Chapter Seven - Survival, Ethics And Democracy
Part 1 - From Neolithic to Neocon

The Desire to Survive is Our Lowest Common Denominator
It is also The Fundamental Basis for Democracy.
"Consensual Democracy" is the key to our Survival

"Majority Rule" is to Consensual Democracy what Newtons Theory of Gravitation is to modern Cosmology - a rough and sometimes workable approximation. A good step in the right direction but certainly not the ultimate goal.

Having established, in the previous chapter, that all behaviour is "merely" pursuit of our desire to Survive and always takes the forms of Pursuit of Pleasure, Pain Avoidance or a mixture of both; I will argue in this chapter that this provides the basis of a new form of ethical analysis (Survival Based Ethics - SBE) and, crucially, the basis of the not so new but vitally necessary rational method for making social decisions - what we might call Democracy with a view to Consensus, or "Consensual Democracy" - CD for short. In the process it will be necessary to re-educate people as to what Democracy is and what it isn't, because most readers probably think they already live in Democracies. They don't - and never have.

The purpose of this chapter is not remotely academic. A strong case can be made that without Survival Based Ethics - or something very similar - and without the very real democratic and consensual controls it advocates, our species is likely to become the most significant victim of the extinction event we have already triggered (cached) for a vast number of other species.

Some think such an outcome inevitable and argue, for example, that we need to trim back (cached) our numbers to less than 3 billion if we are to have any hope at all of a long term future on this planet. Some think our prospective extinction desirable - we've done so much damage to the planet and other species on it that the "humane" way to fix it is "voluntary human extinction". Some merely recognise (cached) the problem but offer no solutions. Some don't think there is a problem - the fuss is just this week's apocalypse (cached) scare story. so - presumably - there's no need to change course. Others are sure we'll adapt. (*Yes there is a cliff edge dead ahead and yes, we're almost certain to fall off it if we carry on driving at breakneck speed in this direction. But evolution got us where we are today and I'm damn sure we'll adapt on the way down.*) And some (cached - pdf:- much easier read) seek to persuade us that the problems are soluble but only if we ALL work at solving the problem. It's not up to specialists, or environmental engineers, or politicians to save the planet; it's up to us.

I'm sympathetic with most of those points of view. They all hold a portion of the truth. But that last

viewpoint is by far the most important. It is indeed not up to anyone else. It's up to you and me. You might well, and with good cause, blame politicians and various other parties for the mess we're in. But that only makes it even less appropriate to expect them to fix it. They've had their chance and screwed things up royally. Now it's our turn. And the first and only problem I'm addressing in this chapter is not any of the various problems which would normally appear on the list of threats to our survival. Instead I'm going to deal with the one I consider to be the single greatest problem of them all - not because it directly threatens our existence but because if we don't solve it, we won't be able to address - effectively - any of those other problems. I am talking about our inability to reach agreement on what to do about all (some would say "or any") of those other problems. This chapter is about how we can make decisions - whatever they are - which "stick"; decisions which attract maximum support and minimum dissent. Decisions which don't start wars. And, by way of an early clue: Democracy on its own is simply not enough.

Quick Links to sections within this section

[The Survival Paradigm](#)

[Why Bother?](#)

[In the beginning...](#)

[Fire - The first WMD](#)

[The Equalizer](#)

[The Dawn of Agriculture](#)

[Drugs at The Dawn of Religion](#)

[Religion Evolves](#)

[Monotheism - The First Battle in "The War On Drugs"?](#)

[The Athenian Model - The Concorde of Democracy](#)

[The Platonist Model - the Neocon Preference](#)

[Rumsfeld's Poem "The Unknown"](#)

[The need for external threats...](#)

The "Survival Paradigm"

First let us restate the SBE disclaimer. I am **not** saying that "Survival" is "Good" or "Right". I am not, therefore, *ever* going to argue that behaviour which enhances our survival is the "Right" (in the sense of "ethical") way to behave. All we can say, if we wish to remain logically consistent with the philosophical precepts outlined in the previous chapters, is that, as living beings, we are (or rather - we appear to be) "designed", apparently by a process of biological evolution, to strive to survive. This *dictates* our individual behaviour *whether or not* it is a "good thing". We simply do not have a choice about that other than to give up Life altogether and even that choice, as discussed in the previous chapter, can be consistent with the Survival imperative. But although we may not have a choice about our primary motivation - Survival - what we can choose is our own survival strategies both individually and collectively.

This choice is one we have - uniquely in the animal kingdom - as a direct result of having a combination of intelligence and communication skills high enough to be able to discuss this issue. The family pet dog or cat has no such choice. Its survival behaviour is pretty well programmed into its genes. It might occasionally act to defend a member of the family, or of its own brood if it has one, and its actions might thus turn out, on occasion, to be for the common good. By and large, however, its actions will be "selfish" or, at least, self-centred - i.e. primarily, like most mammals, designed to benefit itself or its tightly (genetically or "culturally") defined family.

Even mammals with bigger - and possibly better - brains than ours (the cetaceans) don't have our freedom to choose. Their adaptive strategy has conditioned them perfectly for survival within the environment they are born into and they have certainly learned co-operative tactics which promote the common good be it herding food or protecting vulnerable individuals. They have even shown the capacity to protect vulnerable individuals who are not members of their own species (as have some non human primates). But, faced with new challenges (like the human plundering of their food sources) even these remarkably intelligent animals are unable to develop countermeasures to protect their common interests other than by the Darwinian "trial and error" method which has driven evolution to date.

