

Chapter Seven - Survival, Ethics And Democracy

Part 2 - Leadership

Demanding "Leadership" is an abrogation of our own responsibility. It is a childish request for Daddy to take charge

Quick Links to sections within this part

[We Have To Earn The Right To Power](#)

[The Herd Still Believes All We Need is "Good" Leaders](#)

["Rights" are a Collective Project - the flaw in American Libertarianism](#)

[Hostility To Collectivism Drives Hostility to Democracy](#)

[Libertarians Need Democracy as much as Democracy needs Liberty](#)

[The Default Setting Of the Universe is Liberty](#)

[Liberty - The Basis of Anarchism AND Democracy](#)

[Can a Majority EVER Justify Force Against a Minority?](#)

[The Choice: Democracy or Totalitarianism](#)

We Have To Earn The Right To Power

In [Part 1](#) of this chapter, I stripped away most of human history to focus on the evolution of the core division in human ideology which crystallised in the experience of ancient Athens. This is the [first](#) place on Earth and the first time in recorded human history that we see the revolutionary and unequivocally absolute concept that, instead of social control based on the whims of a self-justified elite backed by arbitrary, usually physical, authority, we should, at least for the purposes of decision making, all be treated as equals and take an equal part in the responsibility for running our communal affairs. The first hint of horizontal society. No hint of hierarchy. No dint of delegation. No dilution. Just - People - Power. Just Democracy.

It forced a reaction on the part of those who prefer the vertical structure of society (presumably because they prefer the view from their current position within that vertical structure). Hence Democratic Athens also produced the first formal attempts at justifying "traditional" authority. It is hardly a surprise, then, to learn that the principal philosophical and historical opponent of democracy - Plato - claims (or rather, others claim on his behalf) Royal Blood. His father Ariston

*traced his descent from the king of Athens, Codrus, and the king of Messenia, Melanthus. Plato's mother was Perictione, whose family boasted of a relationship with the famous Athenian lawmaker and lyric poet Solon. Perictione was sister of Charmides and Critias, both prominent figures of **the Thirty Tyrants**, the brief oligarchic regime, which followed on the collapse of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian war (404-403 BC)([source](#))(emphasis added)*

The "Thirty Tyrants" were from the aristocratic families whose class had lost power at the inception of the Democratic regime. They siezed the opportunity of a period of confusion following the war and tried to "resume normal service" by ending the Democratic experiment. So Plato is not just royal blood, but a member of the families who formed the main opposition to Democracy while it was still alive. Hardly surprising, therefore, that Plato's entire focus should be on justifying why his class should retain control. He was bred for it. Thus he explained, with conveniently but deeply held conviction, that social decision making is such a complex and difficult art; and failure can have such dire consequences, that only an elite with appropriate skills, education and personalities can be allowed to take part in it.

Amazingly, in two and a half thousand years, no-one has improved on his argument, so the philosophical debate has hardly moved on at all. To illustrate how static this line of reasoning has become, Noam Chomsky [brings to our attention](#) the thoughts of [Walter Lippmann](#) - who died in 1974 and thus shared the same timeframe and attitudes to Democracy as our friend Leo Strauss - on the roles of the Platonist elite and today's Plebs. (Strauss, of course, provides his own excellent examples of the genre)

You'll probably need to read these comments twice before you believe them, but I recommend you wait till your blood pressure drops back to safe levels before you repeat the experience.:

Lippmann goes on to explain. First, there is the role assigned to the specialized class, the "insiders," the "responsible men," who have access to information and understanding. Ideally, they should have a special education for public office, and should master the criteria for solving the problems of society; "In the degree to which these criteria can be made exact and objective, political decision," which is their domain, "is actually brought into relation with the interests of men." The "public men" are, furthermore, to "lead opinion" and take the responsibility for "the formation of a sound public opinion." "They initiate, they administer, they settle," and should be

protected from "ignorant and meddlesome outsiders," the general public, who are incapable of dealing "with the substance of the problem."

*The second role is "the task of the public," which is much more limited. It is not for the public, Lippmann observes, to "pass judgment on the intrinsic merits" of an issue or to offer analysis or solutions, but merely, on occasion, to place "its force at the disposal" of one or another group of "responsible men." The public "does not reason, investigate, invent, persuade, bargain, or settle." Rather, "the public acts only by aligning itself as the partisan of someone in a position to act executively," once he has given the matter at hand sober and disinterested thought. It is for this reason that "the public must be put in its place." **The bewildered herd, trampling and roaring, "has its function": to be "the interested spectators of action," not participants. Participation is the duty of "the responsible man."** (emphasis added)*

Ignoring the obvious naivete (if anyone knew "the criteria for solving the problems of society" the world would be a different place!) how does it feel to learn that you are perceived as a mere sheep among the "bewildered herd"?

