1. The Space of Reasons
A familiar complaint by those who defend creationism is that the opposition’s views are no more or less founded on reason than their own. Science, the thought goes, rests on its own principles, unproven “yet Sovereign” as Cardinal Newman once put it. If there is a point here, it is this: scientific opposition to teaching Biblical stories of creation in schools naturally assumes scientific standards of justification. Those standards can themselves be open to question. Using scientific standards to defend them would be circular. Consequently, it would seem that we must admit that science itself rests on some assumptions not scientifically proven. And this, some believe, licenses the conclusion that rationally speaking, science is no better off than the Bible.

There are numerous problems with this argument, not the least of which is that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. But the point I am interested in at the moment is not the argument’s flaws but its implicit structure. Its form is essentially that of the ancient skeptical problem of the criterion, which runs like this: Any claim of knowledge assumes some rational standard, some criterion, some method for sorting truth from falsehood. But how do we know the assumed standard is correct? Appealing to the same standard is circular; but appealing to another standard won’t help – for the same question will arise again. Reasons require standards, and standards require reasons.

From these premises, the ancient skeptics concluded we could never know anything. We moderns and postmoderns have been more sanguine. We are more inclined to simply accept that “justification comes to an end” as Wittgenstein puts it, so that we are left with what Hume called Custom and Habit, with the way things have always been done. This appeals to our sense of ourselves as realistic and practical, as it suggests that the proper response to skeptical arguments is to
acknowledge the groundlessness of our believing, roll up our sleeves, and go on from there.

But go where, exactly? In the face of skeptical challenge to provide a non-circular defense of our standards, it sometimes seems as if we have a choice of only two directions: either accept that all standards of truth are equally valid, or plant your flag, declare that there is an objective standard (your own naturally) but admit that reason is never going to reveal what it is.

Skepticism is sometimes discussed by philosophers as if it were an abstract mathematical problem, free from the taint of any practical matter. But as the debate over creationism illustrates, skeptical arguments have a long history of being used as weapons in political debates and, subsequently, in debates over political theory. In particular, skeptical arguments continue to play a foundational role in opposition – from both the Left and the Right – to a conception of democratic politics according to which, as I’ll put it, democracy is a space of reasons.¹

To say that democracy is a space of reasons is to say that the practice of democratic politics requires the practice of giving and acting for reasons. That is, in the democratic state, disagreements between citizens ought to be handled in the arena of reason alone, and arguments legitimizing uses of state power must be backed by reasons. And crucially, the “reasons” spoke of are reasons for believing what is true, as opposed to reasons for believing what will win us the election, make us rich or damn our enemies. In short, to think of democracy as a space of reasons is to see the ideals of democratic politics as requiring a commitment to the rational pursuit of the truth.

Many have come to think that this conception of democratic politics is naïve or incoherent. I think it is neither. As I see it, the idea that democracy is a space of reasons is integral to the very idea of democratic politics. In this essay I defend this idea from two objections that naturally arise from our contemporary responses to skepticism. Broadly speaking, one objection emerges from the political Right, and the other from the Left. Yet they have more in common than they at first appear. The two objections are not only motivated by a similar skeptical stance, each would also lead to a similar result. That result would be to justify a profoundly undemocratic form of dogmatism.

¹ The phrase “the space of reasons” comes from Sellars: “in characterizing an episode or state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says”. (“Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” Midwest Studies in the Philosophy of Science vol. I. H. Feigl (ed). (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 76.) Obviously I adopt it for my own purposes, purposes which I fancy are not completely distinct from Sellars’ own.
2. **Reason as a poor guide**

It is one of the little ironies of history that skeptical arguments are rarely more popular than with true believers. As Richard Popkin and Terence Penelhum have demonstrated, skeptical arguments have a long history of being used to support conservative religious and political viewpoints.\(^2\) A particularly striking illustration of this is the Anti-Reformation writing of Michel de Montaigne, who saw ancient skeptical arguments as showing that it is best to accept without argument the prevailing tradition of one’s community (Catholicism in his case). What we learn from the problem of the criterion, Montaigne argued, is that, “Man’s plague is the belief that he has knowledge. That is why ignorance is so highly recommended by our religion as appropriate for belief and obedience.”\(^3\) Human reason, Montaigne insisted, was stained and flawed; it could not be trusted:

