

EPISTEMIC NORMS AND DEMOCRACY: A RESPONSE TO TALISSE

HENRIK RYDENFELT

Abstract: John Rawls argued that democracy must be justifiable to all citizens; otherwise, a democratic society is oppressive to some. In *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (2007), Robert B. Talisse attempts to meet the Rawlsian challenge by drawing from Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism. This article first briefly canvasses the argument of Talisse's book and then criticizes its key premise concerning (normative) reasons for belief by offering a competing reading of Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief" (1877). It then proceeds to argue that Talisse's argument faces a dilemma: his proposal of epistemic perfectionism either is substantive and can be reasonably disagreed about or is minimal but insufficient to ground a democratic society. Consequently, it suggests that the Rawlsian challenge can only be solved by abandoning Rawls's own notion of reasonableness, and that an interesting alternative notion of reasons can be derived from Peirce's "Fixation."

Keywords: democracy, epistemology, normativity, reasons, Charles S. Peirce, Robert B. Talisse, John Rawls.

1. Introduction

John Rawls, in his later work, argued that democracy must be justifiable to all citizens; otherwise, a democratic society is oppressive to some of its members. In his book *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (2007) as well as several related articles, Robert B. Talisse attempts to meet this Rawlsian challenge of justifying democracy by drawing from Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism, especially his famous 1877 article "The Fixation of Belief." In Talisse's reading, it is a prerequisite for our functioning as epistemic agents that we subscribe to what Peirce calls the scientific method of fixing belief. In turn, the proper functioning of the scientific method requires the advancement of several liberal democratic ideals, including free speech, open access to information, and freedom of opinion. Taken together, according to Talisse, these requirements amount to a social ideal of *epistemic perfectionism*, which is minimal enough to be endorsed by all while substantive enough to ground a democratic society.

In what follows, I briefly canvass the argument of Talisse's book and then criticize its key premise concerning (normative) reasons for belief

by offering a competing reading of Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief." Moreover, I suggest that Talisse's argument faces a dilemma: his proposal of epistemic perfectionism either is substantive and can be reasonably disagreed about or is minimal but insufficient to ground the democratic ideals that Talisse proposes. Based on my reading of Peirce, I then proceed to argue that the Rawlsian challenge may ultimately be misconceived at the outset, and that a Peircean view might ultimately solve the problem of justifiability by abandoning Rawls's notion of reasonableness.

2. Talisse's Argument

It is obviously impossible here to do justice to the complexity and detail of Talisse's arguments for a Peircean view of democracy. I will first canvass the central argument that runs through his 2007 book, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*, and then consider some possible criticisms of that argument. For the sake of clarity, in what follows I have split Talisse's argument into premises and conclusions:

- (P1) Democracy has to be justifiable to all citizens; otherwise it is oppressive.

Talisse's first premise is derived from John Rawls's later account of democratic theory (Rawls 1996). According to Rawlsian liberalism, the coercive power of the state is legitimate only when it is justifiable to all citizens. If democracy is not justifiable to everyone, it is oppressive to those who disagree with it (Talisse 2007, 35–36).

- (P2) Members of a society reasonably disagree about substantive doctrines, including most substantive theories about democracy.

According to what Talisse, following Rawls, calls the "fact of reasonable pluralism," there is prolonged and possibly intractable but reasoned disagreement over big questions, especially such questions that concern ethical views (2007, 82–83).

- (C1) Most substantive conceptions about democracy are oppressive.

From the first two premises, Talisse draws the conclusion that most substantive accounts of democracy are reasonably rejectable, and thus cannot satisfy the Rawlsian demand (2007, 37). In Talisse's hands, such is the fate of John Dewey's proposal of democracy as "a way of life": the Deweyan view is oppressive, as it is "imbued with too many reasonably rejectable philosophical commitments" (2007, 88).

(P3) Reasonable disagreement requires reasons.

However, as Talisse points out, to *reasonably* disagree about comprehensive doctrines about democracy, we must do so for reasons.

(P4) We are all committed to the same conception about what count as (normative) reasons for belief.

The gist of Talisse's argument is his reading of Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief," which Talisse takes to show that *as* epistemic agents or believers we are committed to what Peirce called the scientific method of inquiry. For Talisse, this method involves at least an implicit commitment "to the processes and institutions that would enable those beliefs to be tested against the full range of reasons, arguments, and evidence" (2007, 67).

(P5) We can only advance reasonable belief in a liberal democratic society.

In turn, Talisse argues that scientific inquiry can be advanced only under liberal democratic conditions, such as free speech, access to information, and freedom of opinion. This leads to a *substantive* theory about democracy that Talisse advances, his *epistemic perfectionism*, which involves a "politics that aspires to a specific mode of democratic practice by cultivating a certain epistemic character among its citizens" (2007, 72).

