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Ideas that Matter

A PERSONAL GUIDE
FOR THE 21st CENTURY



integrity, humility and moderation, maintaining the idea of achieving oneness with the Dao through *wu wei*, and no longer rejecting authority or rule but offering advice on how government could best be conducted. The foundation of monasteries and the status to which Daoist masters were raised in the Tang ensured that for centuries thereafter the outlook's ideas retained a major place in Chinese thought. That changed with the advent of communism in China in 1949, for then, and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), a concerted effort was made to stamp it out.

See: BUDDHISM, COMMUNISM

DEMOCRACY

'Democracy' is a word with positive connotations in Western liberal societies; it is what the West stands for, and even claims to go to war to defend or promote. Its flaws

and weaknesses are recognized, and constitutional efforts to adjust for them are standardly made; but the consensus is that democracy is the least bad of all political systems, because it most reflects the will of the governed in their own government, and thus confers the greatest possible degree of consent and legitimacy on the political process. Few would dream of saying, at least aloud, that oligarchy, plutocracy or dictatorship are preferable alternatives.

The basic idea of democracy is that it consists in 'majority rule', though in fact the need to protect minority interests makes this phrase something of a *façon de parler*. It would apply in the case of 'direct democracy', and decision by referendum; but most democracies are 'representative democracies' in which members of a legislature are elected by constituencies and thereby in effect deputized to take decisions, hold office, and generally consider what is best on their electors' behalf.

The feel-good meaning of 'democracy' as understood in liberal Western states comprehends not just the system by which legislatures and governments are elected, but a whole package of concepts besides, centrally including the following: the rule of law characterized by due process; respect and protection for civil liberties and human rights; and the freedom for civil society organizations to exist, representing interests and meeting needs across a wide spectrum.

But democracy has not always had such a good press. Rather the contrary, for Western civilization has in fact been profoundly anti-democratic for most of its history, with democracy regarded as nothing better than the despotism of ignorant and venal majorities. Since most of those who have been literate enough to record their opinion of matters political belonged to the classes of people apt to suffer under mob rule, history is filled with condemnations of democracy.

When classical Athens was a democracy it was not a democracy in the sense that we would now accept. Women, foreigners and slaves (between them constituting the majority of the population) had no say, and freeborn male citizens only reached official adulthood at the age of thirty. Yet at its height under Pericles, Athenian democracy produced art, architecture, literature and philosophy of such excellence and power that they continue to shape Western civilization to this day.

Athenian democracy, despite not really being one, had vigorous opponents. The aristocratic Plato blamed it for making the citizenry 'idle, cowardly, loquacious and greedy' and for devouring those – Pericles, Miltiades, Themistocles – who had given it to them in the first place. Control of the state had, he said, been put into the hands of the ignorant, feckless and greedy mob.

With Plato and after him Aristotle against it, democracy had small chance with later thinkers. Renaissance thinkers assumed that democracy promised nothing but unlimited turmoil. Enlightenment thinkers saw it as a threat to virtue. The founding fathers of the United States believed it would lead to a dangerous equalization of property. And as the much grudging change towards today's simulacrum of democracy began in Britain in 1832, its opponents lamented that they were being sold to the mob, because for them democracy meant only the terrors of ochlocracy as experienced in the French Revolution.

What at last made democracy not merely respectable but something worth fighting wars to protect (and even to disseminate among unfortunates who do not possess it) is the achievement of nineteenth-century historians in rescuing Athenian democracy from the opprobrium bestowed on it by Plato and many intervening centuries of historians. They did it by linking the ideals of democracy with the glories of

Periclean Athens and the fertility of the Athenian mind at that period. The new perspective has proved irresistible.

Still, democracy is only truly respectable when it can be made to work both effectively and, even more importantly, fairly. It needs a method of representation that yields stable government while respecting, and to the extent possible accommodating, minority and individual interests, including those that are sometimes not directly conformable to majority interests. Most of the major Western democracies are very imperfect, and rely on the population's general acceptance of their imperfections in return for more or less satisfactory performance otherwise. The imperfections in question include always producing governments elected by an absolute minority of voters, as in the United Kingdom with its first-past-the-post system; the supposed virtue of this is that strong government results, whereas electoral systems that are too accurately proportional to voters' wishes tend to produce weak and unstable coalition governments (Italy is an example), or governments that are at the mercy of tiny minority parties which hold the balance (Israel is an example).

A condition of genuine and effective democracy is a thoughtful and informed electorate, and one that actually bothers to vote. Some argue that voting, as in Australia, should be compulsory, making it a civic duty like paying taxes and abiding by the law generally. 'Voter apathy' is standardly blamed on politicians, who may indeed merit some of the blame; but it is much more the fault of lazy, indifferent, complacent or ignorant citizens who do not make use of their important right to vote – a right for which people elsewhere have fought and died.

Democratic structures and procedures can and often do exist at the sub-state level too, in organizations such as clubs or boardrooms, educational institutions, even families. The

strengths and especially the weaknesses of democracy are particularly marked in such settings, most of which seem to work better under some form of benign dictatorship. At very least, under benign dictatorship meetings tend to be shorter. In a household with children this seems to be the best system of governance, although when the children become teenagers the dictatorship, now exercised by these latter, tends to turn malign.

To Abraham Lincoln is owed the resounding remark that 'Democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people', and this certainly sums up the best aspiration of the least bad basis for political and governmental authority so far known to mankind. But it is salutary to remember the acidulous but all too speaking comment made by Winston Churchill on the other side of the subject: 'The strongest argument against democracy', he said, 'is a five minute discussion with the average voter.'

See: ANARCHY, ARISTOCRACY, COMMUNISM, FASCISM, POLITICS

DEONTOLOGY

A deontological ethical theory is one that says there are kinds of acts which are intrinsically wrong no matter what, even if the consequences of performing them are good, indeed even if the consequences of performing them are morally obligatory. The word comes from Greek *deon* meaning 'duty', and the concept of duty accordingly plays a central role in the formulation of deontological ethics.

The contrasting ethical outlook is consequentialist or 'teleological' (*telos* is Greek for 'end' or 'goal'). Such a theory holds that what makes an act good is that it brings about something good. On this view, to judge the moral worth of