> There cannot be any principles for men, unless the Divinity has revealed those principles to them; all the rest … is nothing but dreams and smoke.
> For those who argue by presuppositions, one must suppose, on the contrary, the very axiom about which one is arguing.\(^4\)

Montaigne was hardly alone in thinking that reason should be replaced by faith. As Pierre Bayle would put it, a century after Montaigne, and in a very different political and religious context, reason is a “guide that leads one astray…[it] can be compared to some powders that are so corrosive that, after they have eaten away the infected flesh of a wound, they then devour the living flesh, rot the bones and penetrate the very marrow”.\(^5\)

Montaigne’s point is that skepticism shows us not that we know nothing, but that we don’t know anything through *reason*. Only through unreasoned acceptance of a set of standards does salvation, not just spiritual, but *political* lie. The political worry – voiced explicitly by Montaigne, is that the way of reason leads only to strife and discord. Peace is possible only if mankind goes about

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\(^4\) Ibid. 102.

“abandoning and renouncing his own means, and letting himself be raised and lifted up by purely celestial ones.”

This brings us to the first of the two promised objections to the idea that democracy is a space of reasons. Deliberately simplified, it is this: If reason, as Bayle believes, is a poor guide that always leads us astray from the truth, then basing one’s political system on reason alone is not only unwise, it is impossible; the game of giving reasons can never be freed from an unreasoned foundation. Like it or not – and we might as well like it – we must accept some standards on faith.

This general line of argument, particularly in a form the standards in question are ethical or religious in character, has had a wide impact on conservative political thought. Yet importantly, both Montaigne and Bayle were not just talking about ethical standards – they were also talking about our epistemic standards, our standards for determining whether a belief is true or false. The popular defense of creation science mentioned above is an example of this thought in action. The creationist wishes to cast skeptical doubt on the reliability of the scientific method by pointing out that the scientist too must suppose, “the very axiom about which one is arguing”. Consequently, the scientific and creationist views are on a par epistemically speaking. We have to accept either standard on faith.

Yet the conclusion of the argument raises an obvious question. If we just have to accept some standards on faith, which standards do we accept? Montaigne’s answer, echoed in various ways and to various degrees by Burke, Hayek and Oakeshott, is to trust in the calming authority of tradition. Trust the standards inherited from the past.

There are a number of things one might say about the suggestion that tradition is the ultimate arbiter of standards. Here I will be concerned only with epistemic standards. And I will limit my remarks to the following simple argument. The unreasoned acceptance of how things have always been done is dogmatism by another name. Dogmatism is undemocratic. So the idea that tradition is an ultimate epistemic arbiter has no place in democratic politics.

Prior to elaborating on this point, a few qualifications. First, the charge that dogmatism is undemocratic would hardly bother many—like Montaigne—who’ve made the above skeptical argument, simply because being democratic is not a value they share. But that view is not my present concern, which is not democratic politics, but a particular conception of it. Second, my complaint is not about the value of tradition. There is of course something to be said for tradition, for custom and habit. As social conservatives and progressive communitarians alike have noted, traditional ways of doing things may well embody the collective

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wisdom of generations. And a defense of tradition needn’t be dogmatic in character – Montaigne’s, for example, ultimately was not.

The issue isn’t tradition, but *the use of tradition* as the ultimate *epistemic arbiter*. An ultimate epistemic arbiter is first, a stopping point, an authority that all other epistemic reasons must obey. But second, it is itself not subject to epistemic appraisal. That is why it is an arbiter. An epistemic arbiter is an arbiter precisely because it sits outside of the epistemic game. Consequently, to treat tradition in this way, to see it as the non-epistemic ground for reasons, is to treat it as something that is beyond reason – as something that cannot be rationally assessed. And as just noted, the defender of the conservative skeptical argument crudely summarized above seemingly has no choice but to regard tradition in just this way. After all, the *whole point* of the skeptical argument is that skepticism shows us that every standard can be questioned, and thus ultimately we must appeal to something that is neither itself supported by reason, nor needing defense against the complaints of reason. And that, surely, is dogmatism.