Similarly, species genetically engineered by evolution to work as a hive mind clearly act for the common good, but again, not through any conscious choice. Their behaviour is "merely" the result of a sophisticated genetic algorithm resulting from the operation of natural selection. Conversely, whilst human beings *may* - and often do - behave no less "selfishly" than our pets, it is not difficult to find examples of human behaviour which are clearly designed to promote the wider level of benefit achieved by the hive mind. Yet, unlike the bee, ant or termite, each individual human who *volunteers* (as opposed to yielding to compulsion or conditioned behaviour) communally useful actions does so as the result of intelligent conscious choices. The frequency of such behaviour shows us that there are several strands of public awareness that acting for the "community" can bring benefit to a greater number of individuals, often without reducing benefit to any.

Why Bother? Isn't Nature Wonderful?

Why do we need to find a rational basis for social decision making? What, in other words, is the point of making any choice at all? Other social animals don't need to adopt a "philosophy" or political ideology. Their social dynamics are built in. We can see that this is true even of the higher primates and cetaceans - who punish anti-social behaviour and reward supportive behaviour, form strategic alliances and so on, all without the aid of politics or philosophy. Why should humanity require anything more than nature has designed for us? Survival of the fittest works well enough not just for species, but in the human meme pool, the market place, the sports arena and so on. What's the problem we're trying to address with "social decision making"?

The simplest answer is "Conflict". More generally "shared problems of which conflict is the most serious". Our historical inability to reach agreement with rivals has always produced social friction ranging from minor squabbles between friends, through domestic violence, street gang violence, internal political repression and external wars up to and including genocide. Our species track record on social decision making is none too good. The consequences of this failure have always been serious but survivable. However, as we discuss in considerable detail in Chapter 10, this - survivability - can no longer be taken for granted. The technologies likely to become available by the middle of the 21st century will make it possible for even single disgruntled individuals (think: Unabomber) to kill thousands in a single attack and it is becoming increasingly plausible that some of the technologies emerging may be capable of eliminating not just the human species but all organic life on this planet. And, of course, even if we don't commit mass suicide in the form of escalating military conflicts, we can always fall back on mass suicide through neglect of common problems like global warming (neglect induced largely by unresolved conflicting interests).

In short, learning how to resolve (preferably avoid) conflict and reach agreement has become necessary for our species survival. Alternative options, like "benevolent dictatorship" or even not so benevolent dictatorship are no longer viable (if ever they were). Given the level of threat posed by emerging technologies, we cannot afford significant levels of either internal or external opposition. Even if we could achieve Democracy - in the simplistic form of majority rule - it would be nowhere near adequate to the task. As is clearly illustrated by the various conflicts from Northern Ireland to the Middle East, even small minorities can be consistently lethal. And as for the so called democracies, particularly those that still operate on the "first past the post" (largest party takes all) basis, far from pulling people together, they merely exacerbate the problems by polarising debate and attitudes.

We are thus, metaphorically, adrift in a lifeboat a long way from dry land. We have to pull together, or else we'll pull apart. Pulling apart was a viable option when the human population was less than half a billion - if you can't agree with your neighbour, either you or they could move. With over 6 billion that is already extremely difficult. With the 9 billion we anticipate by 2050 it will, for most people, be completely impossible. So if we cannot find a way to suppress or re-direct our aggressive tendencies - before we reach that "point of no escape" - there's a strong chance we'll achieve the aims of the voluntary human extinction movement - but somewhat less than voluntarily.

While we're in pessimistic mode, I feel the urge to shoot down another wishful thought. It is simply not true that "all we need is love" any more than "all we need is democracy". Both will help, of course, but neither are solutions. We've moved way beyond what a little "good will" might have been able to cure. The basic problem is that given any one of the substantive global threats and the sundry interests vested in specific interpretation of those threats; there appears to be no realistic prospect of persuading all parties to agree on a) the nature of any specific threat b) the extent of the threat or c) the best policy to deal with the threat. So the challenge is, given that we're never likely to agree on the details, how can we ever possibly agree on a course of action? That is the challenge I am going to try to meet.

In the beginning...

We left nature behind when we moved from banging rocks against nuts (primitive tool using) to banging rocks against heads (primitive weapons) probably about [two to three million years ago](#). After a few hundred thousand years or so, we probably also made the transition from merely having a taste for the burnt carrion we occasionally found lying around after a forest fire - to figuring out how to make and maintain fire under our own control.

Traditionally, I know, archaeologists tell us that control of fire came much later - around 4-500,000 years ago although there is [at least one](#) ([cached](#)) plausible fire site dated to 1.6 million. But you know what? I refuse to believe that we didn't have control of fire with all that flint knocking around for nearly 2 million years. I'm going to stick my neck out and bet that we eventually prove that flint led to fire and the latter came within - at most - half a million years of the former. I suspect we made opportunistic use of fire even earlier but flint gave us "fire on demand" - so flint tools are clearly first in the sequence but by "only" by a half a million years or less - not the two million lead they are usually credited with. I know they were slow learners in those times (the basic stone hand axe didn't change its fundamental design for a million years!) but surely half a million years of having to stamp out the burning grass - which occasionally resulted from flint sparks - is enough for at least one bright homo erectus to think the equivalent of "hey! wait a minute..."

After writing that paragraph I went looking for evidence or arguments which would either shoot me down or endorse that hypothesis. Although the consensus is still very clearly that while we may not have *Started* fires at will until between 230,000 and half a million years ago, with widespread use not being evident until between 60,000 and 125,000 years ago, no one seems inclined to challenge the notion suggested [here](#), for example, ([cached](#)) that even Homo Erectus were able to at least *Nurture* fire having come across it in the wild, and thus make almost as much use of it as modern humans. And I did find this [fascinating conjecture](#) ([cached](#)-pdf) by Richard Wrangham et al (Wrangham of "The Demonic Male" fame). They've arrived at a similar conclusion (Fire control much earlier than the current paradigm accepts) albeit from a different direction.