(C2) Thus, a substantive conception of liberal democracy is justifiable to all citizens.

Hence, Talisse argues, there is a substantive (although "minimal") view of democracy that satisfies the Rawlsian demand of justifiability.

Many points in Talisse's argument would deserve further discussion. First, it might be asked in what sense the account of democracy has to be "justifiable" to all citizens (P1). While this is the moral Talisse draws from Rawls's later work, the extent of such justifiability is questionable—indeed, to anticipate my discussion near the end of this article, it is hardly obvious what it would mean for a view to be justifiable to everyone. Similarly, it is not at all clear what it means to disagree reasonably, or *for reasons* (P3). The central concept of reasons requires elucidation; and there are many pitfalls in such a project. Most important, the threat is that any argument founded on the concept of reasonableness itself will beg the question against those who disagree with *that* conception.¹ Thus the

¹ In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls argued that reasonable people will agree with the basic democratic principles he suggested. However, this argument seems to hinge on Rawls's conception of reasonableness: reasonable people will agree with Rawls's democratic principles, to quote from Cheryl Misak, "for that is exactly what it is to be reasonable" (2000, 25).

concept of reasonableness must be explicated in a noncircular manner: reasonable disagreement cannot be just such disagreement that happens to somehow agree with *our* (or *my*) conception of reasons. To be fair, this is exactly the notion that the next premise in Talisse's argument (P4)—the one I will concentrate on—is supposed to supply. Before that discussion, however, a couple of considerations of Talisse's other premises is in order.

Talisse argues that a liberal democratic society is a necessary condition of the advancement of scientific inquiry (P5). But the connection between epistemic perfectionism, inquiry, and liberal society could easily be questioned. Most forms of *perfectionism*, to be sure, have had an individualistic bent: as the virtues of virtue ethics, "perfections" have been considered traits of an individual. Against Talisse's premise, it could be argued that even a society advancing the goals of epistemic perfection might involve such a division of epistemic labour that does not entail the characteristics of a liberal democracy. Perhaps epistemic perfections are the privilege of the few and not of all. The development of science and the specialization it has involved surely give us reason to think that not all people can form their opinions based on their own inquiry performed in conditions of liberty; indeed, serious science on any particular topic is the business of a precious handful, and the rest of society largely relies on expert opinion.

However, against this threat of scientific elitism, we could (on Talisse's behalf) argue that the liberality of the epistemically perfectionist society is only to be taken in the abstract sense that, at least *in principle*, anyone might acquire the sufficient education and background experience to confirm and criticize the results of the inquiry so far performed, and that this is what is meant by the openness and freedom of opinion in such a society. And while those of us who are not scientific specialists will need to resort to the work of such specialists in settling our opinion, it is because of the open method of inquiry they advance and *not* because of their position as techno-scientific elite that we rely on their testimony. Although more should be said about this question, I think an answer along these lines should be enough to defuse the challenge of elitism.

There is still a further point about perfectionism that deserves attention—namely, perfectionism about epistemic matters would arguably require more than just our commitment to a set of norms *of* inquiry: it would require commitment *to* inquiry. An epistemically perfectionist society would be one in which truth and knowledge—the advancement of inquiry into all questions that merit scientific interest—is taken as a central goal of the whole social enterprise. Inquiry is not just a part of scientific project inside such a society; nor is it concentrated merely on issues of short-term practical interest to the community. Instead, the epistemically perfectionist society as a whole would be committed to scientific exploration, which the members of that society would need to take as an important aim of their communal enterprise—indeed, for them,

inquiry is “a way of life.” Here Talisse’s epistemic perfectionism verges on turning the goal of truth and knowledge to something quite substantial. It is easy to see how Talisse’s critics—especially Deweyan ones—might plausibly charge him with exactly the sort of robust commitments that underlie Talisse’s own criticism of Deweyan democracy.

Although all of these points would deserve some extended discussion, there is no room for that here. Instead, these preliminaries done, I will concentrate on what I take to be the most central premise in Talisse’s argument, the premise that claims that we are (minimally) committed to the scientific method of inquiry.

3. Five Points About “Fixation”

In a central premise of his argument, Talisse claims that everyone at least implicitly shares a commitment to certain norms of belief or inquiry (P4). This premise maintains that qua believers, we are already committed to minimal norms of inquiry; these norms, then, are foundational to our conception of what sort of disagreements are reasonable, and how disagreements are to be solved. In what follows, I will argue against Talisse that there indeed can be disagreement about such epistemic norms. This counts against Talisse’s key contention that such norms are minimal and shared by all.

