

THE CONCEPTUAL PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Nations, Countries, States of the world practice one form of political system or the other geared towards maintaining peace and order in such society, nation or state. In the quest of this, they have experimented one form of government or the other. Democracy seen as the rule by the people is a form of decision making or government whose meaning can be made more precise by contrast with rival forms, such as dictatorship, oligarchy or monarchy. In these rival forms a single person or a select group rules. With democracy, it is not so. The people themselves rule and they rule themselves. The same body is both ruler and ruled. This paper adopts philosophical analyses to examine the conceptualization of democracy, its nature and discuss of its value. Since the above cannot be completely separated. Any account which explains the value of democracy has to provide or presuppose an account of what it is holding to be of value. Some shortcomings were identified and one answer to all of these problems is to dispense with the idea of democracy being a mechanism for satisfying antecedently given preferences. Instead of taking these as given, democracy should be held as a device in which people develop and discover their views about what is right. And, in thinking about what is right, they should think about what is right for the group as a whole, and not just themselves. People should therefore participate in a form of decision making in which they share their ideas, discuss together and eventually reach general agreement.

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Introduction

Democracy means rule by the people. It is a form of decision making or government whose meaning can be made more precise by contrast with rival forms, such as dictatorship, oligarchy or monarchy. In these rival forms a single person or a select group rules. With democracy this is not so. The people themselves rule and they rule themselves. The same body is both ruler and ruled.

Philosophical accounts of the conceptualization of democracy, analyses of its nature and discuss of its value. The two cannot be completely separated. Any account which explains the value of democracy has to provide or presuppose an account of what it is holding to be

of value. Conversely, supposedly neutral analyses of the nature of democracy are influenced by values. For example, someone who thinks that democracy is a good thing is liable to analyse it in terms of other features also thought to be good. However, this paper will articulate the concept of democracy via its value and paradox. Democracy and knowledge, the use of democracy as well as a balanced evaluation and conclusion.

The Concept of Democracy

The concept of democracy therefore may naturally be thought of as what W.B. Gallie called "an essentially contested concept"¹. Such concepts are concepts whose analysis is unresolvable because different analysts read into it their favoured values. For example, before the reunification of Germany, both East and West Germany called themselves democracies. Yet each had very different political systems, one being a Marxist single-party state, the other having economic and political competition with several parties and contested elections. A dispute about which one was really a democracy would be irresolvable.

This account and example presupposes that democracy is desirable, so there is a competition to lay claim to the honorific title. However, for most of the time since the invention of the concept of democracy it has not been taken to be a term of honour. A kind of democracy did exist in ancient Athens. But, this was a form of government criticized by the leading Greek thinkers of the time, Plato and Aristotle. For most of the time since this early democracy ended, democracy has neither existed nor been thought to be desirable.

Much later, with the creation of the USA, we reach a system which most people today would take to be a paradigmatic example of democracy. Unsurprisingly it was defended by its founding fathers. However, what might surprise us more today is that in one of the most famous of these defences, James Madison was careful not to use 'democracy' as the name for the system he supported. He identifies "things called democracies and does not support them; the description he uses instead for the fledgling USA is republic"².

What Madison means by a republic is "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, and by a democracy a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person".³ It might be thought that the central question here is one of size. Commentators writing just before Madison, such as Rousseau and Montesquieu, held that democracy was only possible in small states; and Madison can be taken to be marking the transition to the modern world, with large states rather than small ones; and a corresponding move from direct democracy to representative government. What is today standardly called democracy is very different from what was standardly so called in the ancient world.

However, size is not the only important distinction here. Individuals in very large modern political units can now be so linked together by modern technology that they can relate to each other much as if they all met together. On the other hand, political decisions by and for small groups are still made in the modern world. It can still be asked of these whether they, should be made democratically; and, if so, which sort of democracy is appropriate. So, whatever the size of political unit, questions can arise about the importance of

participation or discussion before decisions are made. It can be asked whether democracy should be seen primarily as a mechanism in which people vote for policies or representatives without assembly, participation or discussion. At one extreme as with Joseph Schumpeter, "we could analyse democracy as a competition for votes between professional politicians. At the other extreme, we could analyse democracy as a system in which unanimous decisions are reached after a prolonged discussion which respects the equal autonomy and participation of everyone involved"⁴. The former seems more practical, but may not uphold any (other) ideals; the latter seems impressively ideal, but may be ineffective in practice.