Their argument is that the evolution of Homo Erectus is the only example in human evolution where the male-female body size ratio decreased significantly while overall body size increased - implying a major increase in female body size rather than a reduced male body size. At the same time there is

a marked reduction in tooth size - a major indicator of improved nutrition. Their proposition is that the most credible explanation for this is that Homo Erectus underwent a socio-cultural revolution provoked by cooking their food. The nutritional benefits were so profound that it altered the balance of power between the genders and began the march to human culture:- The birth of the hearth. It triggered, they argue, our true "humanity". And most significantly, they point out that the fossil record shows that all this was happening 1.9 million years ago - right about the time I anticipate fire resulting from flint control. As you will see from the same document, other paleo-archeologists are still hostile and present powerful opposition to their argument but at least I'm not entirely alone.

Fire - The first "WMD"

Whenever we acquired control of it, the importance of fire to human development is, in my view, hugely understated:

- The first impact was vastly improved nutrition - giving us access to foodstuffs which until then had been inedible or of little nutritional benefit. This in turn meant we could obtain our nutrition from better use of a smaller area - easier to defend.
- Secondly, it significantlly reduced food poisoning by killing off the bugs in the food. A few generations of home cooking and the fire-using hominid will be bigger, healthier, stronger, breeding more successfully and living longer than the luddites who are still wishing they hadn't come down from the trees.
- Third: It improved night time security. A fire at the door of the cave - or even in the centre of the camp - probably considerably reduced night-time predation and allowed smaller groups to survive in otherwise dangerous locations.
- Fourth: It provided welcome warmth on cold nights and allowed our ancestors to migrate to colder climes. It is our first major control of the environment.
- Fifth: It was probably the first social focal point. I conjecture that we will eventually prove that while human "military" society began when we were still at the Chimp stage and learning to be carnivores and warriors, "civil" society did indeed start around the "hearth" (a la "Clan of The Cave Bear" series by Jean M. Auel) and a lot earlier than we currently believe.
- Sixth: It probably (somewhat later) triggered the development of dance and music - and the story telling tradition - and, again, I suspect, a lot earlier than we currently believe. One thing that follows from the notion - in Wrangham's "Raw and Stolen" paper (link above) - of "delayed consumption of food" and taking it back to the cooking and eating point - where it is shared with at least the cook, and possibly the tribe - is that none of that is possible without much more advanced control and communication skills than chimpanzees are capable of. They must have had what we would recognise as at least a primitive language. (This also makes sense of their ability to pass on skills like flint knapping.) Imitation is far to limited a teaching mechanism to explain behaviour this complex. I am convinced that these people spoke to each other. Indeed this argument is used by one of the opponents to the Wrangham conjecture on the basis that there is no other evidence for such an early emergence of true language. I argue that sophisticated tool use and the passing on of such skills is itself evidence of true language.
- Seventh and - most relevant to this chapter - fire was the first weapon of mass destruction.

Whenever it was, however, until that time, like many other animals, we could kill other animals or each other on a one to one basis. With fire we developed the first technology that could allow one person to kill many. So much destruction was it capable of, that, in places like Australia, from about 60,000 years ago up to 20,000, we strongly suspect (cached) that the human race was primarily responsible for the extinction of all the continent's megafauna. In the process they utterly transformed the ecology and environment of the continent. No other animal, however much faster or stronger it was than a mere pretentious ape, could compete with a species which had command of fire. It was used to drive game into traps or over cliffs. It was used to destroy cover and make it easier for us to hunt. It was used to cook the kill. It was used to keep the predators at bay. It utterly changed the balance of power in nature. Fire put us at the top of the food chain.

The Great Equalizer

Perhaps, however, its greatest significance was much more subversive: you didn't need brute strength to use fire. Like flint-knapping, it required a skill. This was undoubtedly also true of general stone tool manufacture and hunting, but fire was the first technology with military value (which therefore commanded male respect) which had no obvious need for testosterone based qualities. My guess is that the alpha male was probably not the tribe's fire starter/keeper. More likely it was a skill carefully nurtured by a male who perhaps wasn't too good in the hunt, or maybe simply didn't enjoy it as much as the others. Being "keeper of the flame" though, would have evolved power and influence based, for the first time, on something other than muscle. More recent hunter-gatherer societies have allowed women to hold this role but that is unlikely to have been true 2 million years ago. Nevertheless, this was an incredibly important social development which is unique - on this planet at least - to the human species. It is the first social demonstration or acknowledgement that "might" may not always be "right".

In the America of the 1800s, the Colt 45 became known, as "the Great Equalizer" because it allowed:

> *even the weak and socially disenfranchised, who lacked the traditional instruments of power and influence, to assert their will and defend themselves against those endowed with land, position, and political status.* (source)

My conjecture is, however, that Fire was the very first Great Equalizer.

In the outer "Natural World" it cancelled out our physical inferiority to other species and, in that context, has not just "equalised" but given us a position of dominance we hold to this day. But, just as dramatically, within the tribe it opened up the option of alternative power hierarchies, where skill and intelligence can be more valuable and thus accorded greater or at least equal status to brute strength and killing ability. And between tribes, of course, it must have made conflict much more dangerous.

