritative, illegitimate. And the decisions of an illegitimate regime are not morally binding, whatever their prudential force may be.²

Again, when confronted with what they regard as a legitimacy-defeating policy, citizens must decide what to do. The mere fact that the government has enacted a morally unacceptable policy is typically not sufficient 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 the question is: why should they?

In response, democratic theorists typically identify some moral desideratum said to be uniquely or best satisfied by democracy, and they then argue that the importance of realizing this desideratum outweighs the badness of acquiescing in the legitimacy-defeating policy. On the most common version of this view, that democratic processes instantiate a kind of political equality is offered as a reason to sustain democratic commitments. But since we are imagining cases in which citizens’ deepest moral
commitments are at stake, 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 human life?

Note that in pressing this latter question one need not deny that political equality is of great value. One could hold that political equality is extremely important, and yet contend that, in the abortion case, equality is trumped by other moral obligations, such as the obligation to protect the innocent and vulnerable. The moral response to the question of why one should sustain democratic commitments in light of seriously flawed democratic results must produce an argument for thinking that the moral values which recommend sustaining democracy should take priority over all other values in cases of conflict. This is a tall order and it is hard to see how such an argument could avoid begging the question.3

Another common answer proposes decidedly prudential reasons for upholding democratic commitments in the face of serious moral error. It is said that revolt is too costly, and that upholding democratic commitments is necessary in order to keep peace. But this reply is not sufficient. After all, once we concede that democratic politics is a kind of war, we should ask: why not employ the more usual means of fighting a war? Indeed, why should a pro-life activist accept a description of the status quo as one of peace at all? Why should maintaining peace be thought more important than standing up for what is right, despite the cost, come what may?

At this point it is necessary to introduce a little more detail into the discussion. Let us stick with our example of abortion, but consider it from the pro-choice side. For many citizens in the United States, the overturn of Roe v. Wade would represent not merely a sub-optimal policy decision or a drastic moral error; it would represent a moral error that yields a serious lapse in democracy’s legitimacy. It would undoubtedly incite a variety of responses. Here are the main lines of response that are available (perhaps 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, consciousness-raising, coalition-building, public criticism, debate, activism, and so on.
I trust that on most views of these matters, *Civil Disobedience* and *Petition* represent democratic responses, whereas *Relocation* and *Rebellion* do not. Of the non-democratic options, *Relocation* is typically morally superior to *Rebellion*, though it should be noted that *Relocation* is not open to all citizens, and under certain conditions may not be open to any. Furthermore, it should be noted that *Relocation* raises additional moral difficulties concerning the conditions under which it would be immoral for a citizen of one country to relocate to another, which cannot be engaged here. It also bears mention that there may be some cases in which the only morally permissible option other than *Relocation* is *Petition*; that is, there may be cases of legitimate moral complaint in which *Civil Disobedience* is not morally permitted. We need not dwell on these complications. Our question, then, is, in the face of a repeal of *Row v. Wade*, why should our imagined pro-choice citizen pursue *Civil Disobedience* or *Petition* rather than *Relocation* or *Rebellion*? Put otherwise, why should a citizen who sincerely believes that a given democratic outcome violates a basic and necessary condition for political legitimacy nonetheless sustain his commitment to democratic means to social change? Why not pursue non-democratic means to one’s political ends?

Many will want to give the prudentialist answer: one should sustain democratic commitments, even in cases of lapsed legitimacy, because the cost of *Rebellion* is too high. But this answer offers a reason of the wrong kind. We are not concerned with the question of why it would be prudent for citizens to not rebel, but with the question of why in the envisioned case citizens morally ought to pursue democratic means to their political ends. For it is natural to think that *Rebellion* is morally justified only when no democratic option is available, such as when the political order is democratic in name only, or not democratic at all. But what justifies this thought?