It has just been said that voting and representation is at least practical. However, this ignores one prominent problem. This is that the collective view which results from voting may not be related in the way we would wish to the individual views expressed in the votes. In particular, this applies if there are three or more options to be arranged in order of preference and there are three or more such individual orderings (Social choice). These problems will not be discussed further here; although it should be recognized that many people such as W.H. Riker think that they are an insuperable objection to democratic decision making⁵.

The Value of Democracy

Once we have an idea of democracy, the next question is why, or whether, it is of value. The Greek historians identified the original introduction of democracy with the advance of liberty and equality. Since both liberty and equality are usually thought to be of value, this would seem to be a natural answer to the question. Democracy is of value because it produces liberty and equality, for which dictatorship or other forms of special leadership, a particular person or group has more power than others. By contrast, in democracy everyone is equal. Everyone has the same (political) power. So democracy is egalitarian as compared with other forms of government or decision making. A democracy introduced by the overthrow of a dictator increases political liberty, as People are freed from the control of the dictator. Hence democracy promotes liberty. These terms are connected: liberty, freedom, autonomy. However, whichever term is used, this argument seems to work. Consider autonomy, it means, literally, self-rule. Yet this is exactly what happens in democracy, as opposed to other forms of government. The people rule themselves.

However, as always, further inspection makes matters less obvious. Suppose decisions are made by majority (vote) and someone is in the minority, Some persons are outvoted, their wants will not be put into effect. Therefore we can question whether in this (democratic) situation, these persons are really autonomous. They are being made to do something which they do not want to do. Hence they are not really autonomous. Similarly's for equality. Not everyone is treated equally when majority decisions are adopted, because only the views of some people (the majority) are put into effect. The minority's views are disregarded. Hence they are not treated equally. The winner takes all, and hence winners and losers are not equally treated.

If a community is divided into two parts living in mutual antipathy, this becomes even more obvious. Most nations could be by democratic vote, decisions will bear heavily on the minority community, restricting or removing things it holds to be of fundamental value. In such circumstances the members of the minority community could hardly be said to be at liberty; nor could it be said that they were being equally treated. Hence the phrase, used by Tocqueville and taken over by J.S. Mill, "the tyranny of the majority"⁶. The initial contrast between democracy and dictatorship has now been left behind. If democracy is really the dictatorship of the majority, then it is not so obvious that democracy promotes freedom and equality.

The Paradox of Democracy

If we examine democracy from the standpoint of the minority, as in the last section, this helps to focus on the problem of its value. A democrat thinks that the majority view ought to be enacted. But in voting they also declare their own view about what ought to be enacted. When they are in a minority these diverge and they seem to be caught in a contradiction. There are two incompatible policies, A and not -A. Yet the minority democrat seems to think both that A ought to be enacted (because that is what the majority want) and also that not-A ought to be enacted (because that is their own view). Richard Wollheim called this the "paradox of democracy" .

However, if democracy can be given a value, the paradox is resolvable. For what we then have is a simple (and familiar) conflict of values. The democrat's direct view of the matter indicates the value of the course of action for which they voted. But once it is defeated by the majority, this rival course of action also possesses value, for it inherits the value of democracy. If, for example, democracy is taken to be an egalitarian procedure then adopting this rival course of action has an egalitarian value.

An example: four of us in a car have to decide to go either to the beach or to the town. There is only one car and we can go to only one place. We agree to decide democratically, by vote. The vote is taken. I vote for the beach, and am outvoted by three to one. The beach is. of value to me. This is shown by my vote. However, I am also a democrat. After the vote, the town also has value to me. With the town three people's views are respected; with the beach only one. If I hold that people are of equal value, then I have a reason for the car to go to the town.

Democracy and Knowledge

In his Republic Plato says that "it is not in the natural course of things for the pilot to beg the crew to take his orders"⁸ (c.380-367 be: 489b). The implication is that if we want as a group to go to the right place, it is not sensible to assume that everyone has an equally valid opinion. Instead we should follow the lead of those who know. Hence democracy, which treats everybody's opinions equally, is inefficient as a means of determining the Tight thing to do⁹.

