

Self-Reflexive Social Epistemic Norms

Robert B. Talisse

Vanderbilt University

In my 2009 book, [Democracy and Moral Conflict](#), I develop a distinctively 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 thought that our best reasons for endorsing a democratic political order may be epistemological rather than moral has proven a bit hard to swallow for some political theorists. I admit my thesis is striking. But I also think it correct. In this paper, I want to sketch the basic argument and then examine a criticism it frequently occasions. My response to this criticism invokes the idea of a self-reflexive social epistemic norm. These norms are such that part of what it is to uphold or enact them is to stand prepared to address challenges to the effect that they have not been properly upheld or enacted.

I. *The Problem of Justification*

When political philosophers ask whether there is a “philosophical justification for democracy,” they are most frequently concerned with one of two distinct queries. The first has to do with the relative merits of democracy as compared to other possible regimes. What reason have we 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 this-world democracy with ideal-world monarchy.

The second query has to do with the moral binding-ness of democratic outcomes. Central to this line of investigation is the question of whether there is ever a duty to obey the law. The democrat here is opposed to the philosophical anarchist; and both parties seem to agree that non-democratic regimes clearly are not authoritative. The question, then, is whether democracy is sufficient for authoritative collective decisions.

But there is a third query we may be engaging when we’re looking for “philosophical foundations of democracy,” a query less often taken up in the literature. It is this: What reason can be given to democratic citizens to pursue democratic means of social change when they are confronted with a democratically-produced result which seems to them grossly mistaken and perhaps intolerable? This query is not aimed at giving reasons to establish a democracy or to obey the law; rather it attempts to devise reasons for sustaining democratic commitments in light of seriously flawed collective decision. To help focus the issue, we might put the question this way: When democracy decides, someone loses; if you lose and the loss is especially significant; why not give up on democracy? Why not pursue non-democratic (or even anti-democratic) means of getting what you want?

Now, this way of putting the question is surely too coarse. If the worry were simply that some people will not get what they want, we could dismiss it. Life involves disappointments, and mature adults must reconcile themselves to this fact. The problem emerges from two features of contemporary liberal democracy. First is what Rawls (2005) identified as the “fact of reasonable pluralism,” 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 involve more than the desires and preferences of citizens; they invoke 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—without fail invoke deep moral commitments.

To take only the most obvious example: 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 place intolerable constraints on privacy and violate equality. On both sides, part of what’s 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 that 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 favored policy, and it is difficult to see how there could be a compromise position. Yet, some policy must be decided. So, democratic governments must enact an abortion policy which will lead some segment of its population to regard it not only as mistaken about abortion, but illegitimate.

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 not sufficient for justifying violent rebellion. We tend to think that except for the most egregious moral errors, democratic citizens have an obligation to attempt to pursue democratic means of correction. But why should they?

Typical answers on offer from democratic theorists identify some moral desideratum said to be uniquely or best satisfied by democracy, and then argue that the importance of realizing this desideratum outweighs the badness of the legitimacy-defeating policy. On the most common version of this view, that democratic processes instantiate a kind of equality is offered as a reason to sustain democratic commitments. But since we are thinking of cases which invoke our deepest moral commitments, it seems that an appeal to some moral value such as equality is unlikely to succeed. Why should equality trump, say, the protection of innocent lives?

Another common answer provides a decidedly prudential reason for upholding democratic commitments. It is said that upholding democratic commitments is necessary in order to keep peace. Democracy replaces bullets with ballots; it is, the theory runs, civil war by other means. But this reply is not sufficient. After all, if we’re fighting a civil war, why not employ the more usual means? Why should a pro-life activist accept a description of the status quo as one of peace at all? Why should maintaining peace be taken to be more important than standing up for what’s right, come what may?