In his duly influential *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Albert Hirschman (Hirschman 1970) reasoned that when individuals are disappointed by the performance of an institution that is supposed to serve them, they have two options. First, they may exit; they may withdraw from the institution and take their business elsewhere. To return to our categories above, both relocation and rebellion are forms of exit. Second, they may exercise voice; they may sustain their relationship with the institution in question, but voice their dissatisfactions with the expectation that service will consequently improve. Petition and civil disobedience are forms of democratic voice. Hirschman thought that voice is crucial to the maintenance and improvement of institutions; hence he held that institutions need to discourage exit if possible. He further reasoned that exit is discouraged, and voice encouraged, if institutions can nurture a sense of loyalty among their members. Consequently, Hirschman argued that loyalty was crucial to the success of institutions of almost every kind, from firms, businesses, and clubs to governments and, indeed, entire societies.
Hirschman’s framework is ultimately too simplistic, but it suffices for our present purposes. Grant that loyalty is the key to encouraging voice and discouraging exit. However, in modern democracies, citizens are not required to share common loyalties. In fact, we might say that widespread shared loyalties to common moral and religious essentials should not be a desideratum, or even an ideal, of a democratic order. In any case, Rawlsian pluralism seems to be a present and persistent feature of modern democracy. Therefore, citizens not only do not share common loyalties, but in fact maintain conflicting and opposed loyalties. The problem of justification consists, then, in preserving the voice option among citizens who are divided at the level of fundamental moral loyalties.

The folk epistemic argument

The moral and prudential approaches to the problem of justification are not likely to succeed. The alternative I propose offers folk epistemic reasons to uphold democratic commitments even in the face of serious moral error that seems legitimacy-defeating.

I begin with the concept of a folk epistemology. By folk epistemology, I mean something analogous to what philosophers of mind call folk psychology. Folk psychology refers to 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, p. 308). Folk psychology is manifest in the ‘everyday psychological discourse we use to discuss the mental lives of our fellow human beings’ (Dennett 1996, p. 27), and employs a collection of familiar concepts such as belief, intention, desire, pain, memory and so on. The man on the street exhibits an amazing facility with philosophically unwieldy concepts such as belief, intention, understanding, and seeing red. Folk psychological categories are so entrenched that they are frequently taken as the explananda of the philosophy of mind.

Analogously, the term folk epistemology is intended to capture the epistemic practices of the man-on-the-street, the pre-theoretical and intuitive epistemic commitments that are so deeply embedded in our cognitive lives that it is the task of professional epistemologists to explain them and render them systematic. Consequently, in elaborating the general commitments of folk epistemology, we need not take sides in the great debates of contemporary epistemology. We wish to be quietists about such matters; the aspiration is to capture the phenomena at so general a level as to not engage the typical disputes.

The folk epistemic argument begins from a minimal conception of what beliefs are, and then argues that there is a kind of normativity governing our doxastic lives; these epistemic norms are then employed in constructing an argument for certain social epistemic norms, which in turn provide a
case for certain democratic political norms. Again, the overall strategy is to argue that the norms that govern beliefs as such are best satisfied under certain social epistemic conditions, and these conditions are best secured under democratic political conditions. Our interest in the correctness of our own beliefs provides a case for sustaining democratic political conditions. That is the argument in a nutshell.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Return to the folk conception of belief I just mentioned. In calling this conception of belief minimal, I mean to call attention to two of its central features. First, the folk conception of belief is not a full theory of belief and is not presented as such. In proposing this conception I am not denying that there is more to say about belief, and am not asserting that more robust conceptions are incorrect. Second, the folk conception aspires to be acceptable across a wide variety of more comprehensive theories of belief; the aim is to capture certain features of belief which are by and large not matters of serious contention among the robust theories. The hope, then, is to pick out certain central and non-controversial features of belief as such, and leave the more detailed questions to others.

Now, the folk conception of belief is constituted by three core commitments. The first is admittedly almost too obvious to be worth mention. 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; this perspective is crucial for folk epistemology. When we believe we take ourselves to believe what is true and we take ourselves to be responding appropriately 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, frames, and other cognitive distortions. But the folk conception does not deny this; it only says that when we believe on the basis of, say, prejudice or paranoia, we do not take 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, paranoid, conspiratorial, or otherwise corrupt belief are always presented as cases of someone else’s belief. I’ll have occasion to elaborate on this later in the paper.

One way to check the correctness of this folk conception of belief is to consider cases of purported beliefs which seem to violate these commitments. And, again, let me repeat that we are interested in first-personal assessments of belief, assessments of beliefs understood as our own. To assess yourself as believing what is false is typically to dissolve the belief; for the falsity of p is, as Bernard Williams (Williams 2002, p. 67) aptly
noted, a ‘fatal objection’ to the belief that \( p \), no matter what the content. 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 aim to believe what is true. And this is the fundamental kind of normativity that attaches to believing.

From this core norm of truth-aspiration, two other norms come into view. 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 result in the automatic dissolution of the belief. The truth-aspiration norm is stronger than the evidence-tracking norm. But still, to assess oneself as believing \( p \) against one’s evidence is to signal some kind of epistemic failure, or at least an epistemic shortcoming. When we discover that our evidence counts decisively against our belief, we typically feel the need to take action: we revise, reformulate, reconsider, 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 often come to regard the persistence of belief as a symptom of some underlying cognitive malady; that we sustain belief in such cases often calls for diagnosis. We come to regard the belief as an obsession or delusion.

