Replies to Symposium Participants

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I am grateful for this occasion, and for the kind words of my critics here assembled. And, indeed, for their criticism. *Democratic Hope* – a collection of essays – is not the sort of book in which one places much hope. Publishers do not like to publish them; journals do not care to review them; and bookstores are reluctant to stock them. One tries, as I say in my preface, to avoid the appearance of a mere “book effect,” but seldom convincingly.

Insofar as *Democratic Hope* has a measure of connective tissue, it lies in my engagement with the relationship between pragmatist epistemology and democratic politics, what Hilary Putnam has called the Deweyan “epistemological justification of democracy.” So it is not surprising that my critics center their remarks on this relationship.

1. MacGilvray

Eric MacGilvray raises critical objections to two “strong” claims he says I make on behalf of a pragmatist epistemological argument for democracy. First, that insofar as this argument offers itself as a *justification* for participatory, deliberative democracy it is suspiciously foundational and hence not truly pragmatist. And second, that if one does not make it and hence commit oneself to participatory, deliberative democracy, one is not properly a pragmatist.

Let me begin with the second putative claim. I do not believe I make this strong claim in *Democratic Hope*. Rather, wearing my intellectual historian’s cap, I suggest that adherence or non-adherence to the epistemological argument is a nice criteria with which to distinguish two broad camps of pragmatists. As I say, in order to make this argument one has to make a set of controversial moves, moves that are controversial *within* as well as without the pragmatist family (as the comments of both MacGilvray and Hogan themselves indicate). That family is distinguished from others, I say, not by adherence to the epistemological argument for democracy but by another of Putnam’s formulations: the avoidance of “both the illusions of [foundationalist] metaphysics and the illusions of skepticism.”

Nonetheless, as a matter of philosophy and political theory, my sympathies are clearly with the adherence camp, particularly as that position has been advanced by Cheryl Misak (which Talisse nicely summarizes). I try at
length to show some of the difficulties that the non-adherents – particularly Rorty and Posner – get into by their non-adherence. I think pragmatists would do well to adhere to this argument, but I do not make any arguments for doing so that add much to those of Misak. Misak could no doubt defend her pragmatist epistemological argument for democracy better than I, but let me try.

As MacGilvray says, Misak is trying to anchor a commitment to democracy in a neo-Peircean analysis of what it means for human beings to hold a belief to be true. A true belief for a pragmatist, she says, is one that meets the test of inquiry: “A true belief is such that no matter how much further we were to investigate and debate, that belief would not be overturned by recalcitrant experience and argument.”¹ This, she readily acknowledges, is a “low profile” conception of truth – yet one, as Talisse says, is incorporated into all more ambitious, more “high profile” conceptions of truth. To assert a belief to be true thus entails a commitment to inquiry and deliberation, and since effective deliberation requires democratic practices, to assert a belief to be true entails a commitment to democracy – whether one acknowledges it or not.

As Talisse says, pragmatists such as Misak and himself claim to have captured “the norms we countenance in virtue of the very fact that we are believers,” democratic norms that “are not optional.” As I understand him, MacGilvray disputes this claim.

First, he argues that “the mere assertion of a belief does not commit one to further inquiry on its behalf.” Here, it seems to me, he confuses matters by implying that Misak neglects the importance of doubt to the onset of inquiry. But Misak’s contention is that “what it is to have a belief is to be committed to giving reasons for that belief” in the event that doubt is cast on it, for Misak does not dispute the importance of doubt to inquiry. She would be a weird sort of Peircean were she to do so. “A belief requires a justification when, and only when, it has been thrown into doubt,” she observes.² Moreover, she also contends in good Peircean fashion that we cannot in Cartesian fashion call everything into doubt all at once: “justification requires a fallible background of belief which is not in fact in doubt.” In other words, one need not answer the Cartesian, but one must, if one is to honor one’s beliefs as beliefs, respond with inquiry when challenged. “Those challenges can come from within, when my own judgments or principles conflict and I feel a pull towards revising them. And they can come from without, when I see that the judgments and principles of others, from within my circle or from afar, conflict with my own judgments and I feel a pull towards reconsidering them.”³

Second, MacGilvray contests Misak’s claim that effective inquiry is inherently democratic. That is, if he were to concede that to assert a belief to be true in the face of a challenge to it is to commit oneself to inquiry (whether or not one actually does so), he would still contend that there is no necessary reason that such inquiry be democratic. That is, it may be the case, as Talisse puts it, that “if being a believer commits one to the project of justification, and if the project of justification commits one to the social enterprise of examining,