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## WHY WE SHOULD STOP FETISHIZING DEMOCRACY

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**Abstract:** Democracy is in trouble, and it is democracy's own fault—that is Robert Talisse's intriguing contention is his recent book, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place* (2019). What gets democracy into trouble, according to Talisse, is the idea that a democratic form of government is intrinsically valuable, which in turn entails a deliberative conception of democracy that, in combination with the social-psychological fact of social sorting, leads to rampant polarization. According to Talisse, we therefore need to put democracy in its place by resisting the expansive view of the scope of democracy and making room for non-political spaces of interaction, in which we can form civic friendships. However, in what follows, I argue that what Talisse has actually provided is an excellent reason for rejecting rather than merely mitigating the detrimental effects of the idea that democracy is intrinsically valuable. Specifically, we ought to stop fetishizing democracy and instead embrace an instrumentalist view of democracy as a social practice that is instituted and maintained for a purpose external to itself. Once we do this, democracy no longer needs saving from itself.

**Keywords:** Democracy; Democratic legitimacy; Polarization; Instrumentalism about democracy

## I. DEMOCRACY'S AUTOIMMUNE DISORDER

Democracy is in trouble—and it is democracy's own fault. That is Robert Talisse's contention in his recent book, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place* (2019). The claim that democracy is in some form of trouble has been made many times before, of course, but typically either by defenders who feel that we need to do *more* democracy in response to this predicament, or by detractors who want to convince us that democracy, at least in its current form, probably is a bad idea to begin with, perhaps because the public simply is not up to the task. Talisse's book is unique in being a passionate defense of democracy that wants us to do *less* of it for the sake of saving it from itself.

What gets democracy into trouble, according to Talisse, is the idea—understandably popular among its defenders—that a democratic form of government is intrinsically valuable. That is, while democracy certainly might be valuable as an *instrument* to a number of other things, such as stability and respect for people's rights, the value of democracy is not exhausted by its instrumental value. As Talisse explains, “democracy [is] a moral ideal of government among social equals, and [...] the value of democracy as it is practiced in the real world derives from the value of the ideal to which it aspires” (13).<sup>i</sup> Moreover, this intrinsic value explains the *legitimacy*, i.e., the right to rule, of democratic government: “This ability to enact political rule among equals renders democracy a uniquely legitimate form of government; that is, it is in virtue of democracy's capacity to respect citizens' equality that democratic government is *entitled* to the power it wields” (12-13; emphasis in original).

Specifically, according to Talisse, such rule among equals calls for a democratic practice that has citizens engage one another in a constant, public, and deliberative dialogue. As he writes, “we are all deliberative democrats in the sense that political practice *aspires* to deliberative democracy” (65; emphasis in original). This is as it should be, in his view: “some version of deliberativism is correct; I hold that a certain version of deliberative democracy in fact succeeds as reconciling the state's entitlement to coercive power with the moral equality of democratic citizens” (64). At the same time, the need for widespread public engagement means that “politics quickly becomes, at least presumptively, omnipresent” (63). Whether in the office, at school, in the park, or while shopping for groceries, the demands of democracy as rule among co-equals, engaging one another in a deliberative dialogue, means that politics ends up being everywhere.

Many political theorists might welcome this fact, of course—if democracy is as important as we think it is, then what is wrong with people constantly engaging one another in line with its presumably praiseworthy ideals? The problem, according to Talisse, arises due to *social sorting*, the well-established tendency of all of us to seek out people who are like us, a tendency sociologists refer

to as homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Political homophily is particularly well-established (Ackland and Shorish 2014), to the point that people even date (Huber and Malhotra 2017) and mate (Alford et al. 2011) in political clusters. Likeminded groups in turn tend to *polarize*, in the specific sense that they over time will tend to become more confident in more extreme versions of the views shared by members of their group. Indeed, Talisse makes a convincing case on the basis of the empirical literature that such polarization does not even require active *engagement* with members of one's group; all it takes for someone to polarize in aforementioned sense is the *perception* (true or not) on the part of the person that some particular view is popular or otherwise endorsed by people sharing their social identity (117).