It is also a stance contrary to democratic politics, as the following elaboration of the simple argument demonstrates. To engage in democratic politics is to see one’s fellow citizens as rational autonomous agents worthy of equal respect under the law. Part of what it is to be an autonomous agent is to be capable of making judgments about what one *ought* to believe. Judgments about what one ought to believe are thus made on the basis of reasons. I obviously don’t respect you as a fellow judger if I were to refuse to give you a reason for some claim against you should you ask for one; likewise the state fails to respect you if it were to refuse to give a reason for some use of political power. And crucially, the reasons in question cannot be reasons in the sense that my holding a gun to your head is reason for you to do what I want. Political claims on you cannot be justified, in a democratic conception of politics, by simply wielding power – for again the imposition of a claim is not a justification for why it ought to be imposed. Rather, I must try to persuade you that my view of the facts is closer to the truth than your own. Only then do I treat you as an autonomous rational being capable of judging what to believe. Otherwise, by preventing you from accessing the full evidence available, I am preventing you from making the judgment yourself, or even, in effect, making it for you. In sum, to the degree that we cease giving reasons for our beliefs to each other, to the degree that we allow our disagreements to be resolved, and our government decisions to be made, without adequate reasons, to that degree we are ceasing to conceive of ourselves as equal participants in a democratic enterprise.

The connection between autonomy, respect and reason just illustrated is precisely why so many of us worry about the health of a democracy that allows its leaders to mislead them, as this country did in the case of the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, no better example is needed of a lack of respect shown to citizens than the Bush administration’s willingness to manipulate the evidence –
As I see it, this argument, even in this simple form, is convincing against the idea that tradition should be treated as the ultimate epistemic arbiter. But there is more to say about the conservative attack on the idea that democracy is a space of reasons. So far we’ve only criticized the proffered alternative – the idea that tradition is the ultimate authority. We haven’t yet dealt with the skeptical argument itself. Prior to doing so, it will be will be helpful to first turn to the second of the two main objections I mentioned to the idea that democracy is a space of reasons.

3. Consensus over Truth?
If the first objection is that reason is a poor guide, the second is that it is a fine guide, just not to the truth. The democratic space is a space of reasons, but reasons aimed at consensus.

There are several ways to reach this conclusion. First, one might argue that the reasons we give in political argument cannot be reasons for believing that some moral or political position is true, because to maintain the truth of one’s position over another’s is to violate the cardinal liberal principle of toleration. Thus our public reasoning ought to be aimed at consensus. Second, one might argue that true beliefs cannot be the aim of justification in any event, so the point is moot; consensus is the only aim available.

The first point is typically associated with Rawls’ later period. And it is motivated out of a direct confrontation with what Rawls himself called the paradox of public reason, the idea that the liberal cannot defend her own view by appeal to the “whole truth” and yet at the same time maintain that the government must tolerate, so far as possible, differing views of what sort of life is the best to lead. This was a charge frequently leveled against Rawls’ earlier work by communitarians from the Left and conservatives from the Right. Rawls’ response was to argue that the sort of reasons we must supply to each other in the democratic space are political, not “metaphysical” in character. Our purpose in giving such reasons is, at least in part, to produce an “overlapping consensus”.

This goes for the liberal political philosopher as well as everyone else.

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9 For the standard communitarian version of the critique, see Michael Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

The over-all nature of Rawls’ view is of course exceedingly complex. I won’t try to do it justice here, but will confine myself a single point: properly understood, aiming at consensus need not be inconsistent with aiming at the truth per se.

Rawls’ point, crudely, is that in defending our political views, we should appeal only to those principles we all can accept. Note the “should” – his point is clearly not that we cannot aim at the truth, nor that there is no such thing as objective truth at which to aim, but that the principle of toleration (together with the associated virtues of civility) require that democratic political justifications use premises that are widely accepted.

This of course makes a lot of sense. As Jean Hampton put it: “No matter what our religion, moral beliefs, or metaphysical commitments, if we are to work together in one system of cooperation, we have to have a “common currency” for debating and settling disputes or our society will be in ruins”. 11 Our political reasons must trade in that currency – that is, they must be given against a common background of standards against which we measure what counts as true and what counts as false. It is disrespectful, not to mention entirely ineffective, to try and convince someone to accept your claims by way of reasons they will not recognize as reasons. But of course this fact is entirely consistent with its being the case that the common reasons we all do recognize as reasons are reasons for thinking that some belief is true. In political argument, I ought to give reasons that others accept as reasons. But that does not require that those very reasons aim only acceptance. After all, if acceptance is all that matters, there are many means more effective than reason. It is not “reasons” that I should be employing at all, but rhetoric, big sticks and clever television ads. But that is not Rawls’ point. As I understand him, he would be the first to endorse the sort of argument given at the end of the last section: we need to appeal to reasons to justify our political views because only then do respect each other as citizens, no matter what our different views on the good life. And as argued above, these reasons need to be reasons for believing what is true. Only then do I treat those to which I am giving the reasons as autonomous rational agents as opposed to tools to be manipulated. And that in turn means that the principle of toleration, far from prescribing our aiming at the truth in political argument, requires it. For that same principle, not to mention the practical facts, requires that the reasons we give to each other in civil discourse for believing that some proposition is true be reasons that most of us can recognize as reasons for believing it to be true. So it is not that truth isn’t the ultimate aim of our practice of political justification, it is just that we limit the stock from which we draw.