From that point on, it became exponentially more dangerous to have human enemies and - of course

- that much more necessary to evolve mechanisms, within human society, to minimise conflict. In the early days (the next million or so years) we probably wouldn't have noticed any major difference in the way humanity organised itself. With so few human beings on the planet, the most obvious strategy for conflict avoidance, if you didn't have an obvious military advantage (eg a 3 to 1 numerical superiority) was migration. Move away from the potential trouble.

The Dawn of Agriculture

Some time in the last 200,000 years, (traditionally within the last 12,000 but, again, I strongly suspect that it was much earlier) it is probable that this strategy (keeping out of each others' way) started becoming more and more difficult as all the prime real estate was increasingly likely to have sitting tenants. I further conjecture that this growing competition played a major part in the development of agriculture. If you could find a good territory - with plenty of game, fish and food plants to keep you going all year round - why move on? Especially if there were enough of you to defend it against all comers. Start building some permanent defences and barriers to make it harder for anyone to kick you out. The first "settlements" probably arose like that. They were nomadic camps that became more and more permanent; till, eventually, for the first time in our history, we've literally got time to sit and watch the grass and other - more nutritious - plants grow. It doesn't take much imagination to envisage, after a few thousand years of that...

...Hey! Wait a minute...

and the first true "Neil Moment" in human history takes place:

> *We sow the seed, right. Nature grows the seed, and then, we eat the seed. And then, after that, we sow the seed, nature grows the seed, and then, we eat the seed. And then, after that again, we sow the seed, nature grows the seed....*(The Young Ones 12 June 1984) (cached)

Which means we no longer have to find a fully stocked larder - we just have to find a place suitable for growing stuff and there are a lot more of those than ready stocked "gardens of eden". The question arises, now, of how much land we need to grow stuff on to feed the average person. And how is the average person going to work that land and defend it against both human and other animal competitors. Too few is too weak. Too many is too difficult for one hierarchy to control, however dominant and capable its leadership.

It turns out that there is an optimum size for the kind of early agricultural community that would have been big enough to defend itself, while small enough to encourage the necessary bonding and allow hierarchical control, with everyone able to recognise every other member on sight and by "name" (which must have emerged at or before the same time). The ideal answer is around 150 (cached) (use that link for a useful brief intro or this one for Robin Dunbar's original paper)(cached). And once you've got 150 humans in a permanent group, you've got politics, social hierarchy, pecking orders, boundaries, discipline, rules. And not just alpha male leaders dominating on the basis of

physical violence, but, for the first time, "formal" rule making (underpinned, then and now, by physical violence). Rulers in word and deed.

Initially authority was almost certainly vested in the same physical dominance and male alliances that we still see in street gangs and other modern primitive primates. And over tens of thousands of years, the only real change was that rulers learned to protect their status and pass it on to their heirs more efficiently and reliably than having them fight for the right to lead - although right up until relatively recent history, however you became the leader, you were still obliged to prove yourself in physical battle, at some stage, in order to maintain the right to leadership. British Monarchs, for example, were still leading their troops into battle right up until 1743. (George II at the Battle of Dettingen was the last). (Personally I think we should give serious consideration to re-introducing that tradition. If our "leaders" had to lead the charge into battle, they might be a tad less inclined to lead in that direction to start with.)

The early strategic self-serving alliances became the basis for primitive class structure and eventually humans found themselves born into a social role, rather than having to fight for one as they grew up. It is not until much later, when we see the development of early cities and, probably crucially, the invention of writing; that the routine decisions made by rulers or elders start being further formalised into something we could begin to recognise as formal laws and organised politics. Instead, what we see for tens of thousands of years before that is the evolution of the cultural precursors to politics and philosophy.

Drugs at The Dawn of Religion

Graham Hancock has done an excellent job - in Supernatural - of tracing the roots of prehistoric cave art to hallucinogenic experience, generally but not exclusively mediated by psychotropic plants (eg various mushrooms, cactii etc). He answers one of the most puzzling questions about paleolithic art - the incredible similarities between cave art thousands of miles and thousands of years apart.. He makes a strong case for the origin and strong similarities being rooted in what the human brain does when it is hallucinating. i.e. produce a predictable range of images which are mirrored more or less precisely in the cave art itself. I am somewhat less impressed by his attempt to argue that these visions might give us an insight into an alternate universe rather than mere alternate reality but that doesn't weaken the strength of his substantive argument and the empirical data he has gathered in its support.

In short, it seems that we've been "tripping" for at least 40,000 years, probably 70-100,000. The mind-expanding results of those trips may even be responsible for kicking off the explosion of culture and innovation which appears in the archaeological record from about that time forward, including our advanced linguistic abilities and one of the major developmental memes in human history - Religion.

Despite my obvious hostility to modern religion, I have no problem acknowledging the largely positive role its development probably played in the wider development of human culture. I would

argue that it switched from being a positive influence to a negative influence some 5 to 10,000 years ago when it ceased being a prototype cultish behaviour exploited by a few and became the real thing; a socially dominant meme; a tool for social control. Up until then, it was probably a force for good. (It is deliciously ironic, though, given modern religion's hostility to mind-bending drugs, that - assuming Hancock is right - religion owes its origins to shit-faced shamans!)

What made it a force for good? As well as providing a genuinely useful stream of innovative thinking, It provided yet another means of making decisions combined with a socially useful skill which was unlikely to be mastered by the muscle heads who led the tribe. Even women could become masters of this particular skill, though the evidence seems to be that the lead practitioners of the art, the head Shamans, have nearly always been male, while the lesser - but still powerful - role of "medicine woman" was the highest a female could aspire to (other than her status resulting from choice of mate). Why couldn't everyone do it? (Get stoned and make useful predictions) Today, for example, anyone who is brave enough or autonomous enough to risk discovery by the modern State bully can get hold of hallucinogenic substances. It can be as simple - if you know where to find them, and which ones to look for - as picking a few mushrooms.