This, then, is the problem: the idea that democracy is intrinsically valuable—I will refer to this as *the intrinsicist view* in what follows—entails a deliberative conception of democracy that, in combination with the social-psychological fact of social sorting, leads to rampant polarization. And while “the democratic ideal of self-government among equals can be pursued only when citizens can engage in collective reasoning about their shared political order”, doing so brings about a kind of polarization which “directly attacks our capacities to properly enact democratic citizenship, dissolving our abilities to treat our fellow citizens as our political equals” (123). It is for this reason, Talisse suggests, that democracy suffers from an autoimmune disorder (126); the expansive view of the scope of democracy called for by the deliberative conception, meant to protect citizens from illegitimate exercises of power and ensure a just and stable polity, is attacking democracy from within.

So what are we to do? According to Talisse, we need to put democracy in its (proper) place by resisting the expansive view of the scope of democracy and making room for non-political spaces of interaction, in which we can form *civic friendships*. Doing so will help “rework our view of our political adversaries” (170), reduce polarization, and ultimately save democracy from itself. In what follows, I will argue that what Talisse has actually provided is an excellent reason for rejecting rather than merely mitigating the detrimental effects of the intrinsicist view. Specifically, we ought to stop fetishizing democracy by ascribing to it an intrinsic value that it does not have, and instead embrace an instrumentalist view of democracy as a social practice that is instituted and maintained for a purpose external to itself. Once we do this, democracy no longer needs saving from itself.

## II. A FALSE CHOICE

Return to the idea, mentioned above, that democracy is “a moral ideal of government among social equals” and that “the value of democracy as it is practiced in the real world derives from the value of the ideal to which it aspires” (13). Let us assume for the sake of argument that, *if that ideal were to be realized*, it would be intrinsically valuable. Of course, since an ideal, it is not realized—at

best, it is one that we are striving towards. On the view Talisse is sketching here, however, the intrinsic value of the ideal is somehow still inherited by the imperfect instances that consist in us aspiring to that ideal. This is a puzzling thought. An ideal being valuable does not entail that *aspiring* to it will be valuable—sometimes, it is quite to the contrary. This can be illustrated in the political domain with reference to many ideologies that have a revolutionary agenda: even given a highly attractive end-state, pursuing that end state might bring about significant strife and suffering, and as such be of substantial *disvalue*. As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

For that reason, it is clear that any value of actual democratic practice in pursuit of a democratic ideal cannot *derive* from the value of that ideal. This does not rule out that such practice might of course be valuable *independently* of that ideal, and as such be able to stand on its own two feet, so to speak. Whether this is a dialectical avenue available in general, however, it is not one that is open to Talisse. Remember, according to Talisse, the intrinsicist view (as I am calling it) ultimately leads to a level of polarization in the electorate that makes democratic practice a threat to its own continued existence. Clearly, such democratic practice is not of value, neither intrinsically nor instrumentally. If anything, it is of negative value. This raises the question that I will be concerned with throughout: has Talisse not then given us excellent reason to jettison the intrinsicist view?

Talisse does not think so, of course, but why? Perhaps he thinks that, even if holding on to the intrinsicist view might have bad consequences, abandoning that view might be even worse. This would offer some reason to pursue a route of mitigating the effects of that view, in the manner that Talisse does, rather than to reject it. Note, for example, that in framing our democratic predicament, he gives the impression that we have to choose between the intrinsicist view and a form of *minimalism*. The type of minimalism he has in mind is a Schumpeterian view of democracy on which people are expected to engage with the democratic process through occasional elections, but that, “once a democratic election takes place, the citizenry must withdraw from politics and attend to other things, lest they be guilty of ‘political back-seat driving.’” (Talisse 2019: 31), as Schumpeter calls it. Ironically, given Talisse’s concerns about polarized democratic discourse, the intrinsicist and minimalist views inhabit two poles on the opposite ends of a spectrum from highly demanding and ambitious theories to those that are less demanding and more realistic (according to its proponents) or cynical (according to its detractors). And contrary to what his treatment might lead us to believe, they are not our only options.

For example, while minimalism is arguably a type of instrumentalism—it sees democracy as an imperfect but still fairly efficient mechanism for an efficient political competition, provided that people know their place and refrain from meddling too much in the policy details—it is by no means the only kind available. In its most general form, the instrumentalist about democracy maintains that, if democracy is to be endorsed, it is because it is a form of social technology that is highly—or at least

comparatively—successful in bringing about good things. For example, Amartya Sen (1981) famously demonstrated that famines tend not to happen in democracies. Moreover, democracies violate human rights at a much lower rate compared to autocracies (Poe and Tate 1994). More fundamentally, according to John Stuart Mill (2008/1861), a distinctly *liberal* form of democracy, where popular rule is constrained by substantial constitutional protections for people’s rights, promotes the (to him) ultimate good of self-realization.