In my view then, the later Rawls does not provide an objection to the idea that the democratic space is a space of reasons in the sense of “reason” in which it aims at the truth. But given our discussion of the last section, it might be thought that I’ve missed the forest for the trees. Might not the real issue for the Rawlsian liberal be not whether political reasons are aimed at consensus or truth, but her undefended reliance on her own conception of reason? The serious charge is that the liberal too is committed to her own faith: the faith in a particularly “scientific” standard of reason. For as the problem of the criterion seems to show, if the reason cannot give reasons for her standard of reason, she must admit that her worship of said standard is only that: worship of a standard accepted on faith. So she too must admit that reason always ends up standing on what is not reason, and therefore that the democratic space cannot be the space of reasons after all. Democracy is rather firmly within the sphere of faith.

Thus we find ourselves back at the first objection, as one might well have thought we would. For it is one thing to argue that democratic politics requires a common currency of rational standards, it is another to say what those standards are without begging some question or other.

The most direct way to answer this challenge would be to provide epistemic reasons for adopting our particular epistemic standards, perhaps by adopting a “meta-standard” for showing that some of our standards are more epistemically justified than others. Or perhaps one might, with the externalist, dismiss the skeptical argument as resting on an unwarranted assumption. In any event, I will attempt no such answer here. For even if we cannot hope to give a non-circular epistemic reason for trusting some epistemic standards over others, that doesn’t mean that there are no reasons of any sort to take some standards as among the common currency.

Indeed, one might think that what one needs here are practical reasons, not epistemic or theoretical ones. After all, the question here is at root practical: which standards of reason ought we to include among the common currency for our political discourse? Moreover, including an epistemic standard amongst the common currency of our political discourse presumably commits us to politically privileging that standard. To politically privilege a standard is to see it as worthy of being taught in the schools, institutionally protected and assigned more weight in political discourse. These are practical matters.

As I see it, far from acting as an objection to the idea that democracy is a space of reasons, the Rawlsian framework suggests how we might approach this practical question. Call it the argument from the epistemic original position.

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Imagine we are charged with coming up with reasons for politically privileging some epistemic methods for forming beliefs over others in some society \( w \). Candidates will include methods like deduction, induction, sense perception, reading palms and consulting sacred texts. Our deliberations must operate under the following constraints. First, we cannot, in our deliberations, presuppose that any method is more reliable for producing true beliefs than others in \( w \). That is, we must operate under the assumption that consulting the sacred texts may well be as reliable a method of belief formation for the inhabitants of \( w \) as sense perception. In effect, our deliberations must take place under the assumption that skepticism is true – all methods for forming beliefs are as reliable as others because none are reliable. Second, just as we cannot, in our deliberations, assume that one method of belief-formation is more reliable than any other, so we cannot assume that one metaphysical picture of the world is any more accurate than others. By a “metaphysical picture” I mean – admittedly somewhat loosely – a view about the ultimate structure and nature of reality. Thus, we cannot, in our deliberations assume that, e.g. naturalism is true, nor that, e.g. Christian theism is true. Third, we know that we will eventually inhabit \( w \). Finally, fourth, we don’t know all the methods we will –because of upbringing, education, religion, etc. – wish to employ ourselves in \( w \).

Forced to come up with some reason to politically privilege some methods under these admittedly abstract constraints, it would seem to be in our self-interest to favor those methods that, to the greatest degree possible, were \textit{repeatable}, \textit{adaptable}, \textit{public} and \textit{widespread}. Repeatable methods are those that in like cases produce like results. It would be in our interest to favor repeatable methods because such methods could be used over and over again by people with different social standings. Adaptable methods are those that can be employed on distinct kinds of problems and which produce results given a variety of kinds of inputs. It would be in our interest to favor such methods because we don’t know what sort of problems we’ll face in \( w \). Public methods are those whose effectiveness, could in principle, be judged publically –that is, it is not the case that only one person is its sole judge of effectiveness. It would be in our self-interest to favor public methods because we don’t know if we’ll be lucky enough to be that one person in \( w \). And finally, widespread methods are those that many people can in fact employ. It seems rational that we would privilege methods with these features simply because by doing so, we would maximize each of our chances to both use and assess the use of the privileged methods. In this sense, such methods could be called democratic.

