Introduction

Democracy is in crisis. So we are told by nearly every outlet of political comment, from politicians and pundits to academicians and ordinary citizens. This is not surprising, given that the new millennium seems to be off to a disconcerting and violent start: terrorism, genocide, torture, assassination, suicide bombings, civil war, human rights abuse, nuclear proliferation, religious extremism, poverty, climate change, environmental disaster, and strained international relations all forebode an uncertain tomorrow for democracy. Some hold that democracy is faltering because it has lost the moral clarity necessary to lead in a complicated world. Others hold that "moral clarity" means little more than moral blindness to the complexity of the contemporary world, and thus that what is needed is more reflection, self-criticism, and humility. Neither side thinks much of the other. Consequently our popular democratic politics is driven by insults, scandal, name-calling, fear-mongering, mistrust, charges of hypocrisy, and worse.

Political theorists who otherwise agree on very little share the sense that inherited categories of political analysis are no longer apt. Principles and premises that were widely accepted only a few years ago are now disparaged as part of a Cold War model that is wholly irrelevant to our post-9/11 context. An assortment of new paradigms for analysis are on offer, each promising to set matters straight and thus to ease the cognitive discomfort that comes with tumultuous times.

The diversity of approaches and methodologies tends to employ one of two general narrative strategies. On the one hand, there is the c*lash of civilizations* account, which holds that the world is on the brink of, perhaps engaged in the early stages of, a global conflict between distinct and incompatible ways of life. On the other hand, there is the *democracy deficit* narrative, according to which democracy is in decline and steadily unraveling around us. Despite appearances, both narratives come in local and global versions. Although the clash of civilizations is primarily a global

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narrative, it manifests itself locally in the more extreme forms of identity politics and multiculturalism, in disquiet over immigration, and even in the anxiety that gay marriages pose a threat to traditional family values, if not to the traditional family itself. Likewise, whereas the democracy deficit analysis is a primarily local story, it manifests itself globally in anti-globalization and anti-corporate movements, which hold that international economic institutions are threatening self-government and self-determination around the world.

These narratives are not strictly incompatible (indeed, many theorists combine them); however, they are in tension. Whereas the clash of civilizations narrative is premised upon the claim that there is a distinctively Western way of life, the democracy deficit account laments the passing of common purposes and shared visions. Whereas the former encourages the aspiration for the institution of democracy throughout the world, the latter is far less confident that existing democracies should serve as a model for other countries to emulate. Finally, whereas the former points in the direction of a quasi-imperialist foreign policy of "nation building," the latter turns an introspective and critical eye on domestic issues.

Despite these differences, both narratives share a common premise: the old description of politics as simply a matter of "who gets what, when, and how" is obsolete; contemporary politics, both locally and globally, is driven by something deeper and more complicated than what has been variously called "interests," "incentives," or "preferences." We find ourselves ensconced in political contexts in which it seems that there is more at stake than the satisfaction of desire or the getting of what we want; increasingly we find that the political issues we must face unavoidably call into play our most fundamental moral commitments, our judgments concerning what is really important, what is ultimately valuable, what makes life worth living.[1] Such commitments not only specify our conceptions of the good life; they also provide us with our conception of politics itself – what the state is, from whence its authority derives, what liberty consists in, what forms of coercion should count as oppression, and who gets to decide. Consequently, these commitments also specify a conception of the *intolerable*, a view specifying the conditions under which morality requires resistance, even in the form of violent revolt, even at the expense of the other things that we hold dear.

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[1] Some readers will recall the National Election Pool exit poll conducted in the 2004 presidential election in the United States which showed that an unusually large number of voters indicated that "moral values" determined how they voted. Although this poll has been widely criticized, Galston (2005: ch. 3) has proposed a convincing defense of its main findings.