Talisse’s argument for this premise is based on his reading of Peirce’s “Fixation of Belief.” Peirce famously presents four methods of inquiry, the first three of which turn out unsuccessful in fixing belief, while the fourth, the scientific method, is successful. Unlike the methods of tenacity, authority, and *a priori*, the scientific method fixes belief so that it would be “caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency,” that is, Reality (Peirce 1877, 120). Thus, Peirce offers an explication of the concept of truth by reference to those beliefs that would eventually continue to be confirmed by scientific inquiry.

Why is only science successful in fixing belief? Talisse argues that Peirce does not evaluate the success of the different methods of inquiry with reference to some purpose *external* to inquiry itself. Rather, Peirce wishes to point out that we simply *cannot* follow methods of fixing belief other than the scientific one: we cannot “deliberately and self-consciously inquire in any way but the scientific way” (Talisse 2007, 61). Hence, only such reasons that are reasons *by the scientific method* can be reasons for belief. If this is so, we are all committed to a certain, although perhaps vague, conception of what counts as reason for belief. Talisse offers no single argument in support of this view. Instead, drawing from Peirce’s essay, he makes several interrelated points to ground his premise.

While I am in agreement with this general idea about “Fixation,” I think the point of the essay is not to show that the three non-scientific

methods *cannot* be followed in a self-conscious manner. Instead, we can genuinely disagree about method. In what follows, I will distinguish five points Talisse draws from Peirce and attempt to show that there is enough in Peirce's text to support a competing reading. On each of these points I readily admit that Peirce was less than clear. However, I am not as interested in finding out what Peirce actually meant as in the question of whether Talisse's view indeed can be defended in the way he does.

- (1) It is rational to adopt the method that fixes belief so that it is most unlikely to be doubted.

One suggestion that appears early in Talisse's book is that if inquiry is there to replace doubt by belief, then the best method of inquiry is the one that produces such beliefs that are "unlikely to occasion doubt" (Talisse 2007, 13). However, this suggestion merely as such does not recommend any particular method. Probably because of this, Talisse further suggests that the scientific method is the best method because it produces beliefs that "can *withstand* the test of ongoing experience" (2007, 13). But this already assumes that our beliefs are to be tested by "ongoing experience" instead of some other criteria. More has to be said about why this is so.

- (2) Beliefs by their nature dictate the method.

Talisse argues that only the scientific method can fix belief simply by virtue of what our beliefs are like (2007, 13–15, 60).² According to Peirce's pragmatism, our beliefs involve habits, which, in turn, entail certain conditional expectations about future experiences. As the method of science is the only method sensitive to such experience, it is the only method suited to fixing such beliefs that we may want to have. For example, consider again someone following the method of tenacity. Surely, we might think, beliefs fixed by tenacity are prone not to meet the expectations entailed by those very beliefs, and this already seems to count against the viability of any such method.

However, again, this is not what Peirce suggests. Instead, according to him, following the method of tenacity "may, indeed, give rise to inconveniences, as if a man should resolutely continue to believe that fire would not burn him [. . .]. But then the man who adopts this method will not allow that its inconveniences are greater than its advantages. He will say, 'I hold steadfastly to the truth, and the truth is always wholesome'" (1877, 116). For the tenacious person, even massive failure does not count as counterevidence to those beliefs. And who says it should? Again, any response to the tenacious person simply begs the question of why she should apply methods that are more responsive to external

² Here Talisse follows Misak's (2000) interpretation of "Fixation."

circumstances.³ Indeed, instead of naming the habitual nature of beliefs as the cause of the breakdown of tenacity, Peirce refers to what he calls the “social impulse” as counting against this method: we inevitably are dissatisfied with a method that fixes belief only for one and not for all. It is due to the social nature of man that the tenacity fails—not because of its potentially massively unsuccessful results. Thus the nature of beliefs alone does not dictate which method we are to use in fixing belief.⁴

(3) The non-scientific methods are not methods of fixing belief.

Talisce also argues that the three non-scientific methods are methods not of fixing belief but, rather, of avoiding doubt (2007, 57, 61–62, 67–68).⁵ Some of Peirce’s wording indeed suggests this interpretation. For example, Peirce’s second method, the method of authority, lets the state decide the correct doctrine and ruthlessly force it upon its citizens. Peirce, however, adds that this method follows the following maxims: “Let all possible causes of a change of mind be removed from men’s apprehensions. Let them be kept ignorant, lest they should learn of some reason to think otherwise than they do” (1877, 117). Similarly, the method of tenacity is the “taking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it” (Peirce 1877, 115). Here Peirce’s wordings suggest that these methods are designed to keep the actual reasons to revise one’s belief outside of one’s reach, and hence, these methods avoid doubt rather than fix belief.

