Responses to My Critics

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I thank Joe Biehl and Chris Herrera for taking the time to read my book and to formulate their responses. I've learned a lot, and it's a true honor to have one's work taken up by one's peers. Since the criticisms are quite varied, I'll treat my critics separately.

1. Reply to Biehl

I agree with much of what Biehl says, and I think the account he gives of how the Problem of Deep Politics has emerged is surely part of the story. Our disagreement may not be as extensive as it may appear. So let me try to clarify something that's not well articulated in the book.

I think it's worth distinguishing three different tasks one might be pursuing when one attempts a "philosophical justification of democracy." Two of these are quite familiar, the third less so, and I take myself to be pursuing the third and less familiar task. The first is the task of showing why we should *establish* a democracy as opposed to some other kind of regime. The second is the task of showing why democratic outcomes are authoritative, why we must *obey* the law. The third is aimed specifically at the question of why one should *sustain* one's democratic commitments when confronted with a democratic outcome that one regards as morally intolerable. I'm asking neither the *establishment* question nor the *obedience* question; my focus is on the question of *sustaining democracy*. So my arguments are aimed explicitly at those who already have democratic commitments, but are considering abandoning them in favor of some non-democratic means of social change.

So, when Biehl notices that my folk-epistemic argument can succeed only among those who are *already* democrats, he's quite right. But that's the whole point of the enterprise. The folk-epistemic argument tries to establish that we each have sufficient epistemological reasons to sustain our democratic commitments—including our commitment to democratic means of social change—even when our moral reasons give out.

This clarification of the justificatory task I'm pursuing helps me to address Biehl's further challenge. On my view, the purpose of continuing with our practices of democratic engagement across moral differences is *not* that of reaching anything like a consensus on a comprehensive doctrine. If *that's* the only solution to the Problem of Deep Politics, then I agree with

Biehl that it is not solvable. But more importantly, the folk-epistemic argument is *not* aimed at convincing people to adopt certain epistemic virtues or to take up a certain form of (epistemic) life. The claim rather is that certain epistemic norms are *internal* to our cognitive lives as such; we *already* endorse the folk-epistemic norms. The argument aims to make these norms explicit. And the proposed reason why we should continue arguing across moral divides is that this is necessary, if we are going to be able to assess ourselves (first-personally) as living up to the epistemic norms we already endorse.

So consider the following epistemic self-assessment:

> *I believe that p, but whenever I discuss p with competent opponents, my reasons come up short.*

It strikes me that an assessment of this kind must strike one as symptomatic of *some kind* of epistemic shortcoming, something to be diagnosed or else the belief will unravel. More generally, in order to see our beliefs as *proper*, we must be able to assess them as *defensible* (at least up to a point). So it seems, then, that the following self-assessment is also symptomatic of epistemic failure:

> *I believe that p, but I systematically ignore all arguments to the contrary.*

In order to see our beliefs as *proper* (that word again!) we have to be able to assess ourselves as meeting some threshold of engagement with the considerations on the other side. Otherwise, we begin to see our beliefs as something more like afflictions, obsessions, compulsions.

Again, the argument for democratic engagement flows from something about the *internal* normativity of belief. We need to engage with each other's reasons, if we are going to be able to take ourselves to be living up to our own epistemic standards.

Biehl's points about practical identity are all welcome. But it looks to me as if Biehl conflates epistemic phenomena that are best kept distinct, namely, *belief production*, *belief maintenance*, and *belief revision*. Of course, a complete ethics of belief will have to address all of these systematically, but they are nevertheless distinct. So Biehl is quite right to claim that, for example, one's fundamental religious commitments are often *not* the products of deliberation and reasoning; they are more often the result of upbringing and tradition. I accept this as surely true about the origin of many of our beliefs (and it should be said that I'm comfortable with talk of "commitments" rather than "beliefs" as well).

But recall that I'm most interested in the context of *sustaining democracy*; and here we are talking about folks who are *so* offended by a given democratic outcome that they're considering giving up on their commitments to democratic means of social change in order to realize in the

political world "the whole truth" as they see it. Now, Joseph Schumpeter says that the mark of the civilized person is to acknowledge that one's deepest convictions are the products of contingent history and culture, but nonetheless "stand unflinchingly" for them[1]; but I take it that Schumpeter intends to suggest that there are few civilized people and many barbarians. My point is that both Biehl and Schumpeter may be correct about the origins of our deepest moral commitments. But it seems to me that for better or worse we're generally barbarians: we do not see the contingency in the *origin* of our moral commitments to entail anything about their ultimate *justification*. And our barbarism goes deeper than this in that those who do accept Biehl's view that our moral commitments mainly function merely as indicators of group-identity are likely *not* to be people who would consider trying to win the entire political world (at the cost of democracy) for the truth as they see it.