Well, everybody could do it in that recreational sense, but the Shamans were, I suspect, the "flatliners" of their day. Took it to (and probably, occasionally, over) the edge. They would ingest enough of the toxins to cause permanent damage to lesser mortals and to produce, even for experienced users, near death experiences on the extreme edge of human capacity. These trips were dangerous. These were not intended to be "fun". At least, not unless Sex was part of the ritual. They were intended to let them speak to the creatures they met in this alternate world. Creatures, as Hancock illustrates, described remarkably consistently from the paleolithic period 35,000 years ago right up to today's self reported UFO abductees. Creatures who could offer advice or answer questions, or solve problems in the real world, despite not being creatures of that real world.

My conjecture is that the drug induced trances described by Hancock provided occasional real and deep insights which, implemented in the real world, produced sufficient tangible benefits to force evolving human society to take that channel of information seriously. It is unlikely that the insights were as deeply meaningful as Francis Cricks LSD assisted vision of the structure of DNA. But lesser insights could well have improved the survival chances of the tribe and, in their time and context, may have appeared just as impressively "miraculous" as Cricks discovery still does to the modern world. Anyone who uses mushrooms, cannabis or other mind-altering substances knows that - even at pleasant recreational level - they can and do indeed allow our brains to perceive genuine truths and insights (the ones which turn out to be valid even when sober). Most of the time these flashes of awareness are no more profound than Neil's famous agricultural insight (above). But some can and do change our lives. Indeed, this is one of the principle benefits of recreational drug use and one of the most powerful arguments for promoting rather than merely permitting its use, but more of that in Chapter 11.

We can imagine, for example, that, over eons of time, drug inspired Shamanic insights, or common

sense dressed up to look like drug inspired Shamanic insights, improved hunting and warfare techniques, farming practices, medicinal knowledge, tool use and solved thousands of other down to earth practical problems. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that those who appeared best able to make these dangerous journeys and return with valuable insights would attain considerable status and influence. Nor is it surprising that, given such a track record, society generally would believe what the Shamans believed about the world they visited. After all, in the absence of any other obvious mechanism, it must have been the supernatural entities in that spirit-world who gave the Shamans the demonstrably useful information. Hence that spirit-world and those supernatural entities must have been "real". No surprise, either, that the source of all this practical guidance simultaneously emerged as a major source for "moral" guidance.

Religion Evolves

Such social trust and the beliefs it was based on do not - yet - constitute a religion. At this stage the meme is a straightforward empirical hypothesis with a considerable weight of evidence to support it. These guys get stoned, come back with the solution to a long standing or recent practical or ethical dilemma and the damn thing appears to work. (Or, at least, everybody gets used to acting as though it has worked - which, as modern psychologists will confirm, can lead to precisely the same result) It is as reasonable, in this context, for the Shamans and their audience to believe what they believed as it is for us to believe what - say - Astronomers tell us about the methane lakes on Titan or the black hole in the centre of the Andromeda galaxy.

I've certainly never seen them for myself. I have seen blurry photographs and computer simulations which, I am "reliably informed" are useful approximations of the objects in question, that they are respectively to be found on a moon orbiting a gas giant planet within our Solar system and in the middle of our nearest major neighbouring galaxy. I have no reasonable basis for doubting the expert interpretation of the data. Any more than my ancestors would have had a sound basis for challenging their Shaman's reports and interpretations.

There were, of course, those unfortunate occasions when the Shamanic insights proved wrong and might have undermined their growing authority. The rains were supposed to come last month and we're still waiting. The Wildebeest have changed their migration route this year. The chief's son died despite the Shaman's medicine and advice. And so on.

Such failures were bound to have been much more common than the dramatic successes. Really significant drug inspired insights are somewhat rare; possibly even a once in a lifetime event - ask Francis Crick! Get one early in your career and your reputation is made. But from then on, the expectations are high and the actual rate of innovation somewhat lower. One trick is to learn either how to make even failures look like success or how to shift the blame for failure onto factors and agencies other than the Shaman himself. Thus, if the rains did not come, there must have been an impurity in the X or Y that was an essential ingredient of the ceremony performed to bring them. Evil spirits must have frightened the Wildebeest away from their normal route.

Another trick is make your predictions sufficiently ambiguous that almost all outcomes can be interpreted as validation of the prediction. This is an art form still widely practised today.

"The Chief's son will go on to become a great leader" encourages everyone to think he's bound to get better but, when he dies, it turns out he's gone to lead the spirit world.

An alternative to imaginative excuses is straightforward trickery. An important part of the cloak of deception necessary to maintain the illusion of infallibility is the restriction of knowledge of the techniques involved. Today's "Magic Circle" requires - on pain of expulsion - that modern illusionists promise never to reveal the tricks of the trade - and *their* only concern is to protect their relatively trivial commercial interest in being entertainers. We can only imagine how much more seriously such secrecy would have been imposed by the "guild" of Shamans. For them, such secrecy didn't just protect their livelihood, but also their growing power and status.

Only one or two in each generation would be initiated into the secret world and - once they had acquired the authority to get away with it - all access to the tools of their trade would have been forbidden to non acolytes. Mere mortals might have occasionally shared the delights and mild hallucinations of the occasional magic mushroom, but the serious business of learning to use such drugs as a gateway to enlightenment was a jealously restricted trade.