However, despite Peirce’s formulations, there is no suggestion in his essay to the effect that the non-scientific methods “fix” something other than belief.⁶ It is far from inconceivable that some people might self-consciously fix at least *some* of their beliefs by methods other than the

³ Also, it might be pointed out that such an account may also involve a thick notion of the nature of such expectations, as well as “experience” as that which those expectations concern. It is this kind of robust and therefore reasonably rejectable account of experience Talisce presents as the foundation of Dewey’s account of inquiry.

⁴ Indeed, if the point of “Fixation” was merely that the scientific method is the only method suited to fix our beliefs *because* (?) our beliefs involve such expectations, Peirce could have just added this argument as a corollary of the account of belief presented in his second paper of the *Illustrations* series, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (Peirce 1878). I’m indebted to T. L. Short for several discussions on this point.

⁵ Again, Talisce draws this idea from Misak (2000). Much of the criticism of Talisce presented here is, by extension, also criticism of Misak’s argument for a deliberative conception of democracy.

⁶ It seems certain that Peirce thought the non-scientific methods (also) fix belief. In a harsh description of the method of authority he notes that for the mass of mankind “there is perhaps no better method than this,” adding that “[i]f it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain” (Peirce 1877, 118).

scientific one. I will postpone my argument to this effect for a few paragraphs, as I will argue in a moment that at one point Talisse himself seems to admit this much.

(4) The scientific method is unavoidable.

Talisse also argues that fixing belief based on the scientific method is unavoidable for all inquirers (2007, 61–62). In Talisse’s example, even the most ruthless tyrant is, at bottom, a democrat: when a tyrant “sets about terrorizing or propagandizing or oppressing his people, he seeks after the *best* or *most* effective means to his tyrannical ends; he wants the *truth* about potential conspiracies against him, the *truth* about how best to eliminate opposition, and the *truth* about how best to keep people in line” (Talisse 2007, 68).⁷ But again, this is not what Peirce seems to be saying. Instead, exactly when discussing the method of authority, he points out that “the state may try to put down heresy by means which, from a scientific point of view, seem very ill-calculated to accomplish its purposes; but the only test *on that method* is what the state thinks; so that it cannot pursue the method wrongly” (1877, 121; emphasis in the original). And even if it is the case that with many or even most issues we are simply forced to rely on the scientific method, nothing precludes authority from being our method of choice when it comes to some particular questions.⁸ Even though everyone may use the scientific method “about a great many things,” as Peirce (1877, 120) pointed out, that method is not unavoidable.⁹

(5) The non-scientific methods cannot be adopted self-consciously.

Talisse’s most central point is his reading of “Fixation” as an *internal* or *immanent* criticism of methods other than the scientific one (Talisse 2007, 61, 67, 96, 98). First, Talisse argues that truth is a *constitutive norm* of belief, pointing out that “[p]art of what it is to hold that a proposition is true (that is, to *believe* it) is to take it to be able to withstand the scrutiny of inquiry, to prove itself worthy in the test of the ongoing exchange of

⁷ Talisse also argues that those who *do* use non-scientific methods must use the scientific method as well (e.g., 2007, 67–68, 86). However, this already entails tacitly admitting that the non-scientific methods *can* be used in fixing belief. I will return to this issue in discussing point (5) below.

⁸ It may be added that, according to Peirce, the method of science is the only method in which the method and its correct application are separated. But even the “correct application” of this method cannot be dictated by anything except more science: there is no Archimedean point either internal or external to the method from which to evaluate instances of its application.

⁹ Peirce immediately adds that everyone “only ceases to use it [the scientific method] when he does not know how to apply it” (1877, 120). The crucial point is that we *may* cease to follow the scientific method.

reasons, evidence, and argument” (2007, 67; cf. 2010). Then, Talisse points out that the scientific method is the only method that is responsive to such reasons, or, in Talisse’s words, “pursues truth” (2007, 61). Thus, no method other than the scientific one can be *self-consciously* adopted for fixing belief.

However, I don’t think this argument is successful. This is for the simple reason that Talisse uses the concept of truth equivocally. The crucial point to notice is this: the disagreement between the methods is *not* about whether to believe what is supported by evidence. By any method, we cannot believe what we think is unsupported by reasons, or what we think is untrue (cf. Rydenfelt 2009). This is exactly what Peirce suggests, prefiguring later deflationist conceptions of truth: “The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall *think* to be true. But we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so” (1877, 115). However, it is only in this abstract, *minimal* sense that truth is “constitutive” of belief. Instead, the disagreement between the methods is about what *counts* as reasons for belief. If the notions of truth, reasons, or evidence are given any more substantial content, it is evident that they are no longer “constitutive” of belief. In a substantive, non-minimal sense, each of the methods Peirce discusses involves its *own* conception of truth.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, at one point Talisse points out that his view “does not involve the claim that individuals do not in fact practice non-scientific methods of inquiry” (2007, 67). (This brings us back as well to the point anticipated in (3) above.) In Talisse’s own example, even a “close-minded fundamentalist” thinks he is “deferring to epistemically *appropriate* and *reliable* sources of belief” (Talisse 2007, 67–68). But here Talisse in effect admits the point just developed: that there are non-scientific believers, and, moreover, that their beliefs are also responsive to what *they* view as reasons. While we are all committed to reasons, those reasons are not necessarily “scientific” ones. Indeed, it would be extremely difficult to argue otherwise. Surely there are exactly such close-minded fundamentalists who have self-consciously adopted methods of fixing belief—at least when it comes to certain questions—other than what would by any standards count as *scientific*.