A problem arises, however, once it is realized that we live under conditions of *moral pluralism*. We are *divided* over our most fundamental moral commitments. We disagree about moral basics, and accordingly disagree about the precise shape that our politics should take. Lacking a shared set of moral commitments, democratic citizens cannot resolve conflicts or justify collectively binding decisions by way of an appeal to concepts such as freedom, justice, dignity, autonomy, or even fairness. To be sure, values such as justice do enjoy a conceptual core upon which otherwise divided citizens tend to converge. Accordingly, we tend to agree that, for example, slavery was unjust and that the war against the Nazi regime was a just war. However, rapid changes in culture and technology have raised new kinds of dilemmas that seem to turn on the finer details of our moral concepts, including justice; with regard to these details we find ourselves fundamentally at odds with each other.[2] More importantly, since the values over which we are at odds are so *fundamental*, it is not clear how we should go about resolving our disputes. To what value can we appeal in deciding how to address disputes over *fundamental* values? We may say that in such cases, we ought to try to resolve our dispute in a way that is *fair*. But what if we are divided over the nature of fairness itself? Another reply might be that we ought to try to resolve such disputes by seeking a mutually acceptable *compromise*. But what if we disagree about the terms under which a compromise would be morally acceptable? Perhaps the only recourse is to try to maintain conditions of peaceful co-existence among incompatible moral worldviews. But even then, what if my moral worldview instructs me to value moral correctness over peace? Why should a truce with error be preferred to a fight for what is right? We may encapsulate these questions into one: is there a principled way to avoid Hobbes's war of all against all?

In this book, I offer what I take to be a principled alternative to the war of all against all. The alternative proposed in this book differs significantly from the standard views of democratic political philosophers. On standard views, the case for democracy derives from some decidedly *moral* commitment to, say, freedom, autonomy, dignity, liberty, or equality. Such views proceed from the assumption that there is already sufficient agreement, at least in principle, about the value and precise nature of such values among

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[2] Consider the protests that resulted in England following Cabinet Minister Jack Straw's claim that the full veil or *niqab* constitutes a "visible statement of separation and of difference"; Muslim women protested with signs declaring that "the veil is women's liberation." *The Guardian* (October 6, 2006) at: www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/oct/06/immigrationpolicy.labour (accessed August 4, 2008).

citizens.[3] But there is good reason to think that, under current conditions, freedom, autonomy, dignity, liberty, and equality are *essentially controversial* – no elaboration of the details of their content can win widespread and sustainable agreement. By contrast, the case for democratic politics which I propose in this book draws from principles that are *epistemic* rather than *moral*. In the following chapters, I will try to convince you that *no matter what you believe about morality*, you have overriding epistemological reasons – reasons concerning how, what, and when one ought to believe something – to endorse democratic politics. Moreover, I aim to convince you that the epistemological reasons which lead to democratic politics are rooted in epistemic commitments that *you already endorse*. In other words, my project is not to show you that there is some view about how we should think and reason that entails that we should be democrats. Such a project would be easy, but question-begging. Instead, my project is to show you that the views that you already have about how we should think and reason commit you to a democratic political order. I hope that you find this a bold, perhaps outrageously bold, thesis. To modify a famous claim of Bertrand Russell's about the point of philosophy, my aim is to derive surprising and far-reaching conclusions from premises that are so modest as to seem undeniable.

As you will have already noticed, I sometimes write in a way that is addressed directly to you, the reader. Admittedly, this way of proceeding may prove to be awkward or strained at times, but please bear with me; this is not merely a quirk of style. It reflects a methodological strategy that I employ throughout much of the text, which I hope you will be willing to grant the aptness of, even if only provisionally or for the sake of argument. To explain: the epistemic case for democracy that I will develop is driven by what I shall call a *first-personal* epistemology. By this I mean that, in what follows, I will deliberately avoid an approach that has become standard in professional epistemology. This standard way of proceeding attempts to discern the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge by providing a proper analysis of the third-personal attribution of knowledge, that some subject, *S*, *knows* that some proposition, *p*. That I eschew this endeavor should not be taken to indicate some judgment on my part that it is misguided or a waste of time. The analysis of knowledge is centrally important to epistemology as a discipline, and there is good reason why