After tens of thousands of years of such practice and training, in both "real" trance based shamanism, together with sleight of hand, cold reading and all the other conjuring tricks that go with being a Shaman, not to mention the cloak of secrecy and mystery in which their performance was increasingly shrouded, it is hardly surprising that they evolved into the first priest castes. One way or the other, the Shamans made themselves the Google of their time - the place you went for the answer to any question you could formulate. They eventually acquired vastly more status and respect than they deserved and became centers of power in their own right.

At some point we can imagine that the Shamans were able to rely less on any real skills and insight and more on their authority and the venerated tradition of their "calling" to silence any skeptics or dissent. Where and how this mutated into demanding "faith" in their abilities and their revelations it is impossible to pinpoint at this distance, but it is from this point on we can start to talk about true Religion, with a set of codified rules, rigidly defined deities, ceremonies and personnel.

Clearly it happened before the time of the Egyptian Pharoahs, because by then, such was the power of religion that it had become synonymous with the "State".

Monotheism - The First Battle in "The War On Drugs"?
And here I'll stick my neck out with yet another conjecture. Monotheism will be traced to a dispute between the Shamans and some other aspiring source of moral authority. As part of the dispute, the challenging group deprecated all the insights and conclusions reached by 30+,000 years of Shamanism, together with all their practices; including, I strongly suspect, their use of hallucinogenic

drugs - in which case it would mean that "The War on Drugs" has been going on for at least 6,000 years!

The basis of my conjecture? Monotheism is simply not consistent with the typical experience of the drug (or deprivation) induced visions of the Shamans. As Hancock amply illustrates, in any such encounter, there are always more than one demon or god, often dozens. Nobody getting their inspiration from mind bending substances or practices is going to come up with a "single god" explanation. Only those who have never experienced such illumination could possibly have come up with that innovation and that implies that at some stage they either tried and rejected (perhaps after one too many "bad trips"?) or perhaps simply refused to ever to indulge in this "primitive" practice.

Which left them with the problem of how else to justify their own moral authority. They had to produce an insight of their own, which could convincingly be portrayed as vastly more significant and all-encompassing than the fairies and power-sharing mini-gods encountered and described by the Shamans in their art from Blombos cave to Cheops. And it had to be as convincing as, or preferably more so, than the Shamans' traditional performances. And, it seems, they had no compunction about using the Shamans' skills and tricks

Thus, it came to pass that they found the perfect spot. They had to prepare the ground - and the audience - very carefully. It probably took months of planning and, once they had found a suitable location, at least three days to implement. They had to experiment with sound projection and learn where they could be heard and how to disguise the source of their voices. They had to prepare props and practice tricks with incendiaries and pyrotechnics they probably learned from the Shamans. And they had to make sure that none of this stage management was observed, so they used their authority to ban people from coming near the place.

> *Mystery about the ceremonies was deliberately created, however, and fear was the instrument used to paralyze the mind in order to make it more receptive. This accounts for the taboo with the death penalty for violation. For so simple an infraction as touching the border with a hand, the culprit was to be "stoned" or "shot through." No living thing must violate this sacred performance, and so beasts were included in the taboo.* (source)

The mental preparation laid heavy emphasis on "purification". The audience had to be clean in body, clothing and soul. They were, for example, instructed to abstain from sexual contact. Eventually all the preparations were complete, stage effects in place, audience psyched up and the show began. The audience were kept at some distance from the "action" for their own "protection". So after the fireworks, the actual interpretation of the event was helpfully provided by the people's leader - who had been permitted to attend more closely. He brought with him a memento of the encounter, in the form of stone tablets into which the all important message had been carefully carved. It was all a major success - forming the basis for the moral codes of about half the human race to this day. If you follow that "source" link, you can read about it in much more detail, with the actual biblical verses

explained in context. You can read our (SBE) analysis of the Ten Commandments here.

Most of that success, however, lay a couple of thousand years in their future. At the time, the travelling band of monotheists were a tiny and insignificant fringe cult. Polytheism continued as the mainstream without registering this theatrical triumph. Which was probably fortunate for the evolution of political philosophy. Under monotheism, there is, by definition, only one source of authority, one channel of appeal. This was also true under some polytheist societies, where all the gods were recruited and equated to the rulers - as in the Egyptian example.

Elsewhere, a much less authoritarian polytheism was the norm, where if you didn't like the verdict of one deity, you could always try your luck with another. This encouraged, even required, multiple sources of authority. It encouraged and nurtured diversity. Debate over "the right way to behave" was much more natural under this form of polytheism than it could ever have been under monotheism or state based polytheism. This remains true to date. Fundamentalist Moslems and Christians alike continue to reject the people's right to decide their own morality on the basis that such matters have already been decided for them by the one god. Such a repressive thought could never occur to a true polytheist.

The Athenian polytheists, in particular, would have none of this nonsense. Healthy discourse amongst the gods and their people was the natural order; an inherently more level playing field and starting point. Humans who got above themselves and tried to claim sole moral authority were anathema. The gods might produce useful guidance from time to time, but it was up to humans to discuss between themselves the policies and practices required to manage society on a day to day basis.