4. A Fact of (Un)Reasonable Disagreement?

The crucial lesson of the preceding discussion is simply this: it is possible to fix belief by methods other than the scientific method. Nothing about

¹⁰ Cf. Short (2000). It is also to be noted that the difference between a belief being true and belief being justified only appears with the scientific method. This does not imply that the non-scientific methods only “aim at” justification; rather, on the “minimal” level the scientific method adds the notion of justified belief *in addition* to true belief.

believing *as such* precludes following some other method. Indeed, examples of just such believers are ample. And as we have just seen, even Talisse's own account seems to admit as much. Moreover, it is safe to assume that we actually are, at least sometimes and about some issues, faced with exactly this kind of disagreement with others—say, when engaging with people like Talisse's close-minded fundamentalist. Such disagreement is then a *fact*.

Is this fact of disagreement a fact of *reasonable* disagreement? Is the person who rejects the scientific method—let's call her the “non-scientist”—reasonable in this rejection? This seems a strange question to ask, as reasonable disagreement seems to assume reasons. As we saw, a key twist in Talisse's argument was exactly this: if there is reasonable disagreement, competing views must be supported by reasons (cf. Talisse 2007, 87). However, as I will presently propose, Talisse's account is faced with a dilemma: either of the two possible answers turns out problematic for his argument.

Consider first the option that the non-scientist is indeed reasonable in disagreeing with those who follow the scientific method. For example, we may say that even though his views are not based on what we think are reasons, he has his *own* reasons, and thus his rejection of the scientific method is (we could say *minimally*) reasonable. But if this is the case, the scientific method itself can be reasonably rejected; indeed, the non-scientist does so for his own, non-scientific reasons. Then, it immediately follows that a society centered on the scientific method or an epistemic perfectionism devised in terms of that method is oppressive and does not satisfy the Rawlsian demand. In Talisse's own words, such a society forces “all to live in accordance with a comprehensive doctrine that may be reasonably rejected [. . .] and therefore *oppresses* reasonable people” (2007, 84).¹¹ This is the first horn of Talisse's dilemma: if the substantial view held by the non-scientific believer can be considered reasonable, Talisse's epistemic perfectionism is not justifiable to him.

Then, consider the option that we refuse to count the non-scientist as disagreeing for reasons. The non-scientist, we say, is simply unreasonable in fixing her beliefs. However, such a solution seems obviously problematic. As there is no external, method-independent way of evaluating the reasonableness of the methods themselves, such a view would make it a simple matter of definition that those who disagree with the scientific method *are* unreasonable. In part, this is because we may always ask: If we are allowed to do this in the case of the non-scientist, why not do the same with anyone disagreeing with us—say, someone who disagrees about our democratic principles?¹² Such writing off of

¹¹ This parallels Talisse's view of Dewey's notion of inquiry (Talisse 2007, 46–48).

¹² Recall, this was exactly the problem with Rawls's earlier notion of reasonableness (cf. footnote 1 above).

dissenters as unreasonable is exactly the mistake with which Talisse charges Deweyan democrats. The problem is that this puts Talisse on a par with anyone who says that those disagreeing with his substantive doctrine are just unreasonable. This is because the question of what counts as reason for belief is itself a substantial issue, one that we may disagree about. Here is the second horn of the dilemma. Perhaps it could be argued that the non-scientific believer is unreasonable. But then Talisse's premise would simply beg the question against the non-scientist: it would be founded on the assumption that reasonable views *are* the products of the scientific method.

None of the preceding discussion would deny the novelty and interest of Talisse's attempt to ground democracy in *epistemic* normativity.¹³ But if what I have said is on the right track, Talisse cannot escape the dilemma just presented. While in the minimal sense our beliefs indeed are responsive to "reasons," any attempt to say what counts as reason for belief already entails a substantive view about truth (or evidence, justification, and so on), comprehensive enough to invite disagreement. This is because the "constitutive" features of belief are simply minimal and not substantive. Hence, substantive epistemic norms are not minimal enough not to be disagreed upon, and a society grounded on such norms either is oppressive and does not meet the Rawlsian demand or writes off dissenters as simply unreasonable.