In addition to the evidence-tracking norm, we can identify the closely related 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 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 surprising new evidence or reasons. That is, it is not enough to believe what is true and what our evidence suggests, we also must assess our beliefs as being governed by our evidence and reasons.

Pulling the tracking and responsiveness norms together, we can say that a kind of modest evidentialism is internal to belief as such. To be sure, evidentialism is a controversial view in epistemology; however, the modest evidentialism arising from the conjunction of the tracking and responsiveness norms seems hardly objectionable. 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 any stronger principles concerning belief-suspension and the like.

I hope that these first-personal epistemic norms strike you as unobjectionable and commonplace, perhaps even philosophically uninteresting. Again, nothing I have said thus far entails anything vis-à-vis the central debates in epistemology. One can admit the internal norms of truth and modest evidentialism without incurring any specific commitments about
knowledge or justification. Indeed, nothing in the modest evidentialism I have proposed takes any stand on the analysis of knowledge or justification, and even the most ardent epistemological externalist can admit that having access to the evidence and reasons that support one’s belief is a desideratum of cognitive life even if, in the end, they contend that it is not necessary for epistemic justification.

So the hope is that modest evidentialism is modest enough to render it non-committal in the broader area of epistemology, and therefore non-controversial. Things get more interesting, though, once we consider that these first-personal norms implicate what might be called social epistemic norms. That is, the modest evidentialist norms point in the direction of sharing and exchanging our evidence with others. Our beliefs are frequently the products of our interactions with others; and, given the limitations of our individual cognitive resources, we must depend on others for information, including reasons and evidence (Buchanan 2004). Crucially, in the course of gathering and evaluating our evidence, we inevitably come to realize that others disagree with our beliefs.

We say, then, that there are certain dialectical or discursive norms associated with believing. Insofar as we aim to believe in accordance with our evidence, we aim to believe in accordance with all the evidence we have; and this requires us to take seriously the reasons and arguments of those with whom we disagree. Accordingly, when we find ourselves unable to respond to objections or account for countervailing evidence, we assess our belief as deficient; unless we are able to successfully revise, reformulate, rationalize, or dismiss, our belief is thereby jeopardized. Some degree of dialectical success is necessary for epistemic success. Consequently, our first-personal norms entail dialectical social epistemic 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 and severely distorted. Put otherwise, we must be able to reasonably assess our cognitive environment as one in which crucial or especially powerful evidence with respect to important matters would emerge and be widely disseminated, were it to exist. Accordingly, the first-personal epistemic norms entail 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, including freedom of the press, compulsory public education, and government provisions for the protection of public space. There may also be social epistemic arguments for government support for the arts and progressive taxation, though I am not able to explore this here.

These folk epistemic norms are well entrenched in the pragmatics of everyday conversation. When you make an assertion, your colleagues are
typically entitled to ask for your reasons. When the assertion is especially mundane, mundane reasons typically will suffice, and the process of reason exchange will be exhausted quickly. In other cases, the exchange may extend to several rounds. Of course, the process of reason-exchange must end somewhere, and there is indeed a point at which it would be inappropriate for an interlocutor to press further. But even in such cases, the inappropriateness does not derive from there being a point at which your interlocutor owes you epistemic deference or must acquiesce in your say-so; rather, it is a matter of etiquette, politeness, or prudence. Similarly, to respond with hostility or indignation to any request for reasons is not merely rude, it also betrays a failing of epistemic character: someone who routinely refuses to enter his reasons into the dialectical space in which they may be evaluated betrays an insufficient concern for the truth of his beliefs.

Perhaps it may seem that folk epistemology applies only to uninteresting factual assertions. Not so. Our practices of moral belief and discourse also square with its tenets. Persons 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.

To be sure, this is not to deny the existence of demagogues. It is not to deny that moral discourse can be engaged for manipulative purposes. What is being claimed is that sheer moral rhetoric cannot present itself as such. The sophist who is interested only in persuasion cannot confess to his audience that he has no concern for the truth of his position. To announce to an interlocutor, ‘I am trying by means of sheer rhetoric to persuade you of $p$, but I have no reason to think $p$ is true’ is to lose all chance of success. The transparent sophist is doomed. Why should this be except for the fact that we take our moral beliefs, and our sources of moral instruction, to be answerable to the general folk epistemic tenets above?

