



Book Reviews

Andrew F. Smith, *The Deliberative Impulse: Motivating Discourse in Divided Societies* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 180 pages. ISBN: 978-0739146095. Hardback/Paperback: \$65/29.95.

The Deliberative Impulse is a book that is both timely and original. It is timely, among other reasons, because its central topic – the challenge of “triggering the deliberative impulse” and “motivating discourse in divided societies” – has seemingly never been so urgent. Societies remain as divided as ever (in some cases they seem *more* divided), while genuine, well-intentioned, democratic deliberation looks – at least to some observers – to be in decline. The book is original because it provides a clear, philosophically sophisticated, and beautifully written response to a question that has been more or less overlooked in the vast and growing literature on deliberative democracy. A great deal of attention has been paid among deliberative democrats to questions that arise about the quality of deliberation, to conceptions of deliberation under ideal conditions, to deliberation’s ends and limits, to questions that arise about admissible versus inadmissible forms of deliberation, and so on. Yet largely overlooked is what Smith plausibly considers a prior and more fundamental question: the “vexing” question of how to get citizens to the deliberative table in the first place (p. 1). This is an important question indeed, and Smith tackles it compellingly and admirably.

Chapters 1 through 3 defend the crucial significance of living by our convictions. Drawing heavily and insightfully on Chandran Kukathas’s writings, Smith provides an analysis of the normative worthiness of abiding by conscience and argues in favor of its facilitation and protection. Despite important starting points in common – a shared enthusiasm for Hume’s theory of motivation and for Adam Smith’s moral sentimentalism – Smith disagrees sharply with Kukathas about how abiding by conscience is best protected. Important details aside, Smith argues that Kukathas’s vision of the “liberal archipelago” – his theory according to which the “indifferent [but tolerant] coexistence of groups marks the beginning and end of what civility entails” (p. 30) – leaves little or no room for even “modest” state intervention with the activities of groups (p. 13). For Kukathas, Smith argues, “the role and authority of the state is exceptionally minimal within the liberal archipelago” (p. 31), and this is problematic not only because the powerlessness of the state in this domain might also raise questions about its ability to coercively enforce individuals’ right of exit – a right Kukathas regards as inalienable – but also because there are, on Kukathas’s account, absolutely no legitimate bases for state intervention when intra-group oppression and exploitation occurs.

In chapters 4 and 5 Smith develops his account of what abiding by conscience actually entails. The main argument of these chapters is that there is both a moral incentive to engage in public deliberation (chapter 4) and an epistemic one (chapter 5). The plausibility of Smith's epistemic argument hangs, to some degree, on the success of his critique of Robert Talisse's "pragmatist theory of democracy." Talisse has argued, following C. S. Peirce, that we engage in what Peirce called "inquiry" when settled belief becomes unsettled, and when action, accordingly, becomes disrupted or halted. (It pays to recall here the Peircean edict that a belief is a "habit of action"). We have a strong incentive to publicly deliberate in the face of doubt, Talisse has it, because proper inquiry entails, among other things, "thoroughgoing evaluation, criticism, and correction of arguments that others bring to bear" (p. 76). As epistemic agents – as agents who want to have as many true beliefs as possible – we have no choice but to inquire in the face of doubt. It is worth stressing that, on a properly Peircean view, only *action-relevant* doubt will (or should) count here. The merely philosophical (or Cartesian) doubts that Peirce dubbed "make-believe" will not compel inquiry in the same way. But what is less clear – and what Talisse equivocates on according to Smith – is that we have an analogous epistemic incentive to engage in inquiry (and hence, in public deliberation) when we experience *no doubt whatsoever*. This is an important moment in Smith's epistemic argument, given that our moral convictions are not ordinarily put into doubt merely by the presence in our midst of contrary convictions. I can honestly report – and I am sure many readers will feel the same way – that the existence in my society of racist or homophobic convictions does not lead me to waver or to have doubts about my non-racist, non-homophobic views. Yet Smith argues convincingly that we have an epistemic incentive to publicly deliberate even when we experience no doubt. Even when our convictions are relatively stable, that is, there are "tangible benefits" to engaging in public deliberation, including participation in the "ongoing cooperative process of developing political decisions that are freer of errors" and also, preventing our convictions from becoming what J.S. Mill called "dead dogmas" (p. 92).

According to Smith, "we do right by our convictions and by ourselves as epistemic agents by willingly engaging in public deliberation" (p. 92). It might be pointed out, however, that some of the book's frequently occurring phrases like "willingly engaging in public deliberation" or "triggering the deliberative impulse" (p. 17) are ambiguous between (a) *accepting* the deliberative invitation from others if and when it arises, and (b) *instigating* deliberative discussion among our civic peers. It is not entirely clear which of the two – perhaps it is both – Smith thinks we have a moral and epistemic incentive to engage in, and this could be made clearer throughout the text. If it turned out, incidentally, that our incentive was limited only to (a), it is a genuine possibility that none of us would ever, in fact, end up deliberating for the simple reason that an invitation to deliberate was never extended to us.

In the book's final chapter, Smith seeks to extend his conception of public deliberation to conservative religious believers. Drawing on Hermann Cohen's idea of "religion of reason" and Charles Taylor's ruminations on our "secular age" – along

with myriad other sources, including the work of James Boettcher, Jürgen Habermas, and Cristina Lafont – Smith lays out a conception of public deliberation that “provides not merely wide but *unlimited* latitude with respect to the sorts of reasons that can be introduced into public deliberation – so long as one is prepared to defend them against criticism” (p. 94). While some of the discussion about the nature of religious conviction in this chapter is obscure, the argument on the whole is well constructed and apparently advanced in the spirit of conciliation and compromise. Still, the unlimited latitude that Smith is prepared to extend to conservative religious believers will look to many like a repudiation of the very idea of public reason itself, and, perhaps, the basis for an even more dysfunctional public deliberative culture than we presently have. Smith acknowledges early on in the text that a certain disdain for honest deliberation has become endemic among “the most vocal of contemporary [American] conservatives – Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter ...” (p. 15). One could be forgiven for thinking that the extension to conservative religious believers – or CRC’s as Smith refers to them – of unlimited latitude with respect to the sorts of reasons that can be introduced into public deliberation will in practice only deepen that disdain.

On the whole, this is an impressive text, one from which political theorists and philosophers – and particularly anyone with an interest in deliberative democracy – would benefit from reading. What is particularly worthy here for moral and political philosophers is that Smith’s book gives new ethical-political valence to the idea of abiding by conscience. Indeed, one is likely to regard the idea of abiding by conscience as antithetical to high-quality deliberation and engaged democratic citizenship. To the extent that one lives in accordance with one’s deepest convictions, the idea goes, one is less likely to be concerned with open-minded dialogue and civic participation. The ideal of abiding by conscience is often depicted as an ideal of Romantic inwardness, of rugged individualism, of personal authenticity. It is often thought to belong to the snobby, private, idiosyncratic part of our nature, not the democratic, active, and participatory part. One of the central accomplishments of *The Deliberative Impulse* is to encourage that this common view is mistaken, and that the idea of abiding by conscience has extremely important democratic dimensions.

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