5. Reasonableness Revisited

So far, I have argued that questions of which views are reasonable are themselves substantial questions which we may disagree about and which, moreover, are not solved by merely conceptual points about central epistemic notions, or normative notions in general. And if there is no substantial agreement on such normative notions, it immediately follows from the Rawlsian point of view that there may be no way of justifying any particular view concerning *reasons themselves* to everyone.

The underlying reason for this predicament is that there is no way of reconciling Rawlsian reasonable pluralism and the idea that some substantive or comprehensive view would be justifiable to all: the fact of reasonable pluralism is at bottom the *denial* of just such justifiability. Rawls writes: "Under the political and social conditions secured by the basic rights and liberties of free institutions, a diversity of conflicting and

¹³ Perhaps there is, e.g., less disagreement about certain epistemic norms than about moral ones. As Talisse argues, most of us do not self-consciously adopt any of the non-scientific methods of fixing belief (although, as I've argued, some do, and thus we all may). Moreover, while it is beyond the scope of this discussion whether Talisse's arguments for democracy based on epistemic perfectionism are successful—that is, whether (P5) above is acceptable—there clearly is reason to think that the scientific method supports at least some minimal idea of democracy.

irreconcilable—and what’s more, reasonable—comprehensive doctrines will come about and persist if such diversity does not already obtain” (Rawls 1996, 36). What makes differing comprehensive doctrines reasonable is, for Rawls, that they are not the mere upshots of people’s limited and momentary interests but “in part the work of free practical reason within the framework of free institutions” (Rawls 1996, 37). What makes them irreconcilable is, for him, that even the free working of practical reason will lead to differing and conflicting comprehensive doctrines. In effect, Rawls denies that it could be hoped that our opinions, even when developed under the framework of free institutions, could converge on a single such doctrine.¹⁴ Obviously, then, if it is so that the free operation of practical reason will lead to the development of irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines, it seems hopeless that any substantial view would be justifiable to all citizens—let alone some view comprehensive enough to ground a democratic society.

This Rawlsian background will, however, point towards an important consideration. As we have just seen, while comprehensive doctrines invite reasonable disagreement, Rawls still maintains that *reasonableness* itself can be pinned down by reference to the free operation of practical reason: it is the views that are products of that operation that count as reasonable. Although comprehensive doctrines may be reasonably rejected, then, there is still something to be said about what it is to be reasonable. From this perspective, it is easy to see how Talisse’s argument is closely motivated by Rawls’s discussion. However, a point seemingly underappreciated by Talisse is that his epistemic perfectionism in effect attempts to solve Rawls’s problem exactly by eschewing his *notion of reasonableness*. Talisse already rejects the view that products of free institutions are reasonable when he maintains that reasonableness only pertains to the products of the scientific method.

I think the solution to the Rawlsian problem is indeed such a *dissolution*: it involves abandoning Rawls’s notion of reasonableness, the notion that quite explicitly makes it impossible to develop a notion of reasons that would enable justifiability (even in principle) to everyone. However, whereas Talisse (like Rawls with his competing notion) thinks that his scientific notion of reasons is a conceptual point about belief, truth, evidence, and the like, I have attempted to show that the question is far more substantive. Developing a notion of reasons and reasonableness should be done in a manner that does *not* beg the question against competing views

¹⁴ Accordingly, of course, Rawls’s political liberalism is founded not on a comprehensive doctrine but on the citizens’ sharing a public conception of justice, which is then differently related to their differing comprehensive or substantive views. Whether the Rawlsian hope for an “overlapping consensus” on the public conception of justice is really intelligible must here remain an open question; however, it deserves to be noted that projects such as Talisse’s attempt to ground democracy without resorting to such notions.

of reasonableness, such as that of the non-scientists; it cannot be based on a mere conceptual point about belief. The Peircean account, I will now finally proceed to suggest—albeit briefly—will give us a more substantial view of how the “scientific” conception of reasons can develop out of the Rawlsian fact of reasonable pluralism.

To begin with, if, as Rawls holds, reasonable views are those developed in a framework of free institutions, it seems (as we have anticipated above) that several views about reasons themselves can be so developed. This should already give us pause. To put this point differently, if we accept the Rawlsian conclusion that free institutions give rise to irreconcilable views about substantive questions, there will be irreconcilable views about reasons themselves. The fact of pluralism throws the underlying notion of reasonableness into question. This last point, I think, is reflected in Peirce’s “Fixation.” The second method Peirce discusses, the method of authority, ultimately becomes questionable because of the arbitrariness of its results. A “wider sort of social feeling,” Peirce argues, will show that the opinions dictated by the authority are mostly accidental: different peoples at different ages have held differing views. By the third, *a priori* method, we come to fix belief so that the content of the belief is not arbitrary but settled, under conditions of freedom, by what is agreeable to reason: “Let the action of natural preferences be unimpeded, then, and under their influence let men, conversing together and regarding matters in different lights, gradually develop beliefs in harmony with natural causes” (Peirce 1877, 118). This method in effect equals the condition of reasonableness posed by Rawls, the operation of reason in a framework of free institutions. The *a priori* method attempts to avoid the accidental, capricious elements of our comprehensive views by insisting that these views be not the products of contingent conditions or short-term self-interest but those dictated by reason itself.

