**Democracy as a Universal Moral Obligation**

Democracy has long been taken for granted by many of us as a cornerstone of our existence, not to be moved or marred, but only to be built upon. Now when social currents threatening democracy seem to be gaining ground, it is incumbent upon us to be clearer on what we are talking about when we are talking about democracy.

In our varied discussions about democracy, three related but distinct topic areas appear. First is democracy as a certain kind of structure of government, variable and tweakable within certain parameters; secondly, democracy as the contradictory opposite of authoritarianism; and third, democracy as an ideal by which we judge to what extent the attempts we notice at democratic leadership in the organizations to which belong are successful or not.

Democracy in the first sense is a toolbox of political possibilities related to the forms of compromise, mostly institutionalized (i.e., planned, not spontaneous) that might be suitably used to advance or fulfill democratic intentions in diverse situations and groups. These include the various forms of democracy, such as parliamentary or presidential; representative or direct; democracy between sub-groups (e.g. U.S. states), or between individuals; by vote, either among elected or appointed officials, or among individual members; with some matters being settled by plurality vote, some by majority, some by 60 percent, some by two-thirds, some three fourths, and some by unanimity. Other possibilities might be division of decision-making duties, taking turns, or argument to consensus. While it is difficult to imagine a case that any of these and many more possible means of compromise should be considered the unique and definitive way to be democratic, there are certainly some obviously noteworthy commonalities among them, especially as the size of the group governed increases. This manner of discussion presents a variety of forms, a sort of spectrum of democratic forms, in which there may in various senses be more-or-less choices for us to make.

A second way of speaking about democracy is less about form, but more about moral purpose. If the choice for authoritarian leadership is presented to us, then the question of democracy becomes, properly speaking, an either-or choice, since authoritarianism is by definition non-democratic. In such a case, we are committing a version of the false choice fallacy if we try to disguise the democratic choice as the extreme along a spectrum, with other choices wedged in between it and authoritarianism. This is not to say there cannot be more than one democratic choice, but we are fooled if we think there is some middle ground when there is none.

This way of conceiving democracy as the contradictory opposite of authoritarianism we will see eventually converges at least in part with the third sense discussed below.

A third way of speaking about democracy is as a background, common ideal forming the leverage point at the basis of all criticisms of democratic leadership, both *de facto* and *de iure*, in all the groups we belong to. For democracy as an ideal applies to all of them. And the ideal is simple; democracy in this sense is a culture of universal ownership. This is what we all should be striving for in the groups to which we belong: to establish and maintain a culture of universal ownership. Of course, we do not intend here any particular monetary sense of ownership, but moral ownership. Monetary ownership is something established by contract. Moral ownership is our birthright as rational beings. For as rational beings we are moral agents, and as moral agents we are all peers, regardless of wealth or status.

We are not only faced with the threat of authoritarianism at the level of national government. It may be something we have to face at the corporate level, or on an athletic team, or in a school, or in a family, What makes authoritarianism wrong is that, as the contradictory opposite of democracy, it produces a culture of alienation. Alienation, as the opposite of a culture of universal ownership, is the bane of all organizational life. People to the extent that they are alienated have no sense of moral ownership, the motivation for caring. It thus destroys the grounds for friendship and all human socialness.

These are not necessarily things that occur overnight, but they happen. People with more fortunate organizational histories may hold out longer; those who hang on may even constitute organizational democratic outposts for other members of their troubled organization.

At the beginning of their long article on democracy in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2024), Tom Christiano and Sameer Bajaj argue that democracy applies to all groups as a fundamental aspect of human socialness, intending “this definition to cover many different kinds of groups, from families and social organizations to economic firms, states, and transnational and global organizations. It is this most general sense that is most morally relevant, from which we can draw the best instruction for improving our notions and achieving better outcomes. It is not so much about a study of the histories of a few Greek city-states and a few other states in the current world as it is a reflection about how to build our socialness by promoting democratic culture.