Someone may object here that my analysis is undermined by the popularity of moral relativism. The thing to note is that relativist maneuvers are most often employed as moral conversation stoppers. When someone says ‘It’s all just a matter of opinion,’ he is not admitting that his own opinion is no better than yours, and he is not saying that it makes no difference to him that he believe one thing rather than another; instead, he is saying,
‘Let’s not discuss this further.’ But why should an alleged moral relativist be so eager to eschew moral discussion? On the relativist view, remember, there is literally nothing at stake in moral discourse, so why be so adamant in avoiding it? The fact is that there is something at stake in moral discourse. If we find that some moral assertion of ours is without support, we shall have to change our belief. But we are invested in the truth of our moral judgments, and this explains the many mechanisms that we deploy in order to avoid discussion of these commitments in the presence of potential critics. To be sure, we skirt around difficult and controversial issues for the sake of decorum and politeness; but, importantly, it is precisely our individual commitment to the truth of our own beliefs on such matters that makes disagreement potentially volatile and uncivil.

The point is that first-personal epistemic norms give us compelling reason to endorse a range of social institutions that are characteristic of liberal democracy. And this provides a solution to the problem of justification. Recall that the problem is that of giving citizens reasons to maintain democratic commitments (including a commitment to democratic voice as the primary means of social change) in light of policy outcomes and collective decisions that seem to them to be morally intolerable. It is important to note that what gives rise to this problem is our concern to see public policy and collective decision reflect what we regard as the moral truth, or at least not embrace what we take to be serious moral error. Pro-life activists like Abby are conflicted because they take their view concerning the morality of abortion to be correct; those who advocate for marriage equality take standing laws against same-sex marriage to reflect 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, as we have seen, these second-order judgments implicate dialectical and institutional social epistemic norms that can be realized best under democratic political conditions. So those who, like Abby, want to see public policy and collective decision reflect what we regard as the moral truth, or at least not embrace what we take to be serious moral error. Pro-life activists like Abby are conflicted because they take their view concerning the morality of abortion to be correct; those who advocate for marriage equality take standing laws against same-sex marriage to reflect a moral error.

A quick contrast with the kind of view associated with John Stuart Mill is instructive. As is well known, in *On Liberty*, Mill (1991, ch. 2) advances a series of epistemological arguments for the ‘liberty of thought and expression.’ These arguments are unabashedly consequentialist; Mill argues that a free society must respect, even prize, the liberties in question because they are the surest ways available of promoting truth and avoiding falsehood. Mill’s view is that we are all epistemically better off when each of
us believes in accordance with our best judgment after we have heard and evaluated a wide array of opinion. We may call Mill’s view the ‘truth will out’ defense of the liberties of thought and expression. Now, it is an empirical question whether the Millian liberties benefit truth and disadvantage falsehood. And perhaps Mill is in the end correct. But it is worth emphasizing that the folk epistemic view, though consistent with the Millian position, does not depend upon it. The folk epistemic view holds that the liberties associated with free thought are entailments 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 defective). To draw the contrast sharply, my claim is not that a society which 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 ourselves as believing in compliance with the norms that govern belief, we must endorse a social order which supports the dialectical and institutional social epistemic norms identified above. Accordingly, the folk epistemic argument has a deontological flavor; it says that we should sustain our democratic commitments in order to satisfy the obligations that are internal to our role as epistemic agents. Whether a democratic social order also promotes truth in the long run is a different kind of question.

There is the folk epistemic argument. Of course, many more details would have to be introduced in order to make the view compelling. I cannot present a full elaboration here. I will instead work through two frequently raised challenges to the view.

First challenge: epistemic utopianism

Many are inclined to say that the folk epistemic argument is utopian in that it drastically overestimates the ordinary citizen’s interest in the epistemic character of her beliefs. The objection runs that citizens really do not care about having beliefs which accord with norms of proper believing and epistemic responsibility; instead, they have beliefs and want to see them reflected in public policy, and simply do not care about evidence and reasons. Those who raise this objection frequently cite some variety of religious fanatics as the paradigm case of willful epistemic disorderliness (Festenstein 2010, pp. 38–39).

To pick up on a point I raised earlier, it is worth noting that the epistemic utopianism objection always proceeds second-personally. No one offers himself as an example of someone who does not care whether his beliefs are true or supported by good reasons. So the first thing to say in response to the objection is simply this: it is easy to invent cases involving caricatured fundamentalists and other figures supposedly at the epistemic margins. But the fact is that fundamentalists and even Tea-partiers take...
themselves to believe for reasons; indeed, they are often eager—sometimes all too eager—to produce their reasons.