But aren’t we participants in the epistemic original position ourselves using various methods (such as a priori and causal reasoning) to arrive at our conclusion about \( w \)? Obviously we are, and we may be using other methods as well. But the situation described is not one where the participants are without
epistemic methods, nor is it one where we (participants) must share epistemic methods. It is one where we are asked to decide – using whatever methods we have available, and acting under the relevant constraints—which methods should be politically privileged in w. And the methods that are so privileged are those that will form the content of our epistemic standards and principles.

My point here is not to argue which specific methods would emerge from the epistemic original position, although I very much doubt that “consulting the sacred texts” would be one. My point is that even in the face of skepticism, we can give reasons for conceiving of the democratic space as the space of reasons. The reasons are practical, not theoretical, but they are reasons all the same. If we are to treat each other as autonomous agents worthy of equal respect, we must engage in the process of giving and asking for reasons for what we ought to believe. And the reasons we employ – at least those we employ on the public stage – must be the result of methods that are themselves democratic in character. Where we don’t give reasons for our beliefs, or where we use methods for producing reasons that are secretive and isolated, the province of only the few, we risk not only incoherence, we risk falling out of democratic space altogether.

4. The Unseen Target
Let’s take stock. I’ve outlined two main objections to the idea that democracy is a space of reasons. The first is overtly skeptical: it maintains that since reasons always come to an end, politics – including democratic politics – must presuppose certain unreasoned standards. Thus in practicing democratic politics, even the liberal must presuppose certain standards – such as the very standards of reasoning she privileges in political argument. In reply, I’ve pointed out that we can give reasons for the standards of reasoning we privilege. Some standards are worth privileging simply because they are themselves democratic in character. Moreover, the chief alternative – to simply accept some standards on faith and tradition—is itself deeply undemocratic.

The second objection accepts that democracy is a space of reasons, but rejects the idea that the reasons in question are reasons to believe what is true. We’ve seen that Rawls’ later work supplies no support for this idea. But as I mentioned above, there is another route to objection.

According to Richard Rorty, the social practice of justifying our opinions to each other neither needs nor requires what he considered the “transcendent” goal of truth. The only thing that transcends a social practice, Rorty thinks, is another social practice. As such, it doesn’t help to say that truth is the aim of such practices:
I know how to aim at greater honesty, greater charity, greater patience, greater inclusiveness and so on. I see democratic politics as serving such concrete, describable goals. But I do not see that it helps to add “truth”…to our list of goals, for I do not see what we shall do differently if such additions are made.  

Consequently, the question of truth is irrelevant to democratic politics, because, as he makes clear:

The grounding premise of my argument is that you cannot aim at something, cannot work to get it, unless you can recognize it once you have got it….We shall never know for sure whether a given belief is true, but we can be sure that nobody is presently able to summon up any residual objections to it, that everybody agrees that it ought to be held.

As I understand it, Rorty’s argument is essentially this: truth cannot be the target of our justificatory practices – of inquiry, so to speak – because we can never know whether our beliefs are true. And a target we can’t know whether we’ve hit is no target at all. Yet we can know whether “everybody agrees” with a belief. Therefore, agreement, or consensus is the aim of inquiry, not truth.

The argument is curious on a number of fronts. First, why isn’t it possible for me to know “for sure” whether my beliefs are true? The pyrrhonian skeptical argument provides an explanation, but an explosive one. But if that is the sort of skepticism that is driving Rorty’s argument, it becomes even more curious why he thinks he CAN know for sure that “everybody agrees” that a certain belief ought to be held. What about this is so immune from doubt? Indeed, for most beliefs that I am sure are true, I am not at all sure that everyone agrees they are true. After all, “everyone” even if it is just “everyone in my culture” or even “everyone in my culture who looks and speaks like me” includes quite a lot of folks. Figuring out that everyone agrees with me, or even would agree with me with regard to even the most mundane beliefs is not easy.

