Moral Pluralism, Moral Motivation, and Democracy: A Critique of Talisse’s Epistemic Justification of Democracy

Epistemic justifications of democracy have flourished in the last decade, with figures in the pragmatic tradition especially represented. Among the most prominent proponents has been Robert Talisse with a series of books purporting to demonstrate the universal, yet largely implicit, commitment to democracy, on epistemic rather than moral grounds. According to Talisse, as well his fellow Peircean Cheryl Misak, everyone is committed to democracy, which includes a set of epistemic norms as well as particular institutional requirements, simply by virtue of holding beliefs. The epistemic approach is supposed to have the virtue, in addition to its universality, of avoiding the intractable moral debates about what constitutes the good life. In other words, regardless of anyone’s view of the good life, everyone is committed to democracy, whether they know it or not. This sounds all very good, and it does provide an interesting justification for democracy. My worry, however, is that it lacks persuasiveness for those who do not already hold a moral commitment to democracy. I say this in contrast to Talisse’s own claim that the epistemic justification is “sufficient to motivate” a commitment to democracy (2009a, 7; italics in the original). The logic of the connection between belief and democracy may, or may not, be correct, but I question its sufficiency to motivate “on the ground,” so to speak. In other words, Talisse may gain logical sufficiency, but only at the expense of the moral motivation democracy requires to actually constitute a live possibility.

In support of this claim, I will begin by questioning the starting point of Talisse’s project, namely the requirement, drawn from Rawls, of accommodating moral, or in Rawls’ words, reasonable, pluralism. I question the inevitability and permanency of the situation of moral
pluralism grounded as it is on the plurality of fundamentally held doctrines. Even if the situation of moral pluralism holds, and it does seem to be a growing reality in the United States, it is democratically untenable, despite Talisse’s characterization that the various moral doctrines within moral pluralism are plausible (2009a, 13). Whatever plausibility may mean, it is a different matter from being conducive to democracy. The basic issue here is not the content of fundamentally held doctrines, which may or may not be plausible, but the way in which doctrines, or values, are practiced. I will distinguish two forms of value practice, fundamental and experimental, and argue that only the latter is compatible with democracy. Moreover, anyone who does engage in fundamental value practice and who is also persuaded by Talisse’s epistemic justification would be required to abandon one or the other of these commitments. A commitment to democracy, which includes a series of epistemic norms and institutional arrangements, entails the abandonment of fundamental value practice and thus of Talisse’s starting requirement that moral pluralism be accommodated.

With the situation of moral pluralism sufficiently questioned, I then argue that it is only on such a questionable ground that necessitates the need for a universal and complete justification of democracy, as both Talisse and Rawls believe necessary. It is only on the premise that moral pluralism must be accommodated that a once-and-for-all style justification is needed. But once the situation of moral pluralism is recognized as questionable and undemocratic, the need to accommodate it loses its force. I then show that the epistemic justification cannot generate the needed moral motivation for democracy to be a live option. In line with John Dewey’s understanding of human nature, democracy requires an affective and moral motivation. What we end up seeing is that democracy is a moral struggle that cannot be justified by
philosophy, but instead must be justified in its very practice. Philosophy’s role ceases to be the provision of universal, undeniable, logical justification, and becomes the provision of resources to aid in the moral, including epistemic, struggle for democracy.

I. Moral Pluralism and Democracy

Before addressing the problems with the situation of moral pluralism, a brief note is in order on Talisse’s latest attempt at an epistemic justification of democracy. Unlike his efforts in *Democracy After Liberalism* and *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*, the argument in *Democracy and Moral Conflict* barely mentions pragmatism, Peirce, or Dewey. Instead, Talisse turns to a new basis for the same basic epistemic argument, what he calls folk epistemology. This change is most likely not due to any reconsideration of Peirce’s theory of inquiry as a basis for democracy, but rather the result of a desire for a basis that will appeal to a much wider audience, everyone in fact, beyond those sympathetic to pragmatism. At the same time, a recent critique by Eric MacGilvray of the epistemic arguments of Misak and Westbrook points to a problem with attempts to justify democracy from a pragmatist theory of inquiry.² Namely, pragmatist epistemology and its attendant theory of inquiry do not center on belief, but doubt. As MacGilvray says:

> It follows that on Peircean grounds the mere assertion of a belief does not commit one to further inquiry on its behalf, because belief is, as Peirce puts it, “thought at rest.” The origins of inquiry lie for Peirce not in belief but its opposite, doubt, and doubt follows not from habit but from the privation of habit. As long as our habits, our rules of action, reliably serve our purposes, as long as “the premises are not in fact doubted,” then we
need not and will not conduct further inquiry on their behalf. To hold otherwise is to put the pragmatic cart before the horse (2007).