The Herd Still Believes All We Need is "Good" Leaders

One of the most disturbing aspects of the modern political landscape is the extent to which the "bewildered herd" still deserve that patronising description. Their commitment to following "Leaders" is still deeply embedded. Two and a half thousand years of Platonist conditioning have produced a near consensus. For a current example (written 2004) do a google for "[Where have all the leaders gone](#)" (or just click that link) and you'll find (depending on what Google's doing to its algorithm this week) somewhere between 50,000 and 140,000 pages, most of which are pointing to or copying extracts from a polemic piece by Lee Iacocca making an impassioned plea for the emergence of one or more "good leaders". It includes such gems as:

If you're a politician, courage means taking a position even when you know it will cost you votes.

variations of which you will, no doubt, have come across elsewhere. Such sentiments are only capable of a neutral interpretation in any context *other* than "Leadership". In other words, in an election campaign or something similar, where we're merely at the stage of electing decision-makers rather than making any decisions, it may well qualify as courageous to profer an argument which you know to be unpopular and thus risk losing your support and, thus, the *opportunity* of "Leadership". However, once you *are* an Elected Leader, the idea of *implementing* a "position" or policy even when you know it is not democratically approved is a straightforward breach of even the most simplistic notion of democracy - that policy should reflect the "will of the people". Yet this "courage not to represent the will of the people" is clearly what Iacocca has in mind (along with the vast majority of politicians) and is even entirely in tune with the Ron Paul "Libertarian" notion of the Republic rather than Democracy (see below).

There are other significant aspects of that google search which caused me to use it rather than a specific link to the relevant extract. First, note the popularity of the meme, and that most mentions of it include the lengthy extract. Second, I challenge the reader to find any one of those links offering any kind of criticism or even critical analysis of what he has to say. Even sites like the "Information Clearing House" - which generally prides itself on publishing material hostile to the establishment - reprints the extract without comment or criticism in a manner which can only be taken as "supportive".

This attitude - the cult of "Leadership" - is clearly still the majority view. Take a snapshot of modern culture and this is hardly surprising. Here in the UK, even our most "serious" and respected news programs spend between 30 and 50% of their precious air time discussing nothing more substantial than the political consequences of changing or challenging Leaders. Ever since the Labour party came to power, for example, there has been an ongoing narrative about the rivalry between Blair and Brown. Meanwhile the pitiful Tories believe that all they need to reverse their fortunes is to find an electable Leader. Over in the States, as I write, they are in the middle of their 2 year campaign to pick their next dictator to succeed Bush and any analysis of the political coverage reveals that far more time is spent discussing their personalities and pécadillos than their policies. There is no hint whatsoever that policies in a so called democracy are supposed to be a bottom up rather than top down process. In places like China, of course, where the cult of Leadership reached something of a peak in Mao's time, they don't even pretend that such a process is either possible or desirable. The rest of world, with a few notable exceptions (Scandinavia and Switzerland) lie somewhere along the same spectrum: Elected Dictators at one end, Unelected Dictators at the other.

I am, and perhaps you are as well, if you've managed to read this far, part of a small minority when I dare to make the argument that "Leadership" is part of the problem, not the solution. Demanding "Leadership" is an abrogation of our own responsibility. It is a childish request for Daddy to take charge. But, like it or not, it remains the default position of Society at large. "Leadership" makes us feel "cared for" and gives us someone to blame when things go wrong. Anything, it seems, is preferable to admitting our own responsibility for the disaster, because we allow the blameworthy free rein to cause their chaos in the first place.

It is no surprise, therefore that before the Athenian experiment and, of course, since the fall of their Democracy, the Platonists, in various "Leadership" guises, have held power virtually unchallenged. Whether we are talking about the Caesars of Ancient Rome, the Roman Catholic Church, the Monarchs of medieval Europe and Asia or the [Elective Dictatorships](#) of the modern era, with a few minor interruptions (like the French Revolution which succeeded in wresting power from the Monarchy but never quite managed to pass it on to We The People), the Platonists have always held the upper hand.

And rightly so. Daddy should remain in charge until the children demonstrate that they are willing and able to control their own destiny.

Surprised? This is not a sudden change of direction. Why should you expect turkeys to vote for Christmas? It is similarly unrealistic to expect or require those who already hold power and control wealth to suddenly come to their senses and give it all up to We The People. It is, instead, entirely up to We The People to wake up, organise ourselves and assume power for ourselves. Preferably by peaceful means. At the time of writing, however, there is no significant sign of "Prometheus Rising".

This is not, incidentally, an attack on leadership with a small "L". The inspirational leadership which arises from one or more individuals in response to events is essential to human progress. The mistake is to elevate that kind of natural and transient leadership - which people can follow if they wish - to a position of permanent (or long term) political power - which people are obliged to obey, even if they don't wish.

Half a millenium prior to the birth of Jesus, revolution was in the air. If - in 510 BC - the "aristocrats" hadn't expelled the last king of Rome, "Tarquin The Superb" ("Superbus" to his friends. I suspect it read differently then.) they wouldn't have founded the Roman Republic (and - almost certainly - Christianity would not have become a major global religion and none of the history which followed from that development would have happened - or, at least, not in the way it has). Just 2 years later, the Athenians, as we described in Part 1, began their somewhat more thorough redistribution of Power, ejecting the tyrant (Hippias) and introducing full undiluted Democracy. Less than a couple of decades later, in 494 BC, the "ordinary citizens" (*plebeians*) of Rome were also, to a somewhat less ambitious extent, flexing their political muscle.