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[3] Dworkin (2006) is a good example of this approach. Dworkin argues that a shared (but perhaps unacknowledged) commitment to human dignity underlies all of our moral conflicts. Some of the specifics of Dworkin's approach will be discussed in Chapter 5.

this task is best carried out by means of a third-personal analysis. Yet the analysis of knowledge is not the whole of epistemology, and my present purposes point in a different direction. As I said, I am interested in getting a fix on epistemic concepts other than knowledge. Specifically, I will ask you in these pages to scrutinize the function of certain epistemic concepts which are more basic than knowledge – concepts such as belief, truth, evidence, reasons, argument, and so on – in *your own case*.[4] The aim is to get a grip on the roles these concepts ordinarily play in our own lives as epistemic agents – our lives as creatures that form, examine, challenge, and revise beliefs – and to understand their interrelations. Accordingly, in addressing you in this book, I will have no need to appeal to the fanciful thought experiments and science-fictional hypothetical cases which are frequently employed by professional epistemologists. Again, the aim is to disclose the epistemology of us ordinary thinking creatures under ordinary epistemic conditions. I am interested in doing "no frills" epistemology here.

But the fact that I aim to uncover the epistemology we employ in our everyday lives does not entail that the project is strictly descriptive or without prescriptive import. What we will find, I contend, is that our ordinary epistemic practices embed a set of normative epistemic commitments – principles governing the activities by which we form, assert, defend, revise, challenge, and change beliefs. For example, I will argue that there is a tight conceptual connection between *believing* that Athens is the capital of Greece and *taking oneself to have sufficient evidence* that Athens is the capital of Greece. When this connection is breached – as when we discover that our evidence is insufficient – we feel the need to take epistemic action of some sort: we correct or revise our belief, we hedge, we self-deceive or rationalize in order to maintain the belief, or perhaps we suspend belief altogether. In any case, by taking epistemic action we reveal that we uphold the principle that beliefs *ought* to square with the evidence we have and that we as believers *ought* to track evidence. By uncovering our everyday epistemology in this way, we will also make explicit to ourselves the normative commitments implicit therein.

Given its obvious parallels with what is known as folk psychology, I call this general "no frills" first-personal epistemology *folk epistemology*. I will explain it in detail in Chapter 3. For now, it will suffice to say that in

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[4] I say that these other concepts are more basic than knowledge because, on the standard analyses, knowledge is true justified belief, or true belief for which the believer has adequate reasons or evidence. There are several difficulties lurking in this intuitive account of knowledge that I will not engage in this book. The point is that the analysis of knowledge makes reference to the concepts of belief, truth, and evidence (among others); hence these concepts are more basic.

developing an epistemic case for democratic politics, I shall begin from what I take to be an intuitive grasp of what our ordinary concepts of belief, truth, reasons, argument, and evidence involve. Perhaps surprisingly, we will find that these folk concepts, when examined first-personally, imply a *social epistemology* according to which proper and responsible epistemic activity can be engaged only in cooperation with other epistemic agents and under certain specifiable social conditions.[5] The argument of the book is that the folk epistemology to which we are already committed entails a commitment to a certain social epistemology, which in turn requires a democratic political and social order. Thus, the folk epistemic commitments we – you and I – already endorse are sufficient to motivate an overriding commitment to democratic politics, in spite of our deep and serious disagreements over our most fundamental moral commitments.

It should be emphasized at this point (and I will emphasize this elsewhere) that the thesis is *not* that folk epistemic commitments entail specific claims about the nitty-gritty details of democratic government. The ambition is not to show that folk epistemology requires that one should take some particular view about term limits, electoral systems, taxation, or immigration policy. Rather, the claim is that folk epistemic norms entail a commitment to democratic norms in a broader sense: folk epistemology entails commitments to core democratic norms of freedom of speech, thought, and expression, freedom of conscience, political equality (including equality of participation), freedom of the press, protected dissent, political accountability, and so on. One might say, then, that the thesis of the book is that folk epistemic norms commit one to what Karl Popper (1971) characterized as the "open society," or to the broadly liberal and humanistic democratic vision defended in various ways by John Stuart Mill (1859), Bertrand Russell (1949), and John Dewey (1935), among many others. For reasons that I will specify later, I take it to be a virtue of the view that I shall be developing that it attaches to democratic norms in this broad sense and leaves open questions concerning the specific details of democratic governance. I will have occasion in Chapter 5 to say something about certain policies that have been proposed by Ronald Dworkin. Although I will support some of his proposals, I do not contend that the folk epistemic approach *requires* us to support them. Rather, the point is to