I take this to be a plausible critique of the logical connection that is claimed by Misak, Westbrook, and Talisse between pragmatist epistemology and democracy.

Taking this into account, we could ask whether Talisse’s folk epistemological basis does any better to get the epistemic justification of democracy off the ground. The argument is basically the same, namely that a set of epistemic democratic norms and democratic institutions must be accepted by necessity from the very practice of holding beliefs. Does folk epistemology, if not pragmatism, accomplish the transition from the fact of holding beliefs to the justification of democracy? However, instead of analyzing the logical connections between belief and democracy, I take a different path by granting the validity of the connection but finding problems elsewhere with the argument, namely with the requirement to accommodate moral pluralism and the exclusion of moral justification.

The basis of Talisse’s turn toward an epistemic justification of democracy and away from Deweyan-style moral justifications seems to be Rawls’ text Political Liberalism. Talisse accepts Rawls’ argument that because the situation of reasonable pluralism is an inevitable and permanent feature of a constitutional democracy, any defense of democracy, the realization of which manages to avoid oppression, must accommodate this pluralism (Rawls 1993, 37). The logical result is to construct an argument that commits everyone to democracy, whether they know it or not. Unless the justification is universal, oppression must be used to implement the proposal. What this means is that any valid defense must not be a moral defense. Due to the situation of moral pluralism, any moral defense will be reasonably rejectable and thus not
universal. I start in this section to open up justificatory space for moral defenses of democracy by questioning the situation of moral pluralism and the requirement that it be accommodated.

A situation in which society exhibits a plurality of beliefs and values, many of which conflict, is not objectionable and is a normal condition of virtually every society, democratic or otherwise. But the situation of moral pluralism as defined by Talisse assumes that people are divided in a fundamental way over beliefs and entire doctrines. It assumes that people are walking around with complete and coherent sets of values, many of which are inconsistent with those held by others, with which they judge their own and others actions. At the core of each moral or religious doctrine are “values, aims, and ends that are fundamental to living a proper life, both individually and in relation to others” (Talisse 2009a, 12; italics in the original). This situation, I assume, is similar, if not the same, as Rawls’ account of reasonable pluralism characterized by a plurality of comprehensive doctrines (1993, 36).

The reasons why moral pluralism must be accepted for any defense of democracy are, first, that it is an inevitable and permanent condition of constitutional democracy, and second, because the fundamental doctrines within it are plausible (Talisse 2009a, 13). However, I am not so much concerned with the content of doctrines, which the term ‘plausible’ applies to, but rather with the way in which doctrines are held and practiced. I take words like ‘fundamental’ and ‘comprehensive’ to be indicative not only of the content and/or structure of doctrines and values but the way doctrines and values are practiced. While it is certainly possible, and all too common, for values to be practiced fundamentally, it is also possible, and democratically vital,
for values to be practiced experimentally. In other words, I see no reason to accept the inevitability and permanence of moral pluralism and thus the criterion that it be accommodated.

What, then, does it mean to have “fundamental commitments” (Talisse 2009a, 14) or to practice a doctrine comprehensively? ‘Fundamental’ and ‘comprehensive’ are words with extreme connotations, and thus I take it that those who hold and practice values in these ways do so in extreme ways, most notably by holding values as non-negotiable. Such practice can be distinguished from practice that is experimental and experiential. Values can be practiced either with or without regard for their life in experience and with or without an experimental comportment toward achieving the best values in experience. Among other things, experimental value practice means that values are held and practiced non-fundamentally, with due attention to value conflicts, consequences, direct and indirect, of particular values, and changing circumstances that point toward a need for value transformation.