If the "Plebs" hadn't [walked out](#) of the city of Rome in protest at the then Consul's harsh enforcement of credit control, they wouldn't have won the significant concession of the "Council of The Plebs" and their Elected "Tribunes" - constitutional hybrids who had some powers considerably in excess of modern congressmen or MPs. At their peak they could exercise "veto" ("I forbid") against almost any ruling by a higher authority if they deemed the ruling harmful to the interests of their constituents. Later "secessions" forced further significant political concessions: the first formal publication of Roman Law (until then held as a "secret" by the priests) and primacy of the "Plebiscite"

The plebiscite is a remnant of their political power. Eventually (from 287 BC) a plebiscite - then only a decision made by the Council of the Plebs rather than today's direct referendum of the people - became the only recognised means of establishing Law (even over the upper classes who weren't allowed to participate in the Council) Although they didn't hold ballots or wide public debates, the Tribunes were obliged literally to keep open house 24/7 to their electors (which puts today's "weekend surgery" to shame). Even without ballots, having to be that accessible would certainly incline the average Tribune to try to please! Like all systems since, it wasn't a patch on the real thing being pioneered a few hundred miles away, not least because the Tribunes were still junior to the Magistrates, Senators and Consul, but it is illuminating to understand how "advanced" the pre-Imperial Roman system of political representation was, compared to most modern systems.

Incidentally that historical event (the first "Secession of the Plebs" in 494 BC) is my contender for the earliest use of "non violent direct action" as a political weapon. The very first "general strike". (Let me know if you find an earlier reliably documented example)

What is most significant about these historical events is that we know them for the effect they had rather than the personalities involved. Clearly there was some kind of leadership involved in the democratic movements and, if we dig hard enough, we can even find the names of some of the prominent Greeks and Romans who pioneered the ideas and persuaded masses of other citizens to agree with them and work alongside them. None of them, though, acquired or required power and privilege as part of the deal. Yet these movements are amongst the most revolutionary acts in history. Genuine egalitarian movements don't demand "Leadership" even though they are clearly inspired by [leadership](#)

In any case, all attempts at democracy in the growing Republic came to an abrupt end with the Caesars, who reinstated "Leadership" and - in all but name - the Absolute Monarchy; eventually even declaring themselves divine to boot. And what was good enough for Rome was widely considered to be appropriate for all other independent "kingdoms" - a system of government based on the loosely Platonist "divine right to rule."

Fast forward 17 centuries after the founding of the Roman republic and if the English "Aristocrats" - the Barons - hadn't had the balls - and the intelligence to form a co-operative team - to stand up against King John, they wouldn't have won the political concessions enshrined in the [Magna Carta](#), under which, in principle at least (though not really in practice for a few more centuries), they regained - for the "Senate" - what *they'd* lost to the Caesars.

The Barons' solidarity, courage and conviction - like the Athenian Democrats, the Italian Aristocrats and Plebs before them - won them the right to a share in political power. And, generally, by moderately peaceful means. They expelled Superbus, they didn't kill him. The Athenians expelled Hippias. They didn't kill him. The Barons blackmailed King John, they didn't kill him. (By the way, the Pope annulled the original Magna Carta anyway - declaring that the King's agreement was given under duress and thus not lawful. Yeah. The Pope) And the plebs just downed tools for long enough to bring the masters to their senses. They didn't kill anyone either.

Of course there are even more examples where the reigns of power have had to be lifted from their "cold dead hands" but it doesn't have to be that way. What is essential, though, is that the underclass HAS to be prepared to confront the overclass and to make it clear that non-compliance is not at option.

"Rights" are a Collective Project - the flaw in American Libertarianism

ALL our so called political or human "Rights" are won that way and this is the fundamental flaw with the philosophy at the well-meaning but sadly misguided heart of American (right wing) Libertarianism, Objectivism, "rational self interest" and all points west. It is beautifully illustrated by

the words of one of their "sacred texts" - the American Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

... which is very pretty - but philosophical bollocks. If we *were* "endowed" with the sodding things, we wouldn't have had to spend so much time fighting for them! Actually if we ignore the theological implications, they're right, in the sense that we'll expand on below: the default setting of the Universe is Liberty. What their formulation fails to account for is that this applies to *every* living thing. Including bullies and predators who routinely exercise their liberty to deprive us of ours, which, in practice, means that we are constantly engaged in a fight to retain or regain our own liberty.

It is the nature and necessity of that struggle for "Rights" and their recognition which exposes the fallacy in the anti-collective bias of the Libertarian Right. No single slave, no single disenfranchised man or woman, no single victim of racism or homophobia and no single colonist could possibly have won the necessary battles to achieve the end of slavery, universal suffrage, the laws against racism, homophobia, the ejection of the British Empire and so on. These were absolutely essential collective actions. Not only did "their Creator" fail to endow Slaves with Liberty, Women with equality or homosexuals with the right to pursue their Happiness but by all accounts, their Creator was quite content to endorse their ongoing repression.