The case of Mill’s instrumentalism in particular should bring home the point that being instrumentalist does not automatically make you a minimalist Schumpeterian. Talisse might maintain that this is a distinction without a difference. Schumpeter clearly had a theory of democracy, but it is arguable whether he was a democrat. Perhaps the same should be said about Millian instrumentalism. As noted by Richard Arneson (2004), instrumentalism entails that “any individual has a moral right to exercise political power just to the extent that the granting of this right is productive of best consequences overall” (40). In line with this thought, Mill (2008/1861) infamously defended a plural voting scheme, where “higher moral or intellectual being[s]” (334) were to have a greater number of votes than the rest of us. Mill was clearly a utilitarian liberal first, and democrat (in the sense of popular rule) second, so when judging that “the benefits of completely universal suffrage cannot be obtained without bringing with them [...] a chance of more than equivalent evil” (339), any commitment on his part to universal popular rule based on the one-person-one-vote principle had to bend to utilitarian considerations.

However, Mill’s case for plural voting is a non-essential component of Mill’s theory, which moreover does not sit very comfortably alongside his other commitments. Consider, for example, the manner in which a plural voting scheme inevitably would end up weighting your political say with reference to factors that will inevitably track the distinction between the privileged and the less privileged. As David Brink notes:

Interestingly, while [Mill] does not seem especially sensitive to concerns about the bad effects of second-class citizenship in *Considerations of Representative Government*, he seems much more sensitive to such concerns in *The Subjection of Women* [...] [where he] is acutely aware of the variety of ways in which women’s contributions can be discouraged and undervalued and of the individual and social costs of women’s second-class status. Had Mill been as mindful of the costs of according workers second-class citizenship as he would later be of the costs of according women second-class status, he might have been more skeptical of weighted voting than he in fact was (Brink 2013: 248).

For this reason—among others—we do well to discard Mill’s plural voting proposal. What remains once we have done so is a type of instrumentalism that ascribes a value to democracy that

cannot be reduced to the mere facilitation of effective political competition, and as such goes beyond minimalism. Moreover, rejecting the intrinsicalist view—and with it, the expansive conception of deliberative democratic practice that Talisse takes it to entail—in favor of a broadly Millian, instrumentalist view means that a commitment to democracy no longer inevitably bring you to a polarized society wherein democracy needs to be saved from itself.

### III. THE PROS AND CONS OF FETISHIZING DEMOCRACY

If what was argued in the previous section is correct, jettisoning the intrinsicalist view does not force you to embrace a minimal, Schumpeterian view of democracy. However, it might be argued that there are instrumental reasons to hold on to the intrinsicalist view, even if strictly speaking false, on account of how it helps maintain a robust commitment to democracy within the popular imagination, that prevents people from turning to non-democratic options as soon as they do not like the outcome. One way to make this case is as follows.

Democracy is today the dominant form of government. That is not to say that most countries are democratic by a reasonably demanding standard. It is however to say that democracy is the most salient, normative reference point for governments, as evidenced by how even patently non-democratic countries try to increase their perceived legitimacy by donning at least its linguistic cloak, and by holding electoral events that they claim are free and fair. But this dominance is of course a fairly recent phenomenon. Consider the long process in many European countries and elsewhere, whereby demands for popular rule and constitutional protections had to contend with established and powerful monarchies. In resisting such demands, monarchies appealed to myths about divine rights, of the kind pummeled by John Locke in his *First Treatise on Government* (2003/1689). On the uneven historical path to the type of imperfect constitutional democracies that some of us are lucky enough to live in today, democracy would have needed its own set of myths. In particular, since a prominent objection to popular rule is that the people are not fit to rule, and democracy therefore will lead to poor decisions and bad consequences, one of the most powerful myths about democracy is that it is valuable for its own sake: that democratic decision-procedures are intrinsically valuable and on that account legitimate, independently of whether the resulting decisions is good or bad by some independent standard.

Particularly when democracy was in its infancy, this myth of intrinsic value would have been an extremely useful one. And in addition to its many other accomplishments in regard to the consequences of democratic government—some of which have been mentioned already—one particularly impressive feat on the part of the democratic project is that this myth has arguably become largely internalized by citizens of democratic countries. And this is in many ways a good

thing: to make democracy work, it is important that people do not constantly second guess democratically generated results, and the best way to have people not do that is to have them believe that those results are legitimate *simply in virtue of having been arrived at through a democratic process*.