Dewey captured the distinction between fundamental and experimental value practice quite well. He describes the experimental way of holding and practicing values in opposition to reason, which he describes as “an unnecessary creation of men addicted to traditional formalism and to elaborate terminology” (MW12, 134). In its place, he recommends intelligence, which utilizes “concrete suggestions arising from past experiences, developed and matured in the light of the needs and deficiencies of the present, employed as aims and methods of specific reconstruction, and tested by success or failure in accomplishing this task of readjustment” (MW12, 134). In opposition to fundamentalism, or what Dewey terms “carelessness, conceit, irresponsibility, and rigidity—in short absolutism,” “intelligence is not something possessed once for all. It is in constant process of forming, and its retention requires
constant alertness in observing consequences, an open-minded will to learn and courage in re-adjustment” (MW12, 135). Vital to this process of intelligence is the place and function of ends. The practice of values fundamentally means the assertion of a preconceived, static, end prior to thinking and experiment. Intelligence, on the other hand, means that “the only situation in which knowing is fully stimulated is one in which the end is developed in the process of inquiry and testing” (MW12, 164). This account of intelligence must be put into contrast to Talisse’s characterization of Dewey as forwarding a fundamentalist democratic proposal, culminating in the view that “democracy and the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity are to my mind synonyms” (EW1, 248). Unfortunately for Talisse, this passage comes from the very earliest period of Dewey’s career, a period in which he was much more prone to make such foundational pronouncements. His later defenses of democracy must, instead, be read in light of his developed experimentalism, not through quotations taken out of the context of Dewey’s early Hegelianism.

It is certainly the case that many people practice their values fundamentally, as the situation in the United States seems to demonstrate. But why is this inevitable and permanent? Why is it not possible for a society to be characterized by a more experimental approach to values? In other words, why must we accept moral pluralism? Talisse and Aiken have notoriously claimed that pragmatism is in conflict with pluralism, defined as the moral pluralism of fundamental or comprehensive doctrines (2005a, 2005b). They have also chastised pragmatists for not taking this form of pluralism, which they say is the dominant form of pluralism in philosophy, seriously (Talisse and Aiken 2005a, 146). I take issue with neither of these claims, but reject their further claim that pragmatists should abandon the term ‘pluralism’ on the ground that “as the pragmatists’ commitments are incompatible with the range of views
called ‘pluralism’ in broader, non-pragmatist arenas, the pragmatists’ habit of characterizing their commitments as ‘pluralism’ can only invite confusion and encourage insularity,” both of which “are blocks to the kind of ameliorative social and political programs advocated by pragmatists…” (Talisse and Aiken 2005a, 146).

I am not so pessimistic about the possibility of pragmatists using the word ‘pluralism’ as long as they heed the above advise and thus are clear about its meaning and take seriously other, conflicting, uses of the term. That being said, I find problems with Talisse and Aiken’s critique of pragmatism. What seems to be a key motivation of their critique is that “because it is unclear how these differences can be rationally adjudicated, the expectation that we might soon reach widespread moral consensus seems misplaced” (Talisse and Aiken 2005b, 102). It is not the case, however, that pragmatists generally believe that “we might soon reach widespread moral consensus.” It is much more complicated than this. What is true is that pragmatists operate upon a hope that people in conflict will find ways to lessen and resolve conflict intelligently, not toward “widespread moral consensus,” but rather toward a shared mode of life. The latter can exist without consensus on moral values, and indeed, can exist within a plurality of values provided they are practiced experimentally. This confluence of a shared mode of life and experimental value practice lies at the heart of democracy.

Moral pluralism assumes the inevitability of value conflicts over fundamentally practiced values. It resigns itself to a clash of fundamentalisms. It must be recognized, however, that not all concrete instances of pluralism are subject to conflict and not all pluralistic conflict is important enough to seek resolution. The whole idea of multiculturalism is that a plurality of traditions can come together and agree on shared ways of life while retaining the distinctiveness
of each tradition. This may, indeed it must, require each tradition to transform itself in order to achieve a shared way of life, but this does not mean that a single tradition must emerge. The difference between those who are open to this transformation and those who are not turns upon the difference between fundamental and experimental moral pluralism. In addition, sometimes attempts to resolve conflicts can create even more conflict. People can live, and indeed should learn to live, with a certain amount of conflict. At the same time, serious conflicts can and should be resolved, but what exactly resolution means cannot be determined ahead of time and certainly does not entail “widespread moral consensus.”