The Athenian Model - The "Concorde" of Democracy
Athenenian society was not some kind of liberal golden age. Slavery was normalised and both women and slaves were considered property to be owned by males. Amongst the males, however, and almost out of nowhere, arose the most egalitarian and democratic form of government ever invented - a peak which, since Athens declined, has never been attained anywhere else. It collapsed ignominiously, as we shall discuss. But 508 years before Jesus of Nazareth and for nearly 200 years it provided a truly inspiring template for socio-political organisation and (internal) conflict avoidance:

> *Democracy in Athens was **not limited to giving citizens the right to vote**. Athens was not a republic, **nor were the People governed by a representative body of legislators**. In a very real sense, **the People governed themselves, debating and voting individually on issues great and small, from matters of war and peace to the proper qualifications for ferry-boat captains...** The Athenian democracy was not, of course, a free-for-all of mob rule. The **Athenians understood the value of checks and balances** and of enforcing time for reflection before acting. They **understood that professionalism is necessary in certain jobs**, that **accountability was necessary of most jobs**, and that **some jobs required absolute job-security**. The system evolved over*

*time, suffered two complete breakdowns in the 5th century, and is certainly open to criticism at many points during its history. Nevertheless, it was coherent enough during those two centuries that we can describe it, in general terms, without being too far wrong on any point. And **despite its moments of imprudence, injustice, and indecision, it was an experiment remarkable enough to deserve our attention**.*(link) (cached) (emphasis added)

Source:Christopher W. Blackwell, Athenian Democracy: a brief overview, in Adriaan Lanni, ed., Athenian Law in its Democratic Context (*Center for Hellenic Studies On-line Discussion Series*). Republished in C.W. Blackwell, ed., *D mos: Classical Athenian Democracy* (A. Mahoney and R. Scaife, edd., *The Stoa: a consortium for electronic publication in the humanities* [www.stoa.org]) edition of February 28, 2003. Contact: cwb@stoa.org.

In part - and this is a vital lesson for aspiring democrats who would like to return to something like the Athenian model - Athens' decline can be attributed to the weaknesses in its democratic model we'll discuss later. But it is also important to remember what prompted the development of Athenian democracy in the first place. It was a reaction to tyranny. It was a recognition that the only protection against the corrupting influence of power is to share it equally amongst the population; a lesson which those who still crave power have been attempting to suppress ever since.

These are the most important features of Athenian democracy:

- The source of all power was The Assembly which consisted of all male citizens over the age of 18.
- Attendance was voluntary and on a "first come first served" basis. Payment for attendance must have been a useful incentive, but "only" the first 6,000 to turn up were allowed to participate.
- It met about 40 times a year
- Frivolous proposals were discouraged as follows: if a law was passed, found to be wanting and "unconstitutional" within 12 months, the proposer paid a fine which was large enough to bankrupt most citizens. This encouraged a serious approach to the decision making process.
- The decisions of the Assembly were implemented by small ad hoc groups of administrative officials or temporary "police" who were selected by lot. and who were, in turn, overseen by The Council of 500.
- In order to avoid corruption, membership of the Council was also by lot. The ten "tribes" of Athens each had to nominate its 50 randomly selected members to the Council. Each member would only serve for one year and would not be permitted to serve again the following year, nor more than twice in a lifetime. Each tribe served in a sort of rotating chairmanship for one tenth of the year, during which they took the lead in supervising the day to day work of the "executive".
- One of the jobs of the Council was to weed out those "officials" selected by lot but who were clearly "unfit for purpose".
- The council was also charged with preparing the agenda for the Assembly. As it was in more

or less permanent session, much of the meaty discussion took place in Council and it would make recommendations to the Assembly, which could and did modify and accept or reject the recommendations as it saw fit. In the normal course of events, no proposal could be made to the Assembly if it hadn't already been screened and deliberated by the Council.

- Most impressive of all was the Athenian judicial system - which has never been democratically equaled or even closely approached since. Any man over 30 could volunteer to be a potential juror. Every year, 6000 such volunteers would be randomly selected for jury service during that year. For any given trial, over 200 jurors were selected by a complex system designed to ensure that undue influence, bribery and corruption were almost impossible. If selected for a trial, Jurors were all paid to attend in order to ensure that even the poorest citizens could participate. The protagonists would address the jury directly and decisions, on all matters, from guilt or innocence to the appropriate restitution or punishments were made by simple majorities of the jury. The jury didn't just hear civil and criminal cases but was the final court of appeal for citizens who were dissatisfied with the decisions of the Council or Assembly. **The Jury was the ultimate guarantor of democratic rule.**

Leaving aside the sexism and slavery, most people will be shocked to realise how advanced and "progressive" the original model of democracy was. It is certainly humbling to compare the sham which passes for democracy today with that two and a half thousand year old model. Laughably, many people refer to that model as a "stepping stone" on the road to modern democracy; implying that it was, somehow, a naive and inferior version of what we have today. This is like calling the now defunct supersonic Concorde a stepping stone on the way to the hang glider. Far from being inferior, both Concorde and Athenian Democracy were clearly way ahead of their time!

There are many reasons why that form of egalitarian social decision making did not, and, perhaps, could not survive for very long. Losing the 20 year Peloponnesian war against Sparta caused the temporary collapse of Athenian democracy and allowed the aforementioned "Thirty Tyrants" to regain power for the aristocracy. Although their dictatorship was fairly short lived and democracy re-instated, it never really found a solution to the weaknesses exposed by this episode. As such it illustrates some of the major lessons for modern democrats which we must address in seeking to revive the model.

Primarily the Athenians demonstrated that We The People are just as capable as "evil tyrants" of making bloody stupid decisions. Athens lost the war chiefly because the democrats of Athens executed the naval leadership their empire depended on. Why? Because one or two demagogues played on the emotions of the Assembly when discussing the Trial of those leaders. The trial came about because in the process of winning a stunning naval victory against the Spartans, 25 of their triremes were sunk or damaged. Given that each was crewed by a couple of hundred sailors, and that a majority would have survived the battle, that represents a few thousand survivors needing rescue.