This argument makes several presuppositions and can be resisted by contesting them. Some people can only know more than others about something if there is indeed something to be known. That is, if there is a truth about the matter independent of people's opinions. But this is precisely what might be contested when the question is what the state should do. This being a matter of value, it might be held that no independent truth, and hence no knowledge, is available. More precisely, it might be thought that a line can be drawn between areas in

which knowledge is available, and which, for example, might be handled by a professional, trained civil service; and areas for which no knowledge is obtainable, and which should be left to democratic, untrained, amateur decision. Benjamin Barber, for example, takes the area of politics to be one of action, not truth; and for him "democracy takes over in the areas where metaphysics fails, creating its own epistemology"¹⁰.

It should be noticed, however, that an argument for the goodness of democratic decision making cannot simply be made on the basis of a complete scepticism about values. For if no truths about values are available, and then no truths about the value of democracy are available either. Hence a valid argument cannot be made from this premise to a conclusion that it is true that democracy is of value. Conversely, even if it is allowed that there are independent truths about value, it does not directly follow that democracy is an inappropriate way of discovering these truths. For it is quite possible that the truth about what in general the state should do is the kind of truth about which people have a roughly equal capacity. Furthermore, even if people do not have equal capacity, as long as it cannot be told which ones are superior, democracy may still be the appropriate method to use.

The Platonic argument assumes that there is a truth about what should happen; that this truth is better known to some people than others; and that it is possible to tell independently of their views which these people are. All these assumptions could be resisted.

If people are of roughly equal capacity (or it cannot be told who is superior) then, as long as everyone is more likely than not to be right, voting and adopting the majority view is an efficient method to use. For the majority decision has a higher probability of being right than any individual decision, as Condorcet was the first to show. In other words, if I have to make a sequence of decisions about the truth of something and I am in a group each of whose members gets the answer right more often than not, then I do much better systematically following the majority view of the group than my own initial views.

Even if some people clearly have better informed views than others, it still does not follow that democratic decision making is inefficient. For if it is obvious who the experts are, then people with an interest in discovering what is right will generally follow their views. In other words, the same answers will be arrived at as would happen if, as in Plato, the better informed were made dictators. Democracy will not be inferior in discovering of the truth, and will have other advantages.

On the other hand, if it is not obvious who the experts are, then it is indeed the case that the majority view may not follow expert opinion. But, if some people are dictators, it may also be the case that the people who are made dictators are not the ones who are better

informed. The dangers of mistake in following majority opinion are matched by the dangers of mistake in making the wrong people the dictators. The Platonic argument only works if the experts can be recognized in advance, for example (as in Plato's Republic), because they are educated in a way which ensures that they will have expertise.

The Use of Democracy

Other justifications for democracy are possible. One standard device for justification, for many areas, is utilitarianism. Something is justified if it promotes general happiness or utility. It can be asked of a form of government, just like anything else, whether it does tend to promote this. The answer, at least of the classical utilitarians such as Bentham and James Mill, is that democracy does. This argument is expressed most simply in James Mill's short essay, (*Government; (1820)*). He starts with an evaluative and a factual premise. The evaluative premise is utilitarianism. Actions are right in so far as they promote the general happiness.

The factual premise is universal self-interest. People seek those things which promote their own interests. The problem is to find the form of government in which both of these premises can be true together, to find the form in which people seeking their own interest will nevertheless do those things which promote the general happiness. It is not difficult to show that representative democracy is the answer. Kings will promote the interest of kings, dictators of dictators, oligarchies of oligarchies. In all cases the interest promoted is that of the ruling group, not that of the people as a whole. However, if the people as a whole are put in charge, they will promote the interests of the people as a whole. Seeking their own interests, they will produce general happiness. Hence both premises are satisfied simultaneously.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the greatest happiness of the greatest number results if the majority (the greatest number) is put in charge. However, the answer does depend upon certain presuppositions. It assumes that people act in their own interests. Even if this is what they generally intend to do (which might be disputed), it does not follow from this that they are successful. For they may not know their interests. For example, it is often held that people discount the future too severely, so they prefer less important immediate interests to more important long-term interests. If this is so, then democratic decisions will lead to too short-term results, which are not even in the interests of those voting (Needs and interests; Public interest).