But of course Rorty isn’t playing the radical skeptic. The reason that Rorty thinks it is impossible to ever hit the target of truth is not because of skeptical interference but because the target itself is fundamentally flawed. His point is that the sense in which I and others think that truth is the goal of reason and justification must be a bloated metaphysical dubious sense of truth. It involves, as he elsewhere makes clear, a commitment to a looking-glass view of the mind, a

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14 Ibid. 2.
view of the human according to our thoughts, when correct, are mirrors of nature. In short, Rorty thinks that the conception of reason and justification I’ve been defending in this essay assumes an objectionable correspondence theory of truth. And Rorty’s point is not just that we couldn’t know whether our beliefs correspond to the world but that this should show us that the entire notion of truth as correspondence is incoherent and unhelpful.

This is a better argument: more interesting, and more plausible. But it is not persuasive. Two faults in particular stand out. The first is a semi-technical point about the viability of correspondence theories of truth. Rorty is correct, in my view, that traditional correspondence theories of truth are not viable. They take truth to be a relation between beliefs (or sentences) and facts – conceived of as entities over and above the more familiar objects and properties that populate our environment. Such things seem metaphysically suspicious – made to order truth-makers for our beliefs. But one can keep the core thought behind correspondence theories without quantifying over facts. This is exactly what contemporary theories of mental representation do. According to such theories – the dominant paradigm in cognitive science – beliefs represent objects as having certain properties, where the “representation” in question is akin to the way a map represents the landscape. And that representation is accurate (read: true) just when that belief does have that property. Beliefs are therefore true by virtue of how accurate they map the world around them, but that world is not a metaphysically mysterious world of “facts” but the world of mountains and molehills that we already know.

This theory of the mind is not so easy to dismiss, simply because of the success cognitive scientists employing it. Moreover, it retains a core thought behind the traditional correspondence theory of truth – namely that true thoughts accurately represent the world.

The second fault with Rorty’s argument is that idea I’m here defending – that the practice of giving and asking for reasons is aimed at forming true beliefs – doesn’t actually presuppose the correspondence theory or its contemporary cousin. It is, in fact, entirely consistent with a thinner definition of truth, according to which we don’t need to do deep metaphysics to understand what makes a true belief different than a false one. Understanding what true beliefs are, on this view, involves simply understanding what they do – their role in our cognitive economy. True beliefs are those that play the true-belief role. Part of

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that role is being objective in a very obvious sense: To believe what is true is for things to be as one believes them to be (as opposed to being as one hopes they would be). Another part of that role is serving as the goal of our scientific and everyday inquiries – true beliefs are those that, other things being equal, we aim at when asking and answering questions. By grasping the role of true beliefs, one grasps the concept of truth. Metaphysics comes into play only when we ask what in fact plays the truth-role for particular kinds of beliefs – what properties particular kinds of beliefs must have to play the true belief-role. And importantly, it is entirely consistent with this conception that beliefs with very different properties might play that role. Some beliefs might play the role when they accurately represent the physical world. But others might play the role when they cohere over the long run with our other beliefs. These are metaphysical matters that go beyond our ordinary understanding of truth.¹⁶

There is nothing in the conception of reason I’ve been employing in this essay that requires anything more than the functionalist view of truth just described. For the soul of that conception of reason is the simple idea that justification – reason-giving – aims at the formation of true beliefs, not the formation of beliefs “everyone agrees ought to be held”. For even the thin functionalist definition I just gave implies that the set of true beliefs and the set of beliefs everyone agrees ought to be held need not be the same.

This brings us back to Rorty’s curious argument. For once truth is understood in the more minimal, functionalist way, it is again no longer clear why we can’t aim at believing what is true. Sure, if to be true, a belief must always mirror a mysterious world of mind-independent facts, we might raise our eyebrows. But this is not the sense of objectivity required. A belief is true, on the sense defined, just when things are as they are believed to be. And it is not clear why – independent of the general skepticism we’ve already dismissed as not in play here – I can’t aim to have beliefs that are precisely of this sort.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how we can avoid aiming at true beliefs in the functionalist sense. For when I aim to believe anything – including that “everyone agrees with me”, to use Rorty’s example – I aim to believe what is, not what seems to be. And the obvious reason for this is that there is a tight analytical relation between truth and belief. To believe that p, as opposed to hoping that p, or fearing that p, or doubting that p, just is to hold it to be true that p. So insofar as I aim to believe, I aim to believe what is true. And again, one can make this point without having to buy into representationalism about belief. All that is required is the humble platitude that to believe a proposition is to hold it true.