Clearly if the gods themselves weren't prepared to step in and redress the social balance, and a couple of thousand years of Platonist dictatorship had failed to throw up a "benevolent dictator" prepared to step in and right the wrongs, the only way these aspirations were ever going to be achieved was through the collective action of the oppressed group.

The full irony of their opposition to collectivism is that the War of Independence and even - to a lesser extent - the Consitution which they hold so dear are also classic victories for collective action!

Hostility To Collectivism Drives Hostility to Democracy

More worryingly the right wing libertarian hostility to collectivism spills over, quite naturally into hostility to the most overtly collectivist behaviour we can envisage:- Democracy. This opposition is not hidden, although to listen to the average American president, politician, commentator or even citizen prattling on about their "democratic values" you would be right to conclude that *they think* they live in a democracy. In fact those those who actually understand the American Constitution and want - as they see it - to "reinstate" it are quite clear in their insistence that it is not and was never intended to be a democratic institution. This, for example, comes from Ron Paul's gang - The Liberty Committee:

*although the Constitution of the United States does affirm that the people ordained and established the government of the United States, they did so, **not to promote the***

*will of the people, but to “establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity....” Likewise, although the state constitutions affirm that all power is inherent in the people, they did **not establish state governments to obey the will of the people**, but to ensure that all individuals enjoy their pre-existing rights of life, liberty, and property with which they have been naturally endowed. ([source](#)) ([cached](#)) (emphasis added)*

(in other words, "don't you worry your pretty little heads about it - the grown ups will look after you - just make sure you elect the right ones")

The reasons for their hostility include some with which I - as an anarchist - am more than sympathetic and they play a major role in my proposals for the revival of Democracy which I will deal with in the final part of this chapter. Their objection is to "dictatorship by the 51%". In a nutshell, they don't see - and nor do I in *most* cases - why the Majority should (merely by virtue of being the Majority) be able to dictate to the Minority. They will, I hope, eventually agree that there are ways to deal with that problem which do not involve the invention of mythically endowed (and, thus, logically indefensible) attributes of existence.

We will analyse their opposition to Democracy in some detail in Part 5, largely because it is, generally, honest opposition - as opposed to mere Platonist deception and self justification. There are very real problems with Democracy which must be addressed by the Libertarian Left and which the Libertarian Right are entitled to raise. The spin off, if we address the problems even to the satisfaction of the Libertarian Right is that we might actually end the hostility between our two camps and form a powerful alliance.

Meanwhile, despite its rhetorical tones, there is nothing philosophically novel or politically revolutionary about the American constitution. Though it speaks in grand tones about "We The People" - it never actually proposed a power mechanism based on the collective strength and wisdom of "We The People". As The Liberty Committee boast: it was never intended to serve the will of the people. It was always a paternalistic device designed to serve what a fairly narrow elite had predetermined were the *interests* of the people - regardless of their will.

That is so naive (the idea that you can objectively determine the interests of the people without a fundamentally democratic mechanism) that it is frankly embarrassing that so many obviously intelligent and well meaning libertarians can even think like this. (But not everyone chooses to take [the red pill](#).)

Unsurprisingly, given that naivete from its paternalistic authors, the US Constitution has turned out - like all other Republican models - to be just another Platonist control mechanism. Hardly surprising given that Plato invented the concept. Granted it seeks to establish and protect more individual liberties than some (by no means all) other Platonisms, but, as the Libertarian Right (who still

believe that the Constitution will be their salvation) are amongst the loudest to point out, it can now be seen to have dramatically failed to meet its Libertarian aspirations.

Libertarians Need Democracy as much as Democracy needs Libertarians

What the Libertarian Right must grasp is that if they're sincere about establishing and protecting those "Rights and Liberties" which are supposed to be enshrined and protected by their precious constitution, then they desperately need Democracy to help them achieve that goal. Why? Because you cannot logically trump any existing hierarchy with just another hierarchy or by setting arbitrary limits on the power of the hierarchy. The only way to trump any and ALL hierarchies is to remove them and replace government with Democracy. **All Government is Platonist.** Geddit?

Government is an inherently Platonist concept. Democracy is the Opposite of Government. It is NOT Self Government. *This* is Self Government:

"[The] voluntary support of laws, formed by persons of their own choice, distinguishes peculiarly the minds capable of self-government. The contrary spirit is anarchy, which of necessity produces despotism." Thomas Jefferson addressing the Citizens of Philadelphia in 1809. ([source](#)) (emphasis added)

Using the same words, but in the right order, Democracy would be *laws of their own choice, formed by [all] persons*. We'll deal with his natural phobia against anarchy later, though it is worth observing that "self government" has clearly not prevented the emergence of the despots Jefferson clearly hoped to avoid.