This is not to say that the reasons offered by fanatics and fundamentalists are always good reasons for their beliefs. To be sure, there is plenty of self-deception, prejudice, bias, and wishful thinking that parades as reasoning. And much of the dialectical engagement between opposing moral, religious, and political camps is driven to a large extent not by reasons and evidence, but by stubbornness, caricature, character assassination, and smears. But these facts strengthen the case for the specified norms. Were it not the case that we took our moral and political beliefs to be subject to these norms, there would be no need to react in any way at all to our opponents, much less to discredit them. Indeed, the very fact that fanatics see those who disagree with their views as opponents supports the case for thinking that even they feel the need to assess themselves as believing what's true in a way which responds appropriately to their reasons and evidence.

And so it is with garden-variety believers. When we run up against good counter-arguments or recalcitrant evidence that impacts a belief that we care about deeply, we frequently confabulate, rationalize, retrench, self-deceive, dig our heels in, and much else. Nothing in the folk epistemic argument denies this. Indeed, modest evidentialism provides an account of why such behavior is so widespread. If truth, evidence-tracking, and evidence-responsiveness did not matter, there would be no need to engage in any of these familiar belief-preserving measures.

Notice further that current modes of popular political discourse are couched in strikingly epistemic 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.' Popular criticism of George W. Bush, both in the United States and abroad, was focused almost exclusively on his intelligence, truthfulness, and judgment; and current critiques of President Barack Obama tend to focus on his oratorical prowess, his alleged ability to move people with his charm instead of his reasons. Representatives and pundits are commonly criticized for being blindly loyal to a prefabricated party line and thus irresponsible to the arguments and reasons offered by the opposition. And the new mode of political activism practiced by Michael Moore and others is compelling precisely because it claims to use truth as a weapon against power.

For the most part, this popular epistemic self-image is merely an image; claims to epistemic fairness, trustworthiness, and honesty function mostly as slogans that serve marketing objectives. Again, nothing in the folk
epistemic view denies this. However, in light of the market pressures operative in the media industry, we must conclude that such slogans are effective. And they are effective precisely because citizens tend to hold that reasons, evidence, argument, and truth matter for politics.

There is nothing utopian about the folk epistemic argument. There is nothing in the view which requires us to overestimate, or even favorably regard, the epistemic powers of citizens. In fact, the folk epistemic argument is consistent with decidedly negative assessments of the cognitive capacities of ordinary citizens. The argument aims to identify the norms that govern first-personal epistemic assessments. Matters of overall epistemic success at, for example, believing what is true or believing for good reasons, are not at issue. Thus utopianism is not a plausible charge.

Second challenge: the open (but non-democratic) society
There is a second challenge that is more potent. It runs as follows: the epistemic argument at best makes a case for the Popperian ‘Open Society’ – a freethinking, tolerant, and open-minded society of inquirers. But the Open Society is not necessarily a liberal 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 is nothing decidedly democratic about the folk epistemic argument. It offers no justification for universal suffrage, or political equality, or government accountability. Yet these norms are essential to a democracy. So, at best the epistemological argument gives us good reasons to favor social conditions under which a reliable social epistemic system could flourish, but that is consistent with epistemic oligarchy, or some other form of rule-by-experts.

The challenge 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 that calls to mind the dangers of rule by experts, usually by citing historical examples of how such arrangements go bad. This is then supplemented with a word about shoes that pinch and how power corrupts. The ultimate result is some version of Winston Churchill’s famous quip about how democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others. The classic dispute between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey follows this pattern and is typical (Lippmann 1922, Dewey 1927).

To be sure, there are contexts in which practical arguments of this kind should carry the day. But in the present context, the practical argument is especially ineffective. So I want to see if the epistemological argument can go all the way, as it were. That is, I want to see if it could produce a case for decidedly democratic political norms, like political equality and voting.

The key for getting from Open Society norms to democratic norms lies in the concept of self-reflexive social epistemic norms. The idea is, I think,
intuitive: 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 other individuals and on social institutions. When our epistemic dependence is embedded within a well-functioning social epistemic system, great stores of information are available to individuals which would otherwise be inaccessible. However, as with dependence of any kind, epistemic dependence involves risks: we could depend on a dysfunctional social epistemic system. To repeat a point made above, 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 self-monitoring and self-correcting; that is, a reliable social epistemic system is one in which various kinds of breakdown can be detected, diagnosed, and eventually corrected.

