

Communities of Inquiry and Democratic Politics

McBride, C. (2009). Communities of Inquiry and Democratic Politics. Transactions of the Charles Sanders Peirce Society, 45(1), 71-4.

Published in:

Transactions of the Charles Sanders Peirce Society

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Communities of Inquiry and Democratic Politics

CILLIAN MCBRIDE

Abstract

This contribution raises two questions about Talisse's strategy of grounding democratic norms in a perfectionist account of epistemic agency: firstly, whether a perfectionist account of epistemic agency is plausible in itself, and secondly, whether Talisse is right to posit such a close relationship between communities of inquiry and democratic community? Epistemic perfectionism is rejected in favour of a more pluralist view of epistemic agency which starts from an account of the agent's particular responsibilities. Secondly, it is argued that communities of inquiry are neither democratic, nor is democratic government a condition of their flourishing. Against the grounding strategy, it is argued that those epistemic responsibilities pertinent to the practice of democratic politics can only be determined once we are in possession of a prior account of our civic responsibilities.

Keywords: Epistemic, agency, responsibility, democracy, perfectionism, communities, capacities

Robert Talisse has set out a novel and provocative argument for a distinctively Peircean conception of democratic politics which is both perfectionist and pluralist. His strategy is to argue firstly that reasonable pluralism does not extend into the epistemic sphere and that we all have a fundamental interest in being responsible epistemic agents (Talisse, 2008; 63), and secondly, that this sort of agency can only flourish in a democratic society, thereby justifying a commitment to democratic politics. I want to raise two related questions concerns about this argument. Firstly, what does epistemic perfectionism entail? Secondly, how close is the relationship between democratic community and communities of inquiry?

Everyone has an interest in getting the right answers to the 'Big Questions' (Talisse, 2008; 86). Therefore we need to be 'responsible epistemic agents' who hold our beliefs in a particular way. We are 'self-aware and self-controlled' (Talisse, 2008; 63) and are committed to participate in the practice of mutual justification. Such agents are responsible, presumably, insofar as they are prepared to respond to calls for justification from others, and, where necessary, to revise their beliefs when appropriate. By belonging to a community of similarly responsible agents, each member increases the likelihood of enlarging their stock of true beliefs. Must we, however, be perfectionist about 'epistemic agency'? A perfectionist account is not, I think, invulnerable to the charge of sectarianism. We might follow Nussbaum in rejecting a perfectionist account of capacities like epistemic agency, and opt instead for the equal opportunity to develop this capacity, among others. On this view, it would be wrong to adopt a perfectionist line on epistemic agency as this would crowd out other valuable capacities and interfere with individuals' freedom to choose how to order their lives. While it's right to say that we all have some basic interest in having more true beliefs than false, it's not obviously true to suggest that we should devote our lives to perfecting our epistemic capacities. Talisse suggests that ordinary citizens of his Peircean democracy will be

Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 45 (1) 2009, pp.71-4

This is a contribution to a symposium on Robert Talisse's *A Pragmatist Theory of Democracy* (Routledge, 2008), which can be found at: <http://inscribe.iupress.org/toc/tra/45/1>

‘continually engaged in the process of justification’ (Talissee, 2008; 92) but it is hard to see why we must all favour such a life. A religious believer may, for example, find that a life structured around continual justification is simply at odds with a life of contemplation, love, and obedience.

In a more pedestrian vein we might simply reflect on the fact that most people bump along with a relatively limited set of epistemic skills. Certainly, it would be difficult to argue that many of us have an interest in devoting our lives to maximising our epistemic capacities, by spending years studying scientific methodology, or logic, for example. Instead, we exercise epistemic ‘agency’ by practicing what we might call ‘epistemic economy’, i.e. by making judgements about the costs and benefits of acquiring certain pieces of information, and/or the skills necessary to acquire that information. There seems to be nothing obviously irresponsible about practicing this sort of economy, which simply makes effective use of an epistemic division of labour which spares us the cost of developing our truth-discovering capacities beyond a very basic threshold. In such an economy, judgements of credibility and about the authority of other members of the epistemic community will play a large role. We do have an interest in getting things right, but not, I suggest, such an overriding interest that we should endorse perfectionism about epistemic capacities—epistemic agency seems rather to be a threshold concept, and the bar should not be set too high. It is no doubt true that many of us will feel the need to develop our capacities beyond this basic level, but we will typically be rather choosy about the direction in which we choose to do so—we may be skilled at engaging in mutual justification in some areas, but entirely hopeless in others, an entirely satisfactory state of affairs, I believe. It is in making these choices, I suggest, that we are epistemic agents. The extent to which we are acting irresponsibly in choosing not to develop our epistemic capacities in a particular area will depend on the nature of the relationships involved. If I am a general practitioner, for example, I may be excused an ignorance of epistemology, but will be culpable if I do not keep up my ability to prescribe appropriate medicines. If we reject perfectionism, then we will need a fairly complex grasp of the responsibilities of the epistemic agent. I suspect this must elude us unless we already have a theory of democracy in our possession, however.

