Talisse’s Epistemic Justification of Democracy Reconsidered

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Paul Ott offers three related arguments that Robert Talisse’s epistemic conception of democracy fails. Together, they are intended to support the proposition that a Deweyan approach to democracy provides a better explanatory basis for how to facilitate democracy. I argue that each argument provided by Ott fails. As a result, they do not reflect a successful critique of the Talisse’s conception of democracy. Nor do they provide support for Ott’s defense of Dewey. I close by offering a more promising line of criticism against Talisse’s epistemic justification.

1. Introduction

In a recent essay appearing in Contemporary Pragmatism, Paul Ott argues that Robert Talisse’s most recent iteration of his epistemic conception of democracy fails. He offers three related arguments to make his case:

Argument 1

- **P₁** Moral pluralism, as Talisse characterizes it, is a plurality of “fundamentally held doctrines.” (Ott 2011, 146)
- **P₂** A plurality of fundamentally held doctrines is democratically untenable.
- **C₁** Democracy cannot accommodate moral pluralism, as Talisse understands it.

Argument 2

- **P₁** Endorsement of Talisse’s epistemic justification is necessary for embracing Talisse’s conception of democracy.
- **P₂** One cannot endorse both a fundamentally held doctrine and also be persuaded by Talisse’s epistemic justification.
- **C₂** Talisse’s own conception of democracy is inconsistent with “fundamental value practice.” (ibid., 146)
Argument 3

P₁ Talisse’s claim that the epistemic justification is “sufficient to motivate” (2009, 7; original emphasis) a commitment to democracy is false.

P₂ The epistemic justification lacks persuasiveness for those not already morally committed to democracy.

C₃ Democracy requires moral justification and motivation.

Taken together, Ott intends these arguments to support the proposition that a Deweyan approach to democracy, which, he states, “requires an affective and moral motivation” (ibid., 146), provides a better explanatory basis for how to facilitate democracy than does Talisse’s epistemic justification. I will not rehash whether we should accept or reject Deweyan democracy; Talisse’s (2007, 2011a) challenge to it strikes me as decisive.¹ I will instead focus on the merits of Ott’s three arguments, arguing that each is invalid – or at least that Ott has failed to firmly establish the validity of each. As a result, they do not reflect a successful critique of the Talisse’s epistemic justification. Nor do they provide any support for Ott’s wider Deweyan proposition. This is not to say that Talisse’s epistemic justification should be endorsed, however. I close by offering what I take to be a more promising line of criticism against it.

2. Argument 1

Given the description provided in the first premise of Argument 1 (i.e., 1P₁), Talisse characterizes moral pluralism as a plurality of fundamentally held doctrines. According to Ott, that a doctrine is held fundamentally – that one engages in fundamental value practice – says nothing about the content of that doctrine. This instead refers to “the way in which doctrines, or values, are practiced” (Ott 2011, 146). Namely, one engages in fundamental value practice, or fundamentalism (ibid., 149) for short, insofar as they “hold and practice values in ... extreme ways, most notably by holding values as non-negotiable, regardless of changing circumstances” (ibid., 148). Drawing on Dewey, Ott concludes that such a mode of practice reflects nothing less than “carelessness, conceit, irresponsibility, and rigidity – in short, absolutism” (ibid., 149).

If it is the case that moral pluralism is a fact of social and political life, that there exists a plurality of doctrines whose adherents have fundamental commitments that they refuse in principle to abandon or revise no matter what the circumstances, Ott contends that said adherents cannot be expected to embrace democracy. Democracy requires – at a minimum – a commitment to mutual cooperation and reciprocal engagement among citizens regarded as free and equal.¹ This commitment must not be easily overridden by doctrinal concerns (see Rawls 2001, 189). But we cannot expect the fundamentalist to maintain a stronger commitment to democracy than to their doctrinal concerns such that the former generally override the latter. This is what makes a plurality