A related point is that this model takes preferences as they are, without allowing them to be changed by the democratic process. Yet if people are ill informed about what is good for them, it would be better to operate on the preferences before counting votes. Democracy treats all votes equally. But people may not be equally informed about their interests. So the result may be that some interests are catered for better than others. Analogously, treating votes equally means that strongly held and weakly held views are considered of equal importance. Yet if the goal is to maximize utility, it may be wrong to follow the weakly held view of a majority rather than the strongly held view of a significant minority. If the utility of getting something is supposed to be roughly proportional to the strength of the desire for it, then it could be that the total of less people

multiplied by a greater utility per person is higher than the total of more people multiplied by less utility per person.

Evaluation and Conclusion;

The idea of utilitarianism as a mere preference-satisfying machine, in which antecedently given preferences are satisfied, has often been criticized. One alternative is to treat the values more objectively. Democracy can then be shown to be good in terms of these independently specified consequences. Such was the approach of J.S. Mill and more recent defenders such as William Nelson. Democracy is justified as a form of education or development; it is taken to be a political system in which individuals are made to think for themselves and are therefore improved¹¹. Even if the decisions they make are not the best decisions, it is better for individuals if they try and take part in such decisions.

Another consequence which might justify democracy is the supposed promotion of dynamic economic activity; as opposed to the sluggish effects supposedly emanating from more centralized planning and control. Yet even if democracy does correlate with such beneficial economic circumstances, it is not clear that this by itself can be used as an argument for promoting democracy. Jon Elster identifies the questionable role of such arguments based on indirect effects. For it may be that these other effects only happen if people are attached to democracy for more direct reasons (such as thinking that it is a just form of government). If people were only to support democracy because they thought that it encouraged economic dynamism, then the democracy would not work, and so the economic dynamism would not follow either.

This relates to another familiar problem with starting from antecedent preferences and then taking democracy to be a sort of market mechanism in which these preferences are traded. If people only act through self-interest, trying to get their antecedently given preferences fulfilled, then it is not obvious why they should vote at all. For the advantages of voting will come to them if the others vote and their own vote seems to be merely a cost. At the national government level, it is exceedingly unlikely that any one vote will be decisive. So they would be better off not voting at all.

One answer to all of these problems is to dispense with the idea of democracy being a mechanism for satisfying antecedently given preferences. Instead of taking these as given, democracy should be held as a device in which people develop and discover their views about what is right. And, in thinking about what is right, they should think about what is right for the group as a whole, and not just themselves. People should therefore participate in a form of decision making in which they share their ideas, discuss together and, with luck, eventually reach general agreement.

The form of arguments people can use in such discussions is naturally constrained, as people seeking agreement should look as if they are appealing to general principles rather than merely appealing to self-interest. The condition of publicity (that is, of what can be said publicly) imposes constraints. If people think from the general point of view rather than in terms of their own individual interest, the forms of reasoning and the antecedent judgments will be different. Discussion rather than voting becomes the central feature of

democracy, and it is important that people can meet and talk together before decisions are made.

These ideas promoting discussion and participation have several presuppositions. They presuppose that people will be better able to work out the truth (about what is good for the group) by working in groups rather than individually. This may be the case if they are all independently motivated by the same desire to discover the truth. It is less obviously the case if there are deep conflicts of interest (such as capital against labour; or country against town; or this world against the next). The supposition is that group discussion leads to more rationality; but in some circumstances group dynamics merely increase and inflame passion, so that people behave badly together in a way that they never would separately.

The values considered at the start of this discussion - namely, liberty and equality - now reappear; only now not as the consequence of democratic activity but as its prerequisites. For if discussion is to reach the right answer, it needs to start with roughly equal power between the discussants. Otherwise discussion will be forced to be in the interests of the stronger; hence the idea that democracy needs circumstances of roughly equal wealth (held by Montesquieu and Rousseau). The Marxist criticism that Western liberal democracy works on the fiction of an idealized equality when the real situation is one of greatly unequal economic power, hence John Rawls' argument "that political party should be paid for by the state to avoid the economically powerful buying votes"¹². There are also the objections of feminist theorists. If men and women are antecedently in a situation of different power, then the supposed equality of democracy will only result in most of the power remaining with the men. Discussion, yes: but only if the forum is subject to powerful antecedent control and regulation. Otherwise we return to the bad old world of bargaining between antecedently given preferences from which this optimistic espousal of discussion was meant to save us.

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