To help clarify matters, let us return to our admittedly overused example. For many US citizens, the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* would represent a serious lapse in democracy's legitimacy, and would undoubtedly incite a variety of responses. Here are the main lines of response that are available:

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 it is clear that *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. 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 complaint in which *Civil Disobedience* is not morally available. We need not dwell on these and related complications. Our question, then, is why our imagined pro-choice citizen should pursue *Civil Disobedience* and *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 or her commitment to democratic means to social change? Under such conditions, why not pursue non-democratic means to one's political ends?

Many citizens will give the prudentialist answer: one should sustain democratic commitments, even in cases of lapsed legitimacy, because the cost of *Rebellion* is too high. But, again, this answer offers a reason of the wrong kind. We are not concerned with the question of why it would be *prudent* or instrumentally rational for citizens to not rebel, but with the question of why 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 classic book, [*Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*](#) (1970) Albert Hirschman 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*, that is, they may withdraw from the institution and take their business elsewhere, so to speak. To return to our categories above, both relocation and rebellion are forms of exit. Second, they may exercise *voice*, that is, 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 too simplistic to capture precisely the phenomena we're interested in, but suffices for our present purposes. Let's grant that loyalty is the key to encouraging voice and discouraging exit. However, in modern democracies, citizens are not required to share common moral or religious 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 any properly 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. And so the problem of justification consists, then, in preserving the voice option among citizens who are divided at the level of fundamental loyalties.

II. *The Epistemological Argument Sketched*

The moral and prudential approaches to the problem of justification are not likely to succeed. The strategy I propose offers *epistemological* reasons to uphold democratic commitments even in the face of serious error.

The argument begins from what might be called *first-personal* norms of epistemic assessment. Start with assessments instantiating Moore's Paradox (Moore 1993):

- (1) I believe that p , but p is false.

To assess yourself as believing what is false is typically to dissolve the belief; for the falsity of p is, as Williams noted, a "fatal objection" to the belief that p , no matter what the content. In short, beliefs aim at truth. Consequently, there is a normativity that is internal to believing.

From this core norm of truth-aspiration, two other norms emerge. Consider an assessment like this:

- (2) I believe that p , but all of my evidence counts against p .

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 dissolution of the belief. The truth-aspiration norm is stronger than the evidence-tracking norm. But still, assessments like (2) are signals of epistemic failure. When we discover that our evidence counts decisively against our belief, we typically feel the need to take action: we revise, reformulate, rationalize, or self-deceive.

We can identify a closely related norm of evidence-responsiveness. Consider the following assessment:

- (3) I believe that p , but my evidence favors neither p nor $\text{not-}p$.

Again, to assess one's belief in this way is typically to come to regard the belief as unhealthy and in need of attention. We want our beliefs not only to *not contradict* our evidence, but also to respond to the evidence we have.

Pulling norms (2) and (3) 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, modest evidentialism 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. For nothing I've said thus far entails anything *vis-à-vis* the central debates in epistemology: internalists, externalists, contextualists, foundationalists, coherentists, and the like can, I think, agree to everything I've said. One can admit the internal norms of truth and modest evidentialism without incurring any specific commitments about knowledge or justification.

Things get interesting, though, once we consider that these first-personal norms implicate what we might call *social-epistemic* norms. That is, the modest evidentialist norms point us in the direction of *sharing* and *exchanging* our evidence with others. Our beliefs are frequently the products of our interactions with others; given the limitations of our individual cognitive resources, we *must* depend on others for information, including reasons and evidence. And 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* norms associated with belief. To see this, consider the following assessments:

- (4) On the basis of my very limited evidential set, I believe that p .
 (5) I believe that p , but have never consulted those who deny p and have no idea why they reject p .
 (6) I believe that p , but whenever I engage with those who reject p , I find my reasons come up short.
 (7) I believe that p , but I cannot answer objections to p , and do not know how to account for the most compelling evidence against p .