I propose that certain social epistemic norms contain this self-reflexive component: the norm itself demands that space be kept open for its own examination and critique. The democratic institutional norms – equality, rule of law, universal suffrage, regular elections, and the like – are the political mechanisms by which the self-reflexivity of the Open Society norms can be enacted. We uphold decidedly democratic procedural norms because these are required by the self-reflexive component of the Open Society norms. In other words, we need democracy in order to monitor and correct our social epistemic system.

Consider the Open Society norm of free speech. Part of what it is to uphold this norm is to be ready to permit challenges to the effect that the norm has not been properly enacted or satisfied. To silence a challenge to existing practices and institutions by which free speech is protected is to violate the norm. A similar thought applies to norms of political equality. To dismiss a challenge to existing arrangements as insufficiently egalitarian is to violate political equality. Of course, the claim is not that all challenges to standing practices must be heeded or implemented. Some challenges to current ways of realizing equality are misguided. The point rather is that part of what it is to uphold the norm of political equality is to uphold a system by which the implementation of that norm can be evaluated and criticized. To reject this is to violate the norm – it is to say that the concerns of some citizens need not be attended to.

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. Now, I take it that in order to hold
institutions accountable, some scheme of popular voting is required. But
note that the folk epistemic view does not require direct democracy and is
consistent with a range of representative and parliamentary designs.

Imagine, then, a Platonic king 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 the
first-personal folk epistemic norms because it provides no mechanism by
which the king’s subjects could assure themselves of the reliability of the
system; it is not accountable to their concerns, nor vulnerable to their cri-
tiques. In the absence of accountable political institutions which are able to
monitor the social epistemic system, I cannot assess myself as successfully
satisfying the epistemic norms internal to belief. Consequently, the connec-
tion between Open Society norms and democratic political norms is not
merely instrumental, but conceptual. Open Society norms require political
institutions by which they can be monitored and sustained. The objection is
defused.

Conclusion

Surely there is a lot more to say. Many of the crucial questions that are
standard fare for democratic theory have hardly been addressed here. For
example, I have given no account of the authority of particular democratic
outcomes; I have simply presupposed that there could be a successful
account of this kind. Furthermore, I conspicuously have said nothing about
institutions, courts, constitutions, and punishment. A fuller account would
have to show how the folk epistemic answer to the third justificatory query
comports well with attractive views regarding these broader issues within
democratic theory. It should be mentioned, however, that the implications
of the folk epistemic argument are clear for certain of these concerns. For
example, if proper democracy depends upon a well-functioning social epi-
stemic system, then certain implications follow for our schools, political
campaigns, and news media. I am not able to discuss these implications
here (Talisse 2009, ch. 5). For now, I have simply sketched and tried to
defend the folk epistemic response to the third query concerning the justifi-
cation of democracy.

Notes
1. For a recent and sustained example of this line of investigation, see Estlund
(2008).
2. This thought, I take it, is what lies behind much of the more radical pro-life
rhetoric in the United States, where not only is legalized abortion regularly
referred to as a holocaust, and women’s health clinics called ‘death camps,’ but
also citizens are asked what they would have done were they citizens in Nazi Germany. One *Focus on the Family* tract embraces illegal ‘rescue’ action at abortion clinics, asking ‘What would you have done as a citizen of Germany in World War II? The Nazi extermination camps were legal. Would you have broken your country’s unjust laws in order to protect millions of people marked for death?’ The idea is that laws permitting abortion are so plainly unjust that any government that enacts such laws is *ipso facto* not authoritative, and so there are no moral reasons to obey.

3. It is worth noting that when Rawls confronts this difficulty, he simply declares that ‘under reasonably favorable conditions,’ the values associated with democracy will ‘normally outweigh’ the other values that may conflict (Rawls 2005, pp. 146, 155, 209).

4. For coverage of the debates concerning evidentialism, see Conee and Feldman (2004), Dougherty (2011), Aikin (2011), and the essays collected in Feldman and Warfield (2010).

5. Compare Goldberg’s illuminating analysis of thoughts of the kind ‘if that were true, I would have heard about it by now’ (Goldberg 2010, ch. 6).

6. See also Dworkin (2006) for similar proposals.

**Note on contributor**

Robert B. Talisse is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Vanderbilt University. His research focuses on democratic theory, political justification, and pluralism. He is author of *Democracy and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge University Press 2009) and *Pluralism and Liberal Politics* (Routledge 2012).

**References**