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[5] By *social epistemology* I do not mean anything particularly fancy, such as the rejection of traditional or "individualist" methods of epistemology. I follow Goldman (1999: 4) in using the term to refer to the broad view that knowledge-seeking is in large part a social endeavor involving the coordination and collaboration of many individuals within various institutional contexts.

specify how the folk epistemic view frames issues concerning, for example, political campaign speech.

Another point is also worth raising at this juncture. The thesis that folk epistemic norms entail democratic political norms does *not* mean that the epistemological reasons you have to support democracy must be your actually *motivating* reasons. Like most readers of this book, you probably have a set of *moral* reasons for being a democrat which are sufficient to sustain your own day-to-day commitment to democracy, even in the light of what you see as serious moral failings of recent policy. For example, it is likely that your commitment to, say, equality, liberty, or autonomy is such that you take yourself to be morally obligated to support and uphold democracy under almost all non-extraordinary circumstances. If this is true of you, then consider the epistemic argument proposed in this book a *supplement* which may be appealed to when dealing with those who do not share your moral convictions regarding the overriding value of democracy. In any case, if my argument succeeds there will be nothing in the folk epistemic commitments that I identify that contradicts your moral convictions. However, it should also be noted that if my argument succeeds, you will discover that, although you may have moral reasons that, in fact, motivate your democratic commitments, you also have epistemic reasons that are *sufficient* to motivate those commitments.

But more importantly, if my folk epistemic argument succeeds, you will have a tool that will enable you to criticize existing democratic institutions and practices in a way that does not presuppose your own particular – perhaps unpopular and controversial – moral commitments. This is important because it is often suspected that criticisms of, say, standing democratic procedures are simply disguises or proxies for the substantive moral commitments of the critics. But where democratic citizens are divided over substantive moral commitments, any criticism of procedures and institutions that fits this characterization is doomed to impotence. For example, popular criticism in the United States of the handling of the 2000 Presidential election was frequently dismissed by Bush supporters as simply a strategic way of expressing dissatisfaction with the outcome; Gore supporters who objected to the process were charged with being insincere, unprincipled, or sore losers.[6] Of course, Gore supporters *were* dissatisfied with the outcome of the electoral process. But there were many who surely were driven primarily by concerns for the integrity of the democratic

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[6] Recall the bumper stickers that emerged in the weeks following the 2000 election which mimicked the Gore–Lieberman campaign graphic but said instead "Sore Loserman."

process; for them, the process was objectionable *regardless* of the outcome. If the argument of this book succeeds, we will have specified a set of epistemic principles, common to citizens regardless of political affiliation, to which one may appeal in offering such criticism. Criticism that draws only from shared epistemic commitments deflects charges of insincerity and the like.

In identifying and explicating the commitments constitutive of our folk epistemology, I will frequently make reference to artifacts of our contemporary political culture (I did so in the previous paragraph). Examples are often drawn from sources of popular political discourse and commentary, including the work of popular pundits such as Al Franken, Ann Coulter, Michael Moore, Bill O'Reilly, and others. I suppose some may object to this, claiming that it is unfitting or worse for an academic to engage with this literature, which is, in the end, probably better characterized as entertainment and satire than political commentary. However, given that I aim in part to demonstrate that certain epistemic commitments are deeply entrenched in our everyday epistemic practices, the fact that popular political discourse is saturated with appeals to epistemic concepts such as "no spin zones," "straight talk," "inconvenient truths," and criticisms of "bias" and "lying liars" counts as crucial support for my case. I make no apology for this feature of the book.