Experimental pluralists, as committed democrats, should ask moral pluralists, as well as each other, why they should accept moral pluralism? If I am right, the only alternative to moral pluralism is not an oppressive value monism. As will be argued in the next section, experimental pluralists lament the fact of moral pluralism and hope and advocate for a future of experimental pluralism. They do this on the basis of democratic values that speak against coercion as incompatible with democracy and thus rely on democratic activism and what Dewey called democratic faith, “a working faith in the possibilities of human nature” (LW14, 226). In other words, democracy must be an achievement and can only be achieved in experience through an affective experience of the benefits of democracy as a way of life. Before making the case for this, however, I turn now to Talisse’s claim that he has constructed a justification of democracy that accommodates moral pluralism.

If moral pluralism is neither inevitable nor permanent then we, especially committed democrats, are justified in promoting a more experimental approach to the practice of values. I now intend to show that democracy, even in the way that Talisse understands it, is incompatible
with the situation of moral pluralism. Not only is moral pluralism not inevitable and permanent, then, but also the acquisition of what Talisse terms epistemic character entails the abandonment of fundamentally practiced values in favor of experimental pluralism (2009a, 105-106).

Inversely, as the situation of moral pluralism becomes more and more of a reality, the strength of democratic epistemic character decreases. One reason for this is that as people take and practice their values in a fundamental way, democracy turns into a mere means, one among others, to achieve these values. To illustrate this, let us consider Talisse’s epistemic justification of democracy and its resulting epistemic norms.

Talisse’s argument from folk epistemology, briefly stated, is that by holding a belief one is committed to its truth, which then commits one to the further belief that the best reasons support the original belief (2009a, 87-88). This then commits one to what Talisse calls “a social process of reason exchange,” which in turn commits one to certain “cognitive and dispositional norms related to one’s epistemic character (2009a, 88). Talisse details these norms as such:

If we aim to have true beliefs, and if this aiming requires us to exchange our reasons with others, we must avoid adopting attitudes and habits that obstruct or frustrate the dialectal processes of examining and exchanging reasons. So, with regard to our interlocutors, we must be openminded, attentive, honest, and charitable; we must try to avoid rushing to judgment, erecting straw-men, deploying *ad hominem* attacks and other dismissive tropes; in other words, we must play fair. With regard to our own position, we must be earnest, precise, and explicit; we must try to make our case in the clearest terms possible, avoiding obfuscation, equivocation, and sophism” (Talisse 2009a, 106).
The important observation here is that the acquisition of these norms as habits corresponds, in different language, to what Dewey means by intelligence.

Now, I agree with Talisse’s statement that “a reliable social epistemic system can exist only under democratic political conditions,” but he further states that “even those who take their own moral doctrines to be beyond revision and not in need of examination or justification have reason to endorse the kind of democratic politics entailed by folk epistemology” (2009a, 143). This seems odd. It is one thing to say those who practice their values fundamentally need a social epistemic system for non-moral facts, as Talisse does, but it is most important for a well-functioning democracy to adhere to such a system with one’s value commitments. How can one simultaneously take one’s “own moral doctrines to be beyond revision and not in need of examination or justification” and “endorse the kind of democratic politics entailed by folk epistemology.” Of course, one cannot. Once moral fundamentalists accept democratic politics for their own fundamental value commitments, the latter cease to be fundamental. They are subject to intelligent inquiry and experimentation. Moral pluralism, therefore, cannot survive Talisse’s own argument.

Talisse attempts to avoid this conclusion, however, by anticipating an objection to his argument. Namely, in terms of a commitment to democracy, most people will favor their fundamental values over an epistemic commitment to democracy if they perceive that democracy poses a threat to those values. Talisse anticipates this objection by turning to the work of Cass Sunstein on group polarization (2002). According to Sunstein, “group polarization means that members of a debating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members’ predeliberation tendencies” (2002, 176). According to Talisse, this
law entails that “the more deeply one is committed to $p$, and the more one regards the truth of $p$ to be a matter of importance, the more ready one should be to engage others,” for the failure to do so means that one could very well lose one’s fundamental belief in favor of a more extreme version and thus violate one’s original commitment to $p$ (2009a, 144). This is supposed to show that there are no problems with the consistency of moral pluralism and democracy and even that the former needs the latter the more a fundamental belief is. However, in limiting his account to the act of believing, Talisse has missed an important factor that calls the consistency of moral pluralism and democracy into question.