In short, we have come to *fetishize* democracy, and in some respects for good reasons. Talk of a fetish is called for on two grounds. First, we have come to imbue the institution of democracy with a type of value that it is far from clear that it actually possesses, namely a value possessed independently of instrumentalist considerations. Following Alvin Goldman and Erik J. Olsson, we may refer to this as *value autonomisation* (Goldman and Olsson 2009). Second, as Talisse himself argues, we have come to concern ourselves with democracy to an unhealthy, if not obsessive degree that threatens to get in the way of the very goods that democracy will generate when functioning well. Talisse's own example with the person whose pursuit of a healthy lifestyle—clearly, an instrumental good—is compromised by an unhealthy and single-minded fixation with exercise, can equally be described as a case of a fetish, in the sense I have in mind.

As already hinted at, however, a fetish need not be a bad thing. In particular, as I am using the term, something can qualify as a fetish simply in virtue of value autonomisation and in the absence of an unhealthy obsession. To illustrate, consider Mill's theory of the value of moral virtues. On his instrumentalist view, "actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue" (36). For Mill, a hedonist, the end in question is happiness, in the sense spelled out with reference to self-realization in other work. However, Mill notes that many people value virtues for their own sake, independently of their consequences. Utilitarians can account for that because they "not only place virtue at the very head of the things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but [...] also recognize as a psychological fact the possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond it" (36). In other words, while not intrinsically valuable—only happiness is—virtues tend to yield happiness, both for others and for the virtuous individual themselves, who can derive happiness from engaging in virtuous conduct. For that reason, the fact that people fetishize the virtues, by treating as an intrinsic value something that is not, need not be a bad thing, in so far as it has them reliably engage in conduct that has good consequences.<sup>ii</sup>

Something similar might have held in the case of democracy: fetishizing it might at some points in time have helped reinforce a robust commitment to its institution through value autonomisation, and as such secured an effective mechanism for having people reliably engage in instrumentally beneficial conduct, including in cases where they might otherwise have been inclined to second-guess the institution in cases where they did not support the outcome. But as Talisse shows, whether that has been the case at some point in some places, it is at least not so in the USA of today; there, fetishizing democracy has led to a counterproductive fixation on the instrument that gets in the way of the goods



it should be generating. In the next section, I shall argue that, rather than holding on to the myth inherent in the intrinsicist view and trying to mitigate the problems of fetishism through non-political activities in the way that Talisse recommends, it is time to stop fetishizing democracy.

#### **IV. WHY WE SHOULD STOP FETISHIZING DEMOCRACY**

Let us take stock. We have seen that Talisse traces the problem of overdoing democracy back to what I have called the intrinsicist view, i.e., even if democracy is valuable at least in part owing to the goods that it brings about, democracy is also valuable independently of any instrumental considerations on account of involving a pursuit of a democratic ideal of government among equals. It was then noted that pursuing a valuable ideal is not necessarily valuable, and that Talisse's own argument in the case of democracy shows it to be downright detrimental. Moreover, it was argued that Talisse gives the impression that we have to choose between that intrinsicist view and a thoroughly minimal view, on which the only thing to be said in favor of democracy is that it provides a framework for efficient political competition, provided that citizens know their place and do not meddle too much outside of the occasional election. However, this is a false choice, as it ignores a variety of instrumentalist views that have much more going for them than minimalism, including the type of view defended by Mill.

Moreover, on that type of view, we can explain why it would under certain circumstances still make sense to ascribe intrinsic value to the democratic process, even if it is in fact not valuable in that manner—i.e., why there might be situations in which it is advisable to fetishize democracy. However, Talisse's argument provides an excellent example of fetishization gone wrong, our commitment to democracy having turned into an obsession, whereby the omnipresence of democratic citizenship renders us unable to do it well. So, to save democracy, why not finally jettison the intrinsicist view, and stop fetishizing democracy? I can think of two reasons for why someone like Talisse might hesitate to do that so. In closing, I will explain why these reasons ultimately are not good ones.