Similarly, I make no apology for the fact that most of my examples draw from the popular political culture in the United States. After all, this is the political culture with which I am most familiar and am most qualified to discuss. But, as I shall argue in Chapter 3, the fact that the examples are drawn from a single political context does not entail that the folk epistemic principles which they elucidate are somehow provincial or culture-specific. Again, the aim is to identify a collection of epistemic principles that are entirely generic and basic to epistemic agency as such.

Finally, I should confess that I am in agreement with those who hold that our democracy faces a serious crisis. Importantly, though I do not deny that there are formidable threats to democracy posed from without in the form of international terrorism, rogue states with nuclear ambitions, and the like, I contend that there is also a serious crisis *within* contemporary democracy. To be sure, it is typically claimed that democracy is failing internally due to disunity or some moral unraveling of tradition; however, my worry is different. It is my view that the most serious internally posed crisis we face as democrats is not primarily moral, although it most commonly manifests itself in moral conflict. Perhaps it will come as no surprise that I think that the crisis we face is fundamentally epistemic in nature: we are losing our ability to *disagree* with one another; or, rather, we are losing our

ability to see those with whom we disagree as *mistaken* or simply *wrong* rather than wicked, ignorant, dishonest, perverse, benighted, or foolish. Yet, it is one of the philosophical presuppositions of democracy that there can be disagreement – even deep, heated, and seemingly intractable disagreement – among reasonable, well-intentioned, well-informed, and sincere people doing their best to reason through an issue. Put otherwise, at the core of democracy is the belief that *reasoned argument* is possible, even among people who are very deeply divided over moral and religious doctrines. The most disturbing trends in contemporary democracy are those which attack this presupposition by encouraging us to lose sight of it.

And such trends are becoming increasingly prevalent. We are constantly encouraged in forums of popular political discussion to regard those with whom we disagree as *ipso facto* beyond the epistemic pale – incorrigible, silly, irrational, unintelligent, and, therefore, not worth engaging with or even regarding as fellow citizens.[7] Accordingly, public political debates provide occasion not for the exchange of reasons and arguments, but for the trading of insults; they are sophistical contests in which each participant tries to prove the most effective at making his opponent look silly. We shall note and examine these trends throughout the coming chapters. But the philosophical point is worth punctuating from the very start: if we lose our capacity to argue with each other, especially across deep moral divisions, we will lose our democracy.

I close these introductory remarks with a word about the kind of book I have tried to write. No doubt some readers will have detected from the foregoing that in this book I attempt an act of what is sometimes called *public philosophy*; that is, I aspire to present rigorous philosophical argumentation and analysis in a way that is, nonetheless, accessible to a non-academic readership. This aspiration is notoriously hazardous; the attempt to do respectable philosophy in a way that is suitable for public consumption invites simultaneous charges of simple-mindedness (from the academic readership) and over-demandingness (from the non-academic readership). The hazard seems heightened when the philosophical content which is to be made publicly palatable draws from an area as esoteric as epistemology. To further complicate matters, the very suggestion that the solution to a certain problem in democratic theory is to be found in epistemology is bound to aggravate some political theorists. In short, perils abound.

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[7] Notice that Ann Coulter's recent book of popular political commentary is titled *If Democrats Had Any Brains, They'd Be Republicans* (2007).

I have had to deal with trade-offs between accessibility and thorough-ness. To help make the points where accessibility trumps thoroughness more bearable for the academics, I have tried to flag the spots where crucial issues have been bracketed, and in some places I include in the footnotes some of the requisite detail. Where the discussion makes unavoidable the introduction of some nuance or complication that could test the patience of a non-academic reader, I try to slow down and raise a few examples. Unsurprisingly, neither of these strategies is perfect with respect to appeasing the incompatible demands of the different audiences that I am trying to address simultaneously, but this might be the best one can do. In any case, if this book stimulates reasoned criticism and counter-arguments from those who oppose my claims, I will have achieved some measure of success.