Let us grant that a person who is fundamentally committed to certain beliefs recognizes that by not engaging with others who have different beliefs, she risks losing her beliefs for more extreme versions. Two points are in order. First, while this recognition could very well lead a person to support democratic engagement, it could equally lead to a rejection of democracy because democracy may lead to a less-extreme version of the belief. Democratic engagement tends to lesson extreme beliefs. Talisse could respond to this by noting that in his example of the moral fundamentalist he stipulated that her belief in $p$ is not only true, but also that she knows it to be true (2009a, 143). This is supposed to show that since $p$ is known to be true, democracy would not only not change $p$ to a less extreme version, but that it would serve to confirm $p$. However, the fact of actually knowing $p$ to be true changes the outcome of the law of group polarization. Someone who knows $p$ to be true might actually not be influenced by group polarization. To be so influenced would mean that one doubts $p$ and thus does not know it. Moreover, the stipulation itself is unfair and unrealistic. Nobody knows her beliefs are true in the way that Talisse stipulates. We believe them to be true, ideally based on the best evidence,
although sadly this is not always the case. In actual fact, instead of a stipulated fiction, a person who believes something, depending on how they believe it, might actually be more likely to reject democracy for fear of losing her belief. She might be willing to risk a more extreme belief so as not to risk a less extreme version. Moreover, fundamentally inclined believers may actually have no issue at all with acquiring more extreme beliefs since this actually adds further support to the fundamental practice of beliefs. Thus, a fundamentalist believer would not actually be likely to endorse democracy.

The second point continues in a similar vein. People are not only interested in the truth of their beliefs, but in their realization as well. The fundamentally committed person can recognize that by engaging with others she risks losing whatever gains had previously been achieved with respect to both the realization of her beliefs and the number of supporters for those beliefs. I suspect, as well, that the more fundamentally a person holds beliefs, the more that person is committed to their realization regardless of their truth status, even though they certainly believe them to be true. Consider the polarized abortion debate in the United States. A person who believes in a fundamental way that abortion is murder and that it should be illegal may not support dialogue with others who disagree on the ground that such dialogue may threaten both the practical gains for the belief and the number of its supporters. The issue here is prioritization. Those who hold certain values as fundamental, and specifically as more important than democracy, rightfully, I would say, see democracy as a threat. Unless, that is, they observe that the state of democracy is such that their beliefs stand a good chance for realization. But this is to support democracy on entirely instrumental grounds, good only so long as it is perceived to benefit the realization of their fundamental beliefs.¹
What these two points show is that those fundamentally committed to their beliefs will not likely turn to the epistemic norms of democracy. The issue, as was indicated, is the prioritization of values. In the next section, I argue that even if Talisse’s argument is valid, it will not achieve the commitment to democracy on solely epistemic grounds. Democracy, instead, must involve moral and affective motivation. Importantly, this ceases to be a problem once it is recognized that moral pluralism is inconsistent with democracy and that experimental pluralism is an alternative to it.

II. The Need for Moral Motivation

Talisse makes two claims about his epistemic justification of democracy. The first is that it accommodates moral pluralism due to its epistemic, as opposed to moral, character. The second is that it is sufficient to motivate a commitment to democracy. Both of these claims are false even if his argument is logically valid. As was shown in the previous section, those who exist in the situation of moral pluralism are very unlikely to take on the epistemic character Talisse’s argument entails and that if they actually did take them on, they would exit the situation of moral pluralism. The second claim is false for these same reasons. That is, in order for a person to be committed to democracy, she must prioritize it over other values. This is so because democratic processes provide no guarantee that one’s values will be realized. If one does not value democracy itself, little reason remains to commit to it if it is perceived as a threat to other prioritized values.

Talisse seems to think that the epistemic character of his argument will be enough to motivate people who are fundamentally divided over moral values to commit to democracy. But on what grounds does he believe this? I take it that it is on the deductive quality of his argument,
in that it commits everyone to democracy whether they know it or not. This is supposed to be a virtue of his argument in that it avoids the messy conflicts within moral pluralism. But what kind of commitment is this? It is not, as Talisse insists, a moral commitment, but an epistemic one. I put aside the question of whether the epistemic-moral distinction makes sense in actual practice, and ask instead how epistemic motivation is supposed to compete with fundamentally held moral values that could very well be perceived to be threatened by democracy.