Democracy is Not Self Government, it is [Self Governance](#)

Make that a milestone. Once we can make We The People understand the crucial differences between Self Government and Self Governance, we'll have won a major battle, though not the war. In short, self governance carries the natural autonomy of the individual (see next heading) into the autonomy of the ad hoc logical groupings through which we organize society. Membership of an autonomous group is always voluntary. Each group makes its own rules, has its own aims and ambitions, its own disciplinary procedures, its own membership criteria and is beholden to none other than those it chooses to associate with. Decisions are made by consensus (as far as possible) rather than simple majorities and the very existence of the group is determined arbitrarily by its members. Groups may choose to ally themselves with other, similar groups; may choose to use someone else's rules as a template for their own; may choose to subordinate themselves to "ubergroups" and so on - or not, as they and their members wish. The most important thing about self-governance is that, in the area of activities controlled by the relevant group, they are sovereign. They don't have to account (for their group specific behaviour) to anyone outside the group. We'll deal with this in more detail in part 5.

The Default Setting Of the Universe is Liberty

Returning, however, to the basic issues of human rights and the concepts of individual liberty on which we (libertarians at least) all agree, let's recap, for a moment, the principles on which - within these pages - we have established the philosophical basis for pursuing and protecting those liberties.

1) **Nothing we can observe or say about the universe can be proven unequivocally true.** The best we can do is to prove some hypotheses false (or, more accurately, prove them "inconsistent with the data") As a result there is legitimate doubt even about such fundamental questions as whether or not we exist (at least in the form we believe we perceive).

2) **In the absence of certainty, the only rational way to deal with the Universe is empirically** - through repeated observations together with rigorous trial and error and we must always remain open to the possibility/probability that new evidence will require ongoing modification of our beliefs about what the universe is and how it behaves. Rationality can be defined as behaviour or beliefs which are consistent with our current awareness of the empirical evidence.

3) in the light of this fundamental uncertainty about physical existence and structure, it follows that **there can similarly be no meaningful objective answer to the question "How Should We Behave?"** There is, and can be, no objective guide to what may be "good" and "right" behaviour as opposed to "evil" and "wrong". Not even the existence of life itself, nor the existence of behaviour which benefits life itself can be construed as evidence for objective positive ethical value or merit - other than linguistically. i.e. We can define "good" as that which benefits us (the widespread adoption of such a definition is, incidentally, a fundamentally democratic action). But even global consensus on a given "good" doesn't create a disembodied property of "goodness" which would survive if we didn't.

4) in the absence of any objective ethical guide, **we cannot argue that any given human proposition, behaviour or belief is objectively more or less ethically valid than any other.** We can only argue, rationally, about whether a proposition is more or less likely to serve what we consider to be our best interests and whether it has popular support. Even though there may be objective criteria for measuring parameters related to those interests and further objective measures of our success or failure in serving those interests, the initial assessment of what constitutes "our best interests" is a fundamentally personal and subjective process which no third party can make on your behalf unless you have a significant intellectual impairment or are too immature or inexperienced to understand how to assess such matters for yourself (which is, of course, essentially what the Platonists argue is true of the entire population with the exception of their privileged selves)

What is prominently absent in any examination of the Universe to date is any logical, empirical or rational basis for endorsing as "correct" any given self assessed "interest"; or for restricting any given action or thought on a priori grounds. We simply do not see any such constraints in nature - even when we might wish there were (for example when we watch Orcas killing a baby blue whale, or male Lions killing rival males' cubs) Whether we like it or not, Liberty - the freedom to act or think in whatever ways an organism is capable of - is the default setting of the universe. If you need

convincing of this, I suggest a stroll on the African Savannah, where one or more predators will, sooner or later, seek to exercise their freedom to eat you.

It is only because - as a socially advanced and reasonably intelligent species - we have perceived problems arising from the exercise of Liberty (such as being eaten by predators of other species or killed by predators of our own) that we have sought to constrain it. However, so distant are we from our primitive origins, and so successful has the Platonists' strategy been, that we have internalised the cultural conditioning that such Constraint is itself the default setting, not Liberty. This mistake is fundamental.

We don't have to "justify" the default behaviour of the Universe. We might seek to explain, for example, why the Periodic Table has its revealing structure, but we don't have to provide moral justification for it. Similarly, we don't have to justify Liberty. It's the way things are - until we come along and restrict it. And THAT - the Constraints we place on Liberty - is what requires justification. Unfortunately, most of our species has forgotten that and now believes that Liberty itself needs justification.

Amongst the conclusions which follow from the observations summarised above is that they provide the pragmatic and philosophical platform for both anarchism and democracy.

Liberty - The Basis of Anarchism AND Democracy

Anarchism is based on the proposition that nothing and no-one (including other anarchists) should restrict personal autonomy. This doesn't - as opponents argue - mean we feel free to do anything we please including the creation of antisocial chaos and disorder. Clearly we do not regard ourselves as free to restrict the autonomy of others and this automatically places limits on our actions which, in turn, are sufficient to prevent the antisocial consequences they fear. In addition, in the wider social context, our autonomy permits us to act collectively and agree to policies, active or passive, which may include Constraints but which we endorse only on the basis of our free and informed consent with regard to a) the decision making process and b) the relevant policy.