¹⁶ Detailed presentations of this view can be found in "Truth and Multiple Realizability." Australasian Journal of Philosophy 82 (2004): 384-408; and Truth as One and Many (forthcoming 2009, Oxford University Press).
It is helpful, in discussing these matters, to distinguish between the ultimate end or value that *governs* a practice and the more immediate aims that are justified in light of this ultimate value. The former is the light, however faint, by which the practice steers, so to speak. The latter are the direct goals practitioners typically aim to achieve. In saying that true belief is a goal of inquiry, we take it to be an aim of inquiry in the first sense. One thing we can agree with Rorty about is that an individual inquirer rarely has anything so high-falutin as truth as a conscious aim in her everyday life. And even when she does, she cannot achieve that end directly. One does not simply will oneself to believe. Rather, we pursue truth indirectly, by pursuing evidence that supplies us with reasons for belief. Indirect or not, however, it is truth that supplies the point of this enterprise, and what distinguishes it from merely pursuing that which will rally others to our cause, or flatter our opinions. Reasons for a belief are reasons because they are means to the further end of truth. Thus justification – reason-giving – is distinct from truth precisely because it is a means to it.

Rorty sometimes seems to concede that there is a point here. But he thinks that at all it amounts to is that “true” has what he calls a “cautionary” use. We use the word in this way, he thinks, to remind our selves that what may be justified to one audience may not be justified to another; “to remind oneself that there might be…objections that have not occurred to any one”\(^{17}\). It is certainly good to remind ourselves of this fact. But the reason I think it is good is because some of those objections might turn out to be right – and my view may turn out to be wrong. And admitting that we can be wrong is admitting that what we believe is the case, and what we can justify to each other as the case, needn’t be the case.

This is not how Rorty sees it. On his view, when we justify our political views – say for example, when we argue that people of the same sex have a right to marry – we should not see ourselves as trying to argue for what is true. Rather, when using arguments that appeal to rights, we should see ourselves as identifying with a “community of like-minded persons – those who find it natural to act in a certain way.”\(^{18}\)

Yet come tomorrow, our like-minded friends may no longer be so like-minded. They may come to think that it is more useful to believe that we should start restricting what books people read, or the ideas they think. If so, then they will be justified in the Rortian sense in abandoning talk about rights. Such talk would no longer allow us to express our solidarity. Rorty would agree that this would be tragic, but that is all. It wouldn’t be wrong except in the sense that he

\(^{17}\) Ibid. 4.

wouldn’t agree with it. But this, I submit, is just not what we have in mind when we talk of rights, nor is it what we have in mind whenever we offer arguments for our political views, whether they involve rights or not.

5. Concluding Observation
I began this essay by distinguishing two objections to the idea that a democracy is a space of reasons. My chief aim has been to refute these criticisms. But I’d like to conclude with a more general point: namely that, whatever their differences, the above discussion reveals that the over-all theoretical positions implicitly supported by the objections are markedly similar. And that, I think, should give us pause, not only because the positions in question are untenable but because it is a sign that something has gone gravely wrong in a debate when the extremists on either side end up agreeing with one another, while still insisting on their disagreement.

Rorty’s views on these matters, for example, are strikingly close in certain respects to those of the conservative skeptics discussed above. According to those skeptics, reason gives out and faith takes over. We have no choice, they say, to dogmatically accept our own traditional first principles without having any tradition-independent reason for thinking they are more true than rival principles. Likewise Rorty. Rorty (honestly and bravely) describes his view as a “cheerful ethnocentrism” and remarks that:

…there is nothing to my use of the term ‘reason’ that could not be replaced by ‘the way we Western liberals, the heirs of Socrates and the French Revolution conduct ourselves’. I agree with MacIntyre and Michael Kelly that all reasoning, both in physics and ethics, is tradition-bound. 19

Of course, Rorty might protest that unlike the conservative skeptics, he is not claiming that his liberal traditions can actually be known to be true by faith. But this seems to me a feeble protest if we are to take the idea that “reason” is just another word for “accepted by the tradition in which I live”. It is a feeble protest because as Rorty liked to say himself, a distinction that makes no difference is no distinction at all. And it is hard to see the practical difference between a defense of tradition based on faith and a defense of tradition as based, well, on nothing. In both cases, we have given up on the open-minded pursuit of the truth, given up on reason, given up, we might say, on democracy.

Democracy as a Space of Reasons