What does it mean to be exclusively an epistemic justification if such a justification is intended to have purchase beyond mere verbal assent or logical validity? The argument, in other words, is intended to convince and motivate others to be democrats, which for Talisse means to take on the series of epistemic virtues he lays out as following from his justification. But is it possible to be motivated merely on epistemic grounds? The answer, I believe, is no, at least for most people, especially if a prior moral commitment to democracy is absent. To see what I mean, consider an analogy between Talisse’s argument and Kant’s argument against non-rational moral motivation. The claim that epistemic grounds are sufficient to motivate is similar to Kant’s insistence that a rational conception of duty is sufficient to produce right action:

But a completely isolated metaphysics of morals, mixed with no anthropology, no theology, no physics or hyperphysics…is not only an indispensable substrate of all theoretically sound and definite knowledge of duties; it is also a desideratum of the highest importance to the actual fulfillment of its precepts. For the pure conception of duty and of the moral law generally, with no admixture of empirical inducements, has an influence on the human heart so much more powerful than all other incentives which may be derived from the empirical field that reason, in the consciousness of its dignity,
despises them and gradually becomes master over them. It has this influence only through reason, which thereby realizes that it can of itself be practical. A mixed theory of morals which is put together both from incentives of feelings and inclinations and from rational concepts must, on the other hand, make the mind vacillate between motives which cannot be brought under any principle and which can lead only accidentally to the good and often to the bad (1959, 27-28; italics added).

I will not enter into a critique of Kant here, other than to observe, with Dewey, that “when all regard for consequences and for all ends which desire sets before us is excluded, what concrete material is left to be included within the idea of duty” (LW7, 221). Just as Kant’s insistence that moral motivation be cleansed of desire is implausible, given human nature and the actual experiential conditions of moral practice, so is Talisse’s insistence that a justification of democracy be purely epistemic, given the nature of motivation and democracy. With respect to democracy, then, motivation must be moral and affective. In other words, democracy must be a felt moral experience in order to achieve the prioritization it needs.

For justification to be more than conceptual or logical, even if universal, it must enter into the lives of people. It must become a lived practice that reaches into the character of individuals. This is why Dewey focused so much attention on habit and character. It explains the following statement regarding democracy as a way of life:

Put into effect it signifies that powerful present enemies of democracy can be successfully met only by the creation of personal attitudes in individual human beings; that we must get over our tendency to think that its defense can be found in any external
means whatever, whether military or civil, if they are separated from individual attitudes
so deep-seated as to constitute personal character (LW 14, 226).

There is a presumption among political philosophers and theorists of Talisse’s stripe that a
political theory can establish justification in isolation from the actual practice of politics. But as
Dewey recognizes, it is only in such practice that democratic character, which includes epistemic
character, develops. Talisse’s approach requires that the basis of a political system come from
outside, or prior to, the political system itself. The practice of democracy cannot serve as its own,
self-corrective, justification. But if Dewey is right that democracy requires deep-seated attitudes,
then it can only be justified piecemeal, from within it’s own practice, and experimentally, which
means that one can utilize reasonably rejectable beliefs to practice and experiment with. Talisse’s
external epistemic justifications, thus, can be added to Dewey’s short list of “external means”
that cannot serve as adequate defenses of democracy.

Now, Talisse accuses any moral defense of democracy, including Dewey’s, of leading
inevitably to coercion and thus oppression:

If we concede that reasonable pluralism obtains, and accept the fundamental liberal
insight that the political order must justify itself to those living under its authority, the
problem for Deweyan democracy is clear. Under conditions of reasonable pluralism, any
conception of democracy that is tied directly to a specific substantive moral ideal is
oppressive, since it attempts to enlist the coercive power of the state in the task of
realizing a set of values which reasonable citizens could reject (2007b, 21).