Anarchism is justified on the basis, first, that, as we've said, Liberty is the default condition and it is the Constraints which need justifying and second, that your own opinion about an ethical dilemma is as likely to be valid as anyone else's. Conversely, nobody else's opinion - however widely held - can be shown to have any more ethical weight than your own. Hence when an ethical or practical choice concerns only your own behaviour and has no significant consequences for any third party, no rational case can be made for you being obliged to take account of anyone else's opinion (however sensible that advice might be)

Democracy is justified, and made necessary, by the existence of many (potential anarchists and others) whose conflicting interests, practices and ethical dilemmas can produce results which can have a significant - and potentially harmful - effect on third parties. Given the case for anarchism - that Liberty is the default and that no individual can claim greater ethical validity than any other - the

problem of how to resolve a shared (social) rather than private dilemma has a limited range of possible solutions, all of which must - to be consistent with individual autonomy - incorporate the free and informed consent of the relevant individuals. They, collectively, need to agree a) the decision making process and only then, b) the actual policy.

Historically, this ethical requirement for free and informed consent to both process and policy has been perceived as an obstacle to decision making rather than an essential prerequisite. In reality, informed consent is primarily an obstacle to the particular policies favoured by people with power. So it is routinely ignored and, instead, people with access to (generally) military power have chosen to suppress and denigrate the case for both individual autonomy and informed consent and, instead impose their illicit authority by imposing policies based on - if we're lucky - the intellectual posturing of a narrow self interested elite or - if we're not so lucky - naked greed and megalomania. In either case, the illicit authority is imposed regardless of the opinions and interests of the individuals affected or, in many cases, even regardless of clearly demonstrated majority dissent.

The only practical, fair and ethical solution to the problem of conflicting interests and differing ethical analysis and interpretation of potential policies - which does not involve any concession to the illicit authority of a "ruler" or government - is equal participation, by all involved parties, in a decision making process they've all agreed upon. We call this process Democracy. It is, of course, somewhat more complicated than that, but we'll deal with the complexities in Part 5.

As an aside, it is worth noting that there are other potential "fair" (though not always practical) solutions, like randomizing the answer or randomizing the decision maker. These are appropriate for deciding non contentious issues (like which end of the football pitch each team will start playing from) or selecting juries.

Even tossing a coin (the classic example of how to randomise a choice) could be appropriate for deciding serious political issues provided there are only two choices and the balance of opinion is equally divided AND dispassionate. Unfortunately this is a somewhat rare combination and where opinion is divided over a serious issue, there is usually considerable passion invested in the arguments and considerable emotional resistance to the prospect of "the other side" imposing their policy. There are, nevertheless, some highly charged issues which can probably ONLY be decided fairly by random selection - for example the Democratic Cannibals' lunch! (see below)

What is widely recognised, even by dictatorships, is the need for some kind of consistency and "fairness" in the decision making process in order to minimise effective opposition. Platonists certainly understand the need to minimise such resistance. They have evolved a fairly sophisticated range of techniques which begin with [Manufacturing Consent](#) but extend, effortlessly, to the use of brute force where and whenever they deem it necessary.

Democrats must never make the same mistake. Rather than suppressing dissidence, it should be encouraged and embraced as the very lifeblood of the democratic process. Democratic debates

should be structured around answering the objections to a proposition, with a view to minimising dissent; not the Platonist strategies of either simply ignoring or repressing dissidence. Nor is it viable - as we see in the more sophisticated modern Elective Dictatorships - simply to create the appearance of a simple majority in their support in order to justify bulldozing their policies into Law. A president or policy which attracts only 51% support is a potential recipe for civil war.

Forget the ethics or politics of the arrangement; you'd have thought that on simply military grounds the Platonists would have recognised the advantages of having an overwhelming level of support for any policy which will need to be "imposed" (i.e. backed up by the use of force) on a dissenting minority. Traditionally, for example, primates don't attack other primates in the wild unless they have a clear 3 to 1 advantage. That would imply the requirement for at least 75% support before dissenters could be threatened with the use of force in the event of non-compliance. That would at least be a step in the right direction. If you are going to have to use force to impose the majority will, it is much safer and much wiser to ensure that, before we start, the vast majority support BOTH the relevant policy AND the need to use force, if necessary, to impose it. How do they get away with imposing their policies without clear majorities? That's where militarised Police Forces and Standing Armies come into the picture. But, as we know, they're not democracies, so why is this relevant here? Because even true Democrats will, on occasion, need to use force.

Can a Majority EVER Justify Force Against a Minority?

Against criminals obviously, but we can take that as read (subject only to a democratic definition of crime and democratic judgement of the criminals).