However, as Peirce points out—anticipating Rawlsian pluralism—this method will not ultimately succeed in fixing any single comprehensive view. Here it is worth quoting Peirce at length:

We have examined into this *a priori* method as something which promised to deliver our opinions from their accidental and capricious element. But development, while it is a process which eliminates the effect of some casual circumstances, only magnifies that of others. This method, therefore, does not differ in a very essential way from that of authority. The government may not have lifted its finger to influence my convictions; I may have been left outwardly quite free to choose, we will say, between monogamy and polygamy, and, appealing to my conscience only, I may have concluded that the latter practice is in itself licentious. But when I come to see that the chief obstacle to the spread of Christianity among a people of as high culture as the Hindoos has been a conviction of the immorality of our way of treating women, I cannot help seeing that, though governments do not interfere, sentiments in their development will be very greatly determined by accidental causes. (1877, 119)

The problem of the *a priori* method is exactly the Rawlsian one. The method, Peirce maintains, “makes of inquiry something similar to the development of taste; but taste, unfortunately, is always more or less a matter of fashion” (1877, 119), a result that we will ultimately find dissatisfying. Of course, neither the fact that no single view is arrived at by that method nor the dissatisfactory nature of that method is something that can be shown *a priori* (or by the method itself). Instead, it is our actual experience of the practical development of substantial views or comprehensive doctrines that shows it to be so, and this realization already gives us an idea of where to head next.¹⁵ To avoid the problems of the *a priori* method, Peirce suggests that it is required to develop a method “by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency” (1877, 120). This method is, of course, the scientific one: it depends on the assumption that there is an independent reality, which “affects, or might affect, every man” (Peirce 1877, 120), and one true conclusion about any question. With these assumptions at hand, the scientific method of inquiry solves the problem faced by the *a priori* method, the development of several irreconcilable views.

To repeat, Rawls assumes that there are several irreconcilable but quite as *reasonable* views. The Peircean conception of the scientific method involves no such assumption; on the contrary, according to this view there is one correct solution to any question—or so we may at least hope. It does not follow, however, that the point about reasonableness just developed—or Peirce’s defence of the scientific method—is a conceptual one. The proposal here is not that the non-scientist is by definition unreasonable. Accordingly, in “Fixation” Peirce does not argue that the first three methods are unsuccessful because they cannot genuinely fix belief, or that believing as such already assumes the scientific method. Instead, as I have argued, all of these methods are genuinely possible, and moreover, there is no method-neutral way of solving the question of which method to follow: any such view about reasons already assumes one or another method. Obviously, the scientific method is the correct method by that very method; but such an answer would beg the question against other conceptions of reasons, which people might and do actually apply.

Indeed, this conclusion is reflected in “Fixation,” where Peirce simply contends: “Now, there are some people, among whom I must suppose that my reader is to be found, who, when they see that any belief of theirs is determined by any circumstance extraneous to the facts, will from that moment not merely admit in words that that belief is doubtful, but will

¹⁵ Put differently, this is not to say that the *a priori* method is self-undermining: there is no *a priori* proof that we cannot arrive at any one single view by that method. It is only to say that experience shows us differently; but relying on such experience is, of course, already moving us to the scientific method.

experience a real doubt of it, so that it ceases to be a belief” (1877, 119–120). This is as much as can be *said* in favour of the scientific method: the reader, Peirce assumes, will simply feel inclined to approve of it. Moreover, Peirce maintains—or at least hopes—that the scientific method is the view about reasons for belief that everyone, dissatisfied by the alternatives, would ultimately accept.¹⁶ The reader may of course be dissatisfied with such a defence of such a fundamental position; but it is exactly because the question of method is so fundamental that offering any seemingly method-neutral argument or reason for choosing one method over another would simply lapse into either circularity or regress. All Peirce can do is point out the relevant features of the methods he discusses, and hope his reader will join him in condemning the non-scientific ones.

6. Conclusion

Talisse argues that our shared epistemic norms involve an implicit commitment to democratic principles. These principles are thus justifiable to all citizens, and meet the Rawlsian challenge of justification of democracy. The crucial premise of Talisse’s argument, as I read it, is questionable, however. That premise maintains that there are constitutive or minimal norms of belief that we all, qua believers, share. These norms of belief Talisse then exploits in showing that genuine believers require democracy.