In other words, the Schumpeterian view engenders an easy-going Rortyan mood: "Sure, we'll stand unflinchingly for the Big Stuff, but we don't sweat the Small Stuff . . . oh, and by the way, it's *all* Small Stuff." For now, I'll just say that the question of *sustaining democracy* is addressed to Schumpeterian barbarians who not only stand unflinchingly for (and only for) the truth, but are willing to knock others down in order to realize it in politics.

2. Reply to Herrera

Herrera sees clearly that I'm concerned with the question of *sustaining* democracy; I want to say something to aggrieved, angered, and distrustful democratic citizens. Yet, crucially, in saying something to such citizens, I also seek to say something *about* them as well; and more importantly, I aim to say something *about* them that they themselves would endorse as accurate. Accordingly, the *first-personal* aspect of the folk-epistemic argument is crucial. To put it in a way that picks up directly on one of Herrera's remarks: The argument is not aimed at trying to convince the "angry citizen" that she should "take our word on her rationality" (p. 31).[2] The aim rather is to convince her to take *her own word* on her rationality. That is, the folk-epistemic story is supposed to capture norms that are *internal* to belief as such, rather than imported from some tweedy professor's lofty armchair and imposed from above upon the lowly and (epistemically) impure masses. If this first-personal approach fails, I think the Problem of Deep Politics is not solvable.

So the approach is to take the angry and aggrieved at their word about their rationality rather than to insist that they conform to someone else's conception of it. If this seems unpromising, consider that the complaints,

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[1] Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1942), p. 243.

[2] Chris Herrera, "The Paradox of Democracy," *Reason Papers* 36, no. 1 (July 2014), pp. 30-43.

protests, and critiques of the angry and aggrieved are saturated with the vocabulary of folk epistemology. They claim to be especially interested in truth, facts, reason, and evidence. They seek to expose cover-ups, strip away smoke screens, and reveal conspiracies. They speak truth to power, and engage in "straight talk" and "common sense." The folk-epistemic argument asks them to walk the walk that accompanies the talk that they talk. Maybe that's too cynical a way of putting the point. Here's another: My argument tries to show that the epistemic norms appealed to by the angry and aggrieved are *the proper norms*. The argument asks those who are disillusioned enough by democracy to consider pursuing non-democratic means of social change to *live up to* the norms that drive their disillusionment. The charge, then, is not that those who seriously consider deserting democracy in reaction to a morally intolerable outcome are being *irrational*, but rather that they are being *untrue* to the norms to which they claim their allegiance.

Herrera worries that the folk-epistemic strategy depends upon citizens' willingness to "put epistemology before [their] moral values" (p. 35). Later, he challenges the idea (which he attributes to me) that we should "separate epistemology and morality." I am quite sympathetic to the thought that all forms of normativity are of the same fabric. Indeed, I think that moral and epistemic normativity are part of a broader normative project, namely, that of living life on our own terms, or living a life that can reflectively be endorsed. So I don't see the matter as one in which individuals must give priority to epistemology; rather, it seems to me that in order to muster and sustain the confidence in one's moral judgments required for mounting serious defection from democracy, one must take one's moral judgments to pass some epistemic threshold of correctness (or at least not fall short of it). So I agree with Herrera that the moral/epistemic divide is not a clean one; I also would resist the thought that we should expect citizens to prioritize the epistemic *over* the moral. But it seems to me that these categories of normativity run together, that is, side by side: I think we're likely to see the moral normativity of a commitment wane as we come to regard it as epistemically defective. But that's not to *prioritize* the epistemic; it is rather to acknowledge that to assess a moral commitment as *false* is also to assess it as non-binding.

I have one final point of contention. I don't think that we can adopt the view that "democracy [is] supposed to mean that [we] would not have the values that others hold injected into [our] lives" (p. 34). Surely politics of any variety involves precisely this kind of imposition. What's special about democracy is that it tries to limit the scope of such impositions by means of constitutional constraints on the scope of collective decision-making, and even where it does allow others' values to be injected into our lives, the injecting results from a process that respects our fundamental political equality. Depending on how any given election goes, many citizens will find new points at which others' values (values alien to their own) will be injected into their lives. Under normal circumstances, that the unwelcome results are the product of a properly constrained and otherwise well-ordered political process is enough to render those results *tenable*, even when I must regard them as

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deeply mistaken or worse. The folk-epistemic view is not aimed at relieving us of the hard fact that politics is about forcing people to do what they otherwise would not do. However, it does try to show that certain epistemic commitments we already endorse give us sufficient reason to uphold democracy even when it goes badly. But the success of this kind of argument does not turn on the ability to convince citizens never strongly to oppose, or even resist democratic outcomes; the bar for success is set much lower. The folk-epistemic argument attempts to show that our epistemological reasons are sufficient to keep our protest, dissent, and resistance within the bounds of democracy.