Why would Talisse characterize Dewey’s vision of democracy as oppressive? I propose that it is
only because Talisse understands political theory in the way he does, as an all or nothing, as well
as purely logical, affair. Within the situation of reasonable or moral pluralism, which must be
accommodated, the only possible way to justify democracy is a logical or conceptual and prior
justification that accomplishes what is needed in one fell swoop. Anything other will be
reasonably rejectable and thus impossible without coercion. The claim is that given moral
pluralism, no ground can ever be made on working toward a more substantive model of
democracy like Dewey’s, leaving only two options. Either democracy is justified logically and
completely, and thus is not reasonably rejectable, or the justification must utilize coercion.
Talisse, however, is trapped in a political theory in which a lack of universality can entail only
oppression, which enables him to accuse Dewey and Deweyans of aspiring to be Platonic “social
architects” by recommending that society be reconstructed “in the image of their substantive
moral commitments” (Talisse 2007b, 21).

Talisse is only able to paint Dewey in this way because he fails to recognize the need for
democratic struggle with moral-philosophical arguments to aid it. On this view, not only is
democracy a process, but the efforts to achieve and ameliorate it are as well. Philosophy takes
the role of critic, analyzing the “conditions and consequences” of currently held and proposed
values or goods in order to contribute to their “expansion and emancipation” (LW 1, 303 and
305). And this is just how Dewey understood his contribution to democracy. He theorized ideals
of democracy to aid in the struggle for democracy. In no way did he understand his contributions
as demands, let alone requirements, that called for coercion through forced implementation or
social engineering. But on Talisse’s model of political theory, the need for democratic struggle is
never considered.
What stops democratic struggle from being coercive? For Dewey, it is “the democratic faith in human equality,” which is the belief that every human being, independent of the quantity or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has. The democratic belief in the principle of leadership is a generous one. It is universal. It is belief in the capacity of every person to lead his own life free from coercion and imposition by others provided right conditions are supplied (LW 14, 226-227).

As I argued above, democratic motivation requires moral motivation and moral attitudes, which can only be achieved in the practice of democracy itself. They are not the kind of attitudes that anyone can be forced to acquire and practice. These include, along with “the democratic faith in human equality,” what Charles Larmore calls the respect for persons (1999), to which I would add as well a concern for the public good and a sense of community.

I end by observing a conflict between these values and a particular feature of Talisse’s argument. Notice that all of these values involve a strong social component, without which democracy will never find its needed motivational source. Consider also that Talisse’s argument is intended to appeal to people as isolated believers, not as socially engaged individuals. Due to the requirement of accommodation of moral pluralism, the appeal to democracy based on associations, or community connections, would violate moral pluralism, thus leaving us with the isolated individual believer. Each person should be committed to democracy solely because of an isolated interest in holding true beliefs (Talisse 2007b, 22). Not only is it questionable that the average person would be so motivated, but democracy requires so much more. Democratic
motivation comes from a much deeper, affective, and moral source. It must be acquired, or learned, through democracy itself, which means that people must acquire, in a deep-seated way, the appropriate democratic virtues and character. This is exactly why Dewey spent so much time writing about human nature, the self, and human flourishing, among other topics. He did not advocate the coercive achievement of his theories, but intended for them to contribute to an ongoing debate over and struggle for democracy.

**Works Cited**


1 See Talisse (2005), (2007a), (2009a). For other examples of the epistemic defense of democracy, pragmatist and otherwise, see Anderson (2006), Estlund (2008), Misak (2000 and 2008), and Westbrook (2005). See also Clanton and Forcehimes (2009) and Deen (2009) for recent critiques of Talisse, as well as Talisse’s response to some of his critics in Talisse (2009b and 2009c.)

2 See MacGilvray (2007), Misak (2000), and Westbrook (2005)

3 See Zackariasson (2009) for a critique of Rawls’, and by extension Talisse’s, notion of comprehensive doctrines.

4 All references to Dewey are to the complete works and will be cited using standard abbreviations for The Middle Works (MW) and The Later works (LW).

5 See Talisse (2007a), 42.

6 For a recent analysis of hope in pragmatism, see Koopman (2009).

7 See Sullivan (2001) for a Deweyan analysis of how a plurality of beliefs, modes of life, and bodily habits can transform together toward a shared mode of life while simultaneously retaining their distinctness.

8 One may recall how the Nazi Party utilized German democracy as an instrument for gaining power. Once achieved, democracy would have only been an impediment toward the achievement of Nazi policy, the realization of which was certainly valued above establishing its truth.