Voting, as we'll see below, is really an admission of defeat. It means we have failed to reach consensus but we've decided the issue is so important that a decision must be taken anyway and we need to determine how much support there is for a given proposition and, then, whether the level of support is large enough and angry or determined enough to impose their will on a dissenting minority. It doesn't matter how large the majority is, however. It is still true that any decision - even one resulting from genuine democratic consultation and decision making - still has no greater ethical validity than your own opinion, but at least you now know what other people think and how your opinion fits or contrasts with theirs. If there is zero dissent, no vote is necessary. The result is consensus in favour of a given proposition, the decision becomes "policy" and the issue is settled.

If, however, the decision attracts majority support but falls short of consensus, then we have a secondary social dilemma - how, or even whether, to implement the policy when not everyone has signed up to it. (If you don't yet agree that this is a social dilemma, you'll have to wait for part 5 for the next round of the argument, but, for a reasonable stab at it, you might be interested to read my "[Democratic Cannibals](#)" story which hit the K5 frontpage in March 2007. Here, if you prefer, is my [blog version](#) of the same thing but without the K5 arguments)

This dilemma may require a secondary debate (primarily among supporters of the initial proposition) to determine how much the initial decision "matters"; whether, if it matters, the dissenting minority

view can be accommodated and, if not, what sanctions the majority are prepared to impose on the minority to enforce their will. This may, in turn, entail the use of force by the majority to impose their will on the minority and is precisely what the Libertarians (generally on both Right and Left) are opposed to. It certainly cannot be ethically defended (the minority view might, after all, be "right") but it certainly can be pragmatically defended.

If you think there are no circumstances in which such majority "imposition of will" can be defended, consider the social dilemma "which side of the road shall we drive on?" Clearly we cannot afford even 1% dissenting behaviour on such a decision as it would have lethal consequences. A "majority" in such circumstances is completely justified in preventing the dissenters from acting in opposition to the majority view, if only on the grounds of their own "self defence". Note, in particular, that there is obviously no "ethically correct" answer to which side we should drive on. It is neither good nor evil, under any known religious or other moral code, to drive on one side or the other. Nevertheless, we can make both a pragmatic and ethical argument for 100% conformity in this instance - at least on the public highway.

I was stunned (and pleasantly surprised) to find, more than a year after I drafted the above paragraph, the following passage:

But the rule itself is not a moral rule. In England men drive on the left-hand side of the road, in the United States and nearly all parts of the Continent of Europe on the right. Morality has nothing to say to this, except that those who use the roads ought to know and observe the rule, whatever it be

which came from the introduction to "The History of English Law Before The Time of Edward I" - written by Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland in 1895. The whole thing (all 719 pages) is available as a pdf [here](#). If that link breaks, here's my [cached](#) version. It's good to know I'm following a well ploughed furrough! But be that as it may...

Even such a clear cut case doesn't mean that we cannot accommodate ANY part of the dissenter's action. For example, if they own a private road for which they are able to restrict access to "dissenters only" (or have good reason to know that only dissenters will ever use) then there is no reasonable case the majority can make against them driving on whichever side they prefer. It is only the shared PUBLIC space where the majority can justify imposing their constraint. Nor is there any excuse for ignoring the reasons for the dissent and trying to reach a settlement which addresses those reasons, without conceding the policy. For example - suppose the 99% vote for driving on the Left because they already own Right Hand Drive vehicles whereas the dissenters oppose driving on the Left because they own Left Hand Drive vehicles. The rational compromise is that all parties should share the burden and costs of replacing or adapting the dissenters' vehicles for driving on the Left.

The Choice: Democracy or Totalitarianism

But the important point is that as soon as you have perceived that there are such genuine social

issues, where a clear cut decision is required and dissenting action (as opposed to dissenting thought or discussion) cannot be tolerated, then no decision making system other than consensual democracy is consistent with individual autonomy - the primal Liberty we are born with and the fundamental ethical validity of making your own assessments of what is in your own best interests - as well as your opinion about the wider social interest.

Consensual Democracy does not solve the problem but it seeks to minimise it by exposing where the conflicts arise and provoking negotiations about how those conflicts can be resolved with minimum dissent. If some people have to be disappointed, and possibly coerced into conformity, then it obviously makes - at least military if not ethical - sense to ensure that the numbers of potential rebels is as small as possible. It also makes sense, if the reason for dissent is that the policy will damage the interests of the dissenters, that they should be compensated, fairly, for their losses. It is these pragmatic angles which democracy, in its purest form, has never attempted to grasp.

The aim of the Athenian democrat was also, as a preferred option, to achieve consensus. Only when consensus could not be reached was it necessary to find another way to reach a decision and the concept of voting appears to be an Athenian invention designed to ensure numerical equality in the event of having to make a decision in the absence of consensus:

*"Voting was both a way of making explicit differences of judgment and a procedural mechanism to legitimate a solution to **pressing matters**."* ([source](#)) (emphasis added)

The emphasis on "pressing matters" is of primary importance. It implies, first, that most issues were decided by consensus and second, that debates could and did take place on which no decision was reached because there was no consensus. The absence of consensus was regarded as an indication that no policy or change could be agreed upon and that, unless the issue was a "pressing matter", no decision was necessary. The modern question of "which side of the road shall we drive on" is an example of a "pressing matter" in that it would be positively lethal to leave it unresolved. But, in real life, there are few such matters which **MUST** be resolved - i.e. a decision must be imposed universally, even upon dissenters.