In authoritarian culture, communication is not good, because no one feels comfortable speaking up, not knowing whether the information they offer will be used against them; not feeling in any way part of the leadership of the organization. Authoritarian leadership is therefore blind and deaf to the extent that it cannot readily avail itself of the eyes and ears of all its members, as would happen naturally in democratic culture.

This is not an extremely complicated matter. Our thoughts on the matter become obfuscated by the structural complexity of democratic forms and the difficulty even to achieve democratic results from democratic structures. I grew up in a generation in which many of us denied this country was a democracy. Very few of those who expressed that opinion had any substantial criticism to make about our governmental structures but felt that we just were not a *de facto* democracy. I had my reservations about their pessimism but could not deny that we were and are still at best a dysfunctional democracy, surely not getting the most out of our democracy- enabling social and governmental structures. In the end, I am afraid, what is missing in us is not to be found in the democratic apparatus alone, but in our flagging democratic intentions.

As one key example, it is not enough not to “vote away democracy”; we must also vote with democratic intentions. It is not even democratic to vote away democracy since we in so doing are not just expressing our own political will but acting to deprive others of their future right to democratic action. If the right to vote is only a right once we vote it in, then it follows that we must say the same of political participation; but if political participation is only a right if granted politically, then it is not a moral right at all and we no longer have a case against even totalitarianism, since the right to political participation is not fundamental, but has to be granted (or not) into existence.

In the age of enlightenment (17th-18th centuries), the arguments given for democracy were largely not based on entitlement, but on the utilitarian consideration that democratic culture was the only way to promote and substantially maintain freedom of speech for the sake of cultivating rigorous argument in the public forum conducive to the best decisions being made in government. To be sure, this does not always happen; but when it does not, it is largely on account of bad actors and dishonest speech. This is the reason, in fact, behind the criticism of democracy by Socrates and Plato, who, of course, would have supported democracy on those grounds if they thought them likely. That they opposed democracy cannot be read as an opposition to it as an ideal, but only as too likely to collapse into demagoguery.

In Book VIII of Plato’s *Republic*, we see at 557a, we see quite a different look at what democracy is, with Socrates in discussion with his interlocutor Adeimantus, asking him: “And a democracy, I suppose, comes into being when the poor, winning the victory, put to death some of the other party, drive out others, and grant to the rest of the citizens an equal share in both citizenship and offices…for the most part assigned by lot.” To which Adeimantus tersely replies, “yes… whether by force of arms or by terrorism.”. Of course, democracy so conceived as having no concern for argument or community, but rather on a pirate-like takeover of government, could not be expected to go anywhere good. At any rate, we would have to count it as a decidedly anti-democratic bias. But let’s take care not to blame this on Socrates, since the Republic does not count as a Socratic dialog, written earlier in the life of Plato, dialogs thought to be most faithfully representative of Socrates. However, it was well-enough attested that Socrates did have criticisms of his own. But there was clearly a difference it what they were talking about when they were talking about democracy and how we talk about it now, according to which they both may have been more favorable.

In fact, Socrates spent his life conducting in the open forum what he referred to as a divine activity, which was free public discussion with all the citizenry present of matters pertinent to political and moral life. This in fact is the heart and soul of the Enlightenment case advocating for democracy. To be sure, the “divinity” or good of it wasn’t simply in the arguing, but in the manner of arguing – dialectic and truth-oriented rather than rhetorical or polemic. Those of us devoted to the cause of democracy today ought to take note, lest in seeking victory over the foes of democracy we become like them ourselves.

So, okay. Maybe Socrates wasn’t an actual proponent of democracy. But he certainly provided the best case for it and was the best model for it.

It is clear to us all that to promote and maintain democratic culture – a culture of universal ownership, getting everyone to take ownership of the groups they belong to as theirs – is a constant struggle. But the difference of behavior seen in someone taking ownership of their family, their workplace, their school, their city, their state, their country, their world, for the first time is dramatic and substantial. The struggle, of course, is greater the greater the size of the group. But the struggle is clearly worthwhile when we see the results of our surrender to anti-democratic forces. We all belong. We all must claim our ownership.