First, it might be argued that a thoroughgoing instrumentalism about democracy is undesirable in making the case for democracy hostage to empirical circumstance. As Arneson (2004) writes, with characteristic directness: "The choice between autocracy and democracy should be decided according to the standard of best results." (41). In other words, on the instrumentalist view, it is perfectly possible that a highly competent form of autocracy is the most legitimate form of government, because most successful from the point of view of generating the relevant goods. This might worry a defender of the intrinsicist view. At the same time, this is a somewhat strange worry for an intrinsicist to have. Given a plausible set of goods, it is difficult to think of historical examples where autocracies have done a particularly good job of securing as opposed to violating them. That

means that the intrinsicist would have to have a particularly pessimistic view of what democracies can actually achieve. Only then would democracy having to rest on its instrumentalist credentials pose any risk to a forceful and convincing case for its adoption and retention.<sup>iii</sup>

Another concern about rejecting the intrinsicist view is that it might make democracy *unstable*. This is a recurring theme in Talisse's work.<sup>iv</sup> If 'my side' loses out in an election, why should I stick with democracy? If I *believe* that there is something intrinsically just about that process, then perhaps that will motivate me to see past my disappointment, and realize that there is something to respect about the process, quite apart from whether it gets me what I want. This point is of course related to the one made in the previous section, when discussing the potential virtue of fetishizing democracy under some circumstances. But what is clear from Talisse's book is that we are *not* in those circumstances, given that democratic fetishism currently is leading to polarizing dysfunction. In light of that, an instrumentalist conception of democratic participation might just be exactly what we need: if we deliberate together as citizens for a purpose rather than for its own sake, it is easy to make the case that we perhaps should do things differently in order to do it well.

## V. CONCLUSION

I am of course not pretending that the points in the previous section convincingly respond to all concerns that someone might have—and that many *have* had—about democratic instrumentalism. Doing so would require re-visiting several long-standing debates in political philosophy and democratic theory. But my focus here has been more narrow than this, in specifically looking to engage the view put forward by Talisse in his book. Because whether he intends it or not, Talisse has offered a strong argument against the intrinsicist view—it has bad consequences; indeed, bad enough that democracy needs to be saved from itself. In so doing, he has provided a novel, indirect argument for democratic instrumentalism.

As I have argued, the relevant type of instrumentalism can (*a*) be easily distinguished from a Schumpeterian minimalism, thereby rejecting the false choice that Talisse seems to set up between intrinsicism and minimalism; (*b*) account for the occasional virtue, and thereby also the appeal, of fetishizing democracy under conditions where doing so will strengthen our commitment to it; and yet also (*c*) explain why the very predicament that Talisse argues that we are in gives us excellent reason to stop fetishizing democracy, and embracing the view that democracy is valuable because it has a purpose. What is that purpose? The type of self-realization that Mill has in mind is an attractive candidate, although by no means the only one. Interestingly, however, Talisse comes close to just such a view in introducing his own solution:

[...] the problem of overdoing democracy in part arises from our tendency to lose track of the fact that, even supposing that its value is intrinsic, democracy nonetheless is *for something*, and that something is not simply more or even better democracy. I will make the case that the point of democracy is to foster valuable human relationships and lives that are devoted, collectively and individually, to meaningful projects that lie beyond the struggles of politics (36).

This, alongside the other considerations brought up above, makes one wonder why Talisse insists on holding on to the intrinsicist view. Given where Talisse ends up, the step towards some non-minimal form of instrumentalism seems small and, at least according to this author, well-motivated. He agrees that it creates severe problems; the entire book is motivated by that fact. He also agrees that democracy has a purpose, and value, external to itself—that it is *for something* that is not about politics. Perhaps it is not so much that democracy needs to be put in its place, as that those of us theorizing about its nature have tended to misplace it.

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<sup>i</sup> All page references are to Talisse (2019), unless otherwise specified.

<sup>ii</sup> Elsewhere (Ahlstrom-Vij 2019), I have argued that the same goes for epistemic justification, if reliabilism is true: a commitment to reliable belief-formation leads to overconfident second-guessing of reliable heuristics, which is best avoided by a form of epistemic fetishism, on which some heuristics are treated as fundamental (as opposed to instrumental) epistemic norms.

<sup>iii</sup> This is of course compatible with there being some revisions to the democratic process that might render democracy even more successful. See, for example, Ahlstrom-Vij (2020) on modelled democracy and Guerrero (2014) on lottocracy.

<sup>iv</sup> See also Talisse (2009).