Drawing from my alternative reading of Peirce’s “Fixation,” I have argued that belief can genuinely be fixed by different methods, some of them not at all scientific, and thus that the question of which method to choose is also a substantial one. Minimal or constitutive norms of belief, if there are such things, are not substantial enough to differentiate, let alone decide, between different methods. For example, belief may always be responsive to evidence, but the difference between the methods lies exactly in what counts as evidence—the testimony of the Holy Book or that of the telescope? For this reason, I have argued, Talisse’s argument is faced with a dilemma. Either those who fix their belief in a non-scientific manner—the non-scientists, as I called them—are reasonable, and hence

¹⁶ Obviously, much more about how and why the scientific method will ultimately prevail should be said; that would, however, take this discussion far beyond the confines of “Fixation” and to Peirce’s later views about the normative sciences (cf. Short 2007, chap. 12, sec. 8). Here it has to suffice to note that, following the method of science itself, it is an empirical question which method will ultimately prevail. An idea that underlies the Peircean view is that there is an irreversible tendency toward affirming certain aims instead of some others (Short 2007, 148–50). The implication of applying the scientific method to normative questions is, after all, a normative realism: there must be an independent reality which the normative inquiry is answerable to. As I have argued elsewhere (Rydenfelt 2011), the circularity here is again obvious but hardly vicious, unless the application of the method itself is taken as a method-neutral proof *of* the method.

the democratic principles derived from the scientific method are oppressive to them by Rawlsian principles; or they are considered unreasonable, which, however, begs the question by simply assuming a particular notion of reasonableness.

If questions about epistemic norms too are substantive and can genuinely be disagreed about, Rawlsian reasonable pluralism would entail that there is no hope of deriving any principles justifiable to all citizens from such norms. Indeed, it seems that no view whatsoever can satisfy the Rawlsian challenge of justifiability. The only way the Rawlsian challenge can be met, I have argued, is to abandon one of its key assumptions, the idea that reasonableness equals being the product of the operation of practical reason under conditions of liberty. There may very well be many irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines that are reasonable by *those* standards. From the Peircean perspective, however, this is the problem of the *a priori* method in general, a problem that the scientific method of fixing belief will solve by attempting to derive one true answer to all questions.

Abandoning the Rawlsian notion of reasonableness will open the possibility of a scientifically oriented conception of reasons. While Talisse's proposal of solving the Rawlsian problem already amounts to the (at least implicit) denial of the *a priori* notion of reasonableness, it attempts to derive the scientific notion of reasons from a mere conceptual consideration of belief, truth, evidence, and the like. Talisse's argument still involves the attempt to answer the key challenge of the justifiability of a certain conception of reasons by *a priori* means. I have instead argued that there is no conceptual or method-neutral argument for the scientific method: the followers of any method are reasonable by their own lights. Accordingly, Peirce's story in "Fixation" involves no attempt at such an argument. However, even admitting as much, perhaps we are no less prepared to accept its conclusion.

Department of Theoretical Philosophy
P. O. Box 24
FIN-00014 University of Helsinki
Finland
henrik.rydenfelt@helsinki.fi

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to T. L. Short and Mats Bergman for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article, as well as to Richard Bernstein, Sami Pihlström, Robert Talisse, and others for discussions on a much shorter version presented at the *Second Nordic Pragmatism Conference: Pragmatism in Society and Democracy* in Reykjavík, Iceland, August 2009.

References

- Misak, Cheryl. 2000. *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1877. "The Fixation of Belief." In *Essential Peirce*, edited by Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, 1:109–23. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- . 1878. "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." In *Essential Peirce*, edited by Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, 1:124–41. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- . 1996. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rydenfelt, Henrik. 2009. "Pragmatism and the Aims of Inquiry." In *Pragmatist Perspectives*, edited by Sami Pihlström and Henrik Rydenfelt, 41–52. Helsinki: Acta Philosophica Fennica.
- . 2011. "Naturalism and Normative Science." In *Pragmatism, Science and Naturalism*, edited by Jonathan Knowles and Henrik Rydenfelt, 115–38. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Talisso, Robert B. 2007. *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- . 2010. "Peirce and Pragmatist Democratic Theory." In *Ideas in Action: Proceedings of the Applying Peirce Conference*, edited by Mats Bergman, Sami Paavola, Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, and Henrik Rydenfelt, 105–16. Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 1. Helsinki: Nordic Pragmatism Network.
- Short, T. L. 2000. "Peirce on the Aim of Inquiry: Another Reading of 'Fixation.'" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 36, no. 1: 1–23.
- . 2007. *Peirce's Theory of Signs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.