When such issues arose and consensus could not be reached, it was necessary to invent a method of reaching a decision as fairly as possible. Voting in this sense is an admission of failure (to reach consensus) and far from being the standard way to make decisions, was only supposed to be the compromise means to be used only for such "pressing matters". It is also true that the Athenians accepted that, in the event of needing to make a decision by voting, that even a simple majority of one would be sufficient to carry the day.

But it is crucial to understand this in the context of Athenian democracy in which nobody had the power to insist on a vote being taken at all. In other words - and this is absolutely vital to an understanding of true democracy - there would have had to have been at least one crucial consensus prior to any such vote - viz that the matter was so urgent that it *had to be decided* by voting. Thus too,

there was an **ad hoc** consensus that the result would be considered fair even if the majority in favour of the end result was only a single vote. *This is not a situation which could or would ever have applied to a contentious issue - because the primary consensus that a simple majority was a fair way to decide the issue would not have arisen in the first place.*

Voting, in other words, should only ever be necessary and appropriate where the issues at stake were in the realm of those we mentioned above which could "fairly" be decided even by random means; necessary but not contentious. The Athenian system was designed to make it impossible to impose a contentious decision on an unwilling minority. Hence one of the major charges laid against it - "Tyranny of the Majority" - *ought to be* grossly misplaced. Unfortunately it isn't because some of the weaknesses of their design rendered such tyranny still possible.

Ironically, part of the problem arose from the open debating process and freedom of speech which Democracy invented. As is still true today, free speech favours those with verbal dexterity and allows particularly charismatic speakers to exert far more influence than their peers - regardless of the merits or content of their speech. This allowed/allows them to sway the "masses" and create the appearance of consensus where none really existed. Hence, for example, the disgusting example I mentioned in Part 1 of how the Assembly refused even to hear the case for giving the Generals a fair trial. A few loudmouthed fanatics were able to intimidate the opposition into silence.

This remains one of the true weaknesses of the original democratic process in that although it nominally accords equal status to its participants and they all have an equal right to speak, there are clearly vast differences in the ability of people to address large numbers of fellow citizens in open debate. The result is that we tend to hear only the loudest and most confident speakers all the time. And, as we know to our cost today, there is no correlation between such presentational skills and wisdom.

That requires two significant amendments to Athenian style democracy, the secret ballot and a new platform for debate. Fortunately the web presents obvious opportunities for both but we'll deal with those issues in part 5. But other than those enhancements, the aim of the Consensual Democrat remains very similar to the original aims of our Athenian predecessors.

Our primary aim is to find a policy which not only addresses the relevant issues and attracts support but also attracts minimal dissent. Unless it is a non-contentious issue, we are not interested in merely achieving simple majority support. Furthermore, if there is any remaining dissent, it is our obligation to look for ways to accommodate it without compromising the wishes and welfare of the majority.

For sundry political and philosophical reasons, this commitment to trying to achieve consensus and, at least, minimal dissent may or may not appeal to modern "liberals" or even some of those who think they are genuine democrats. My own reasons, however, for promoting this approach are both principled and pragmatic. The principles are, in a sense, what this whole book is about so I won't reiterate those yet again.

The pragmatic case for minimising and accommodating dissent is based on two key problems. We've touched on the first (the need for substantial numerical advantage in military terms if we ever have to coerce dissenters) but this has become vastly more important since 9-11. There is now an overriding requirement to minimise dissent in order to tackle various security threats which I deal with, primarily, in Chapter 10. Second, however, is the problem of Social Trust - the absence of which is a root cause of the Conspiracy theories which we will be dealing with in Part 4.

These problems are now, in my view, so grave that if we don't choose the path of Consensual Democracy, we'll be stuck with the Platonist solution. And they are obviously keen to consider only one other strategy - and that is the increasingly Totalitarian control of everything we do, say or even think. Rather than minimising dissent, the totalitarian tries to suppress or repress it. I suspect that it is, by now, clear to even the most wishful of thinkers, that the world in general is heading, with increasing speed and determination in precisely that direction. If you are keen to avert that impending disaster, I cannot insist that you support my feeble efforts or those of others pushing in the same direction. But I can insist that if you choose not to, you'd better come up with an improved alternative pretty damn quick!

The obvious question: *How do we minimise dissent?* is one of the main things we'll be discussing in Part 5.

Meanwhile, one of the alternatives already on offer is the philosophy which underpins the politics of the American Libertarian Right - the thoughts of Ludwig Von Mises which led to Ayn Rand's objectivism and a rash of similar approaches. That's what we're going to look at next...

First Uploaded 5 Sept 2007

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed by Harry Stottle (2004-7) under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License](#).