First, I want to assess the relationship between democratic societies and communities of inquiry. Talissee makes two claims here—firstly, that communities of inquiry are ‘inherently democratic’ and secondly, that democracy is necessary for communities of inquiry to flourish. This latter claim is extremely dubious as the scientific revolution of the modern era obviously took place in non-democratic regimes. The world in which Harvey discovered the circulatory system was one in which one could still have one’s books burned in public. I suggest that all that is required for inquiry to flourish is a moderately liberal regime which does not police heresy too rigorously. One could easily imagine communities of quantum physicists flourishing under a tolerant despotism—political indifference, not democracy, is the background condition of free inquiry.

There is only a tenuous relationship between communities of inquiry and democracy. The denizens of communities of inquiry need free speech within the community, and must be willing to criticise received wisdoms. They need not, I think, even be especially self-critical—science can move on even if particular scientists refuse to surrender their pet theories. These communities are not democracies for the simple reason that a community of inquiry does not make collectively binding decisions—no votes need be taken, and no one is bound by the outcome of deliberations. Democratic politics, as we political philosophers are often reminded by more hard-nosed colleagues is not a philosophy seminar, but a sphere in which decisions are taken and citizens are bound.

These key differences between communities of inquiry and democratic politics count against Talisse's strategy of grounding democratic politics in an epistemic perfectionism, for they determine that what counts as responsible agency will be different in each case. Where I participate in taking collectively binding decisions, I owe it to those whom I propose to bind some consideration of their interests, and some account of my reasoning. I am responsible to my fellow citizens for how I propose to use our 'common coercive force', in Rawls' phrase. As a member of some community of inquiry it may be in my interest to respond to the challenges of my peers as a means of improving the quality of my beliefs, but I have no equivalent responsibility to them. As a democratic citizen, however, I can acquire clear epistemic responsibilities to brush up my beliefs and epistemic capacities in order to discharge my political responsibilities as a citizen. To fail to exercise my epistemic agency on a given area on which I propose to vote, is to fail in this larger civic responsibility.

To seek to elide the difference between inquiry and democracy is to risk overstating the extent to which communities of inquiry are democratic on the one hand, and to rob the concept of democracy of its moral content on the other hand. Talisse argues that this is a virtue of his purely epistemic democracy, and points to its compatibility with a wide range of institutional arrangements (Talisse, 2008; 98). This inclusiveness may come at too high a price, however, for if the deliberative account of our civic responsibilities is sound, then many of our institutions currently do a very poor job of helping us to discharge these responsibilities.

I indicated above that the rejection of epistemic perfectionism leaves us in need of some way to determine the responsibilities of epistemic agents. Only when we have some determinate idea of what these are will we be able to judge what sort of inquiries we need to engage in, which authorities to accept, and which skills to acquire, etc. Crucially, for the attempt to ground democracy in an account of epistemic agency, it appears that we first need to know what our responsibilities as citizens are if we are to identify any determinate responsibilities for the epistemic agent. Epistemic responsibilities turn out to be parasitic upon civic responsibilities on this view, so that *epistemic* interests, let alone responsibilities, are disqualified from playing any role in *grounding* democratic politics. The conditions of responsible epistemic agency turn out, in the end to be inextricable from the conditions of responsible moral agency and our thinking about democracy must in the end cope with the difficult problems this throws up. While I believe that Talisse's strategy is not in the end successful, he has certainly done this community of inquiry a service in focusing our attention on these problems.

Queen's University Belfast
c.mcbride@qub.ac.uk

REFERENCES

Talisse, Robert. *A Pragmatist Theory of Democracy* (Routledge, 2008).