Assessments (4) through (7) signal different degrees of epistemic failure. Surely any of these assessments is consistent with sustaining the belief that p . However, we can put the differences aside, because once we assess ourselves as not having an adequate grasp of the available evidence pertaining to p —or having only a limited command of the reasons that speak in favor of p —it is difficult to assess ourselves as satisfying the modest evidentialist norms noted above. 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 counter-evidence, we assess our belief as deficient; unless we can successfully revise, reformulate, rationalize, or dismiss, our belief is jeopardized. Some degree of dialectical success is necessary for epistemic success. Our first-personal norms entail dialectical social epistemic norms.

Similar considerations give rise to social epistemic norms that are institutional rather than dialectical. Consider assessments such as these:

- (8) I believe that p , but all evidence against p has been suppressed.
- (9) I believe that p , but all information pertaining to p has been carefully vetted by the Minister of Information.
- (10) I believe that p , but opponents of p have been imprisoned or intimidated into silence.

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 distorted. 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 will not explore this here.

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 reflect what we take to be false). Pro-life activists 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 only under liberal democratic political conditions. So those who want to see public policy and collective decision adequately reflect the best beliefs about morality should uphold democratic political conditions. Our commitment to sound believing and proper epistemic practice entails a commitment to a democratic social order. To draw upon the Hirschmanian language: our loyalties to our own deepest beliefs provide compelling reasons to engage voice rather than exit.

III. A Challenge

So there is the epistemic argument in a nutshell. Of course, many more details would have to be introduced in order to make the view compelling. I leave this task aside, opting instead to work through a specific kind of challenge to the view. The challenge runs as follows: the epistemic argument at best makes a case for the “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 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 epistemic 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.

IV. A Response: Self-Reflexive Social Epistemic Norms

The challenge just stated should sound familiar to any student of democratic theory. It 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 on behalf of democracy. The stock response calls to mind the dangers of rule by experts, usually citing historical examples of such arrangements going bad. This is then supplemented with a word about shoes that pinch and how power corrupts. The ultimate result is some version of Churchill’s quip about how democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others. The Lippmann / Dewey debate follows this pattern and is typical.

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

As I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, I think 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 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 that would otherwise be inaccessible. However, like all dependence, epistemic dependence involves risks: we could depend on a dysfunctional social epistemic system. Again, 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—political equality, rule of law, universal suffrage, regular

elections, the like—are the political mechanisms by which the self-reflexivity of the Open Society norms can be enacted. We uphold democratic political norms because these are required by the self-reflexive component of the Open Society norms: we need democracy in order to monitor and correct our social epistemic system.

I have moved too quickly. Consider the Open Society norm of free speech. It seems to me that 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. That is, 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 and criticisms 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 that 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.

Imagine a Platonic monarch who in fact 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 epistemic norms because it provides no mechanism by which his subjects could assure themselves of the reliability of the system, it is not accountable to their concerns. To see why this is objectionable from the first-personal epistemic point of view, consider the following assessments:

- (11) I believe I am functioning within a well-ordered social epistemic system, but I have no reason to believe that I am.
- (12) I believe that I am functioning within a well-ordered social epistemic system, but should I come to discover some reason to believe the system to be dysfunctional, there are no mechanisms by which I could press for corrective measures.

It seems to me that 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 connection 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.

[ROBERT TALISSE](#) is a professor of Philosophy at [Vanderbilt University](#). His book, [Democracy and Moral Conflict](#), has been nominated for the 2011 American Philosophical Association Book Prize. He has recently released a new book, [Reasonable Atheism: A Moral Case for Respectful Disbelief](#), with [Scott Aikin](#) of Vanderbilt University.

Works Cited

- Hirschman, Albert. 1970. [Exit, Voice, and Loyalty](#). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Moore, G. E. 1993. "Moore's Paradox." In [G. E. Moore: Selected Writings](#). Thomas Baldwin, ed. New York: Routledge.
- Rawls, John. 2005. [Political Liberalism. Expanded Edition](#). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Talisse, Robert B. 2009. [Democracy and Moral Conflict](#). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.