The Generals left two triremes there to pick up survivors and set off to relieve the blockade at Mytilene where another 50 Spartan ships could be dealt with before they had a chance to rejoin the remainder of their fleet. Unfortunately a storm blew up which prevented the Generals getting to

Mytilene and prevented the two triremes left behind rescuing the survivors who nearly all drowned.

Athens citizens were furious at what they saw as a betrayal of their sons and brothers and demanded blood. The Generals didn't help their own cause by initially blaming it on the two Trireme masters they'd left behind (instead of simply explaining that storms can wreck any human plans). When they acquitted themselves well before the Assembly, the citizens anger then turned against the Generals.

Such was the emotional intensity of the "debate" that when some citizens tried to argue merely that the Generals should at least get a fair trial, they were threatened with a new "democratic" motion that would see such objectors receive the same treatment as that proposed for the Generals. This despicable intimidation of fellow "free speakers" was the low point for Athenian democracy and many would argue that after failing such a test of integrity, it deserved to die. The Generals were condemned to death and hemlock they all duly drank, thus disposing, in one glorious self destructive act, of all their competent military leaders. The Spartans must have been very pleased with their gods that night!

The most notable protestor at this stupidity was Socrates. By historical coincidence, he was serving his turn as "chairman" in charge of the Assembly's debate when they dealt with this fractious issue. It was one of many occasions on which he had the guts to oppose the baying masses. He even tried to refuse to allow the vote on "instant death penalty" by arguing that it was unconstitutional. He was outmanouevred and the vote went ahead regardless. But that sin, together with his continual skepticism, dissent and opposition to the democratic project provided the excuse for his own execution at the behest of the mob. In a nutshell, We The People shot ourselves in the foot and proved ourselves no more deserving of political leadership than the later Caesars.

Indeed, that example of "mob rule" is used to this day as the chief argument against the re-introduction of democracy. It is a very powerful argument and, without an intelligent policy to deal with it, the case for re-introducing democracy is weak. It is hardly surprising that our chief witness to these events - Plato - designed the most fundamentally anti-democratic system he could envisage, in order to protect society from the ravages of that evil political nightmare. We the People had demonstrated our basic lack of fitness for command. Clearly what was needed were trained experts with perfectly balanced judgment and the wisdom required to make the wisest decisions.

I will develop the counter-argument in some detail as we go but it is worth putting a marker down here and now. Essentially Socrates was obviously "right" about many of the issues on which he was the lone voice. Nor is this a question of hindsight. Anyone thinking rationally rather than emotionally must have known that killing your best fighting men is a bad idea when you're in the middle of a war.

A sensible decision making process must - at least - protect the likes of Socrates and ensure that the intelligent dissenter gets a proper hearing without fear of retribution. The democratic majority must, ultimately, have the final say, but they should insist that any counter-arguments are thoroughly

explored and their merits analysed as part of the public debate. If claims are made, they must be tested or shown to be untestable. If predictions are made, they must be properly recorded and alarms set to detect signs that the predictions are being realised. Above all, after testing and rejecting the opposition arguments and reaching a democratic resolution, the majority must never make the mistake of assuming that, just because they are the majority, that they're also necessarily right!

Clearly that infrastructure of objective assessment of rival propositions was not part of the Athenian democratic model and it willed its own death as a result. Much like many of the regimes which have failed in its wake.

Yet clearly something glorious about the concept of equal shares in the decision making process survived the denigration and historical failure of its original model. But although their model was superficially mimicked by later systems its principles were never again taken so seriously by an entire nation and all national systems since have ensured that an elite always has control albeit occasionally behind a facade made to look more or less like one component of its magnificent Greek original (the Council of 500). None permit the equivalent of The Assembly or the Supreme Jury and the true powers of Democracy have been diluted to almost homeopathic levels.

This chapter will make the case not so much for a return to the Athenian model as for the adoption of an updated and improved version which contains even more protections against corruption and abuse of power than the original and which enables much wider participation in the debate and decision making process. Here, and in Chapter 12, we will also establish the case for giving day to day control over the democratic process back to the Jury. But we must truly honour the Athenian precedent which, for its time, was simply amazing.

But we still haven't got to the core of why we need such an elaborate decision making process...

What is wrong, for example, with the Greek reaction to the failure of the the Democratic model - Plato's benevolent dictatorship?

The Platonist Model - the Neocon Preference
Socrates main objection to democracy was the squabbling it entailed as different opinions competed for popular support. He recognised that just because an idea is popular doesn't make it right. We can't argue with that - look how "popular" religion still is for example. Plato's solution to the problem recognised by Socrates was rule by philosopher-kings. People who have been born, bred and educated to become wise in all things and thus able to determine the "right" answer as a product of their superior wisdom.

This is the "bus driver" approach to politics. Clearly we don't fill a bus with passengers and then elect a driver. We need to have a trained and vetted driver available before we fill the bus, in order to ensure safe and efficient bus driving. Why not run society generally that way? The answer is that while it is easy to define the rules and parameters which determine safe and efficient bus driving, no

such simplicity is possible for "driving society".

Our first few chapters should have made it clear why this is a naive approach to knowledge and, therefore a flawed basis for social control. In short, the fundamental uncertainty of existence limits us to an empirical determination of reality. In the process we observe that there are no a priori or empirical rules governing the ethical merit of alternative forms of behaviour. There is no narrowly defined "road" down which we can instruct a "driver" to travel.

There is nothing, for example, to sustain what is probably one of our most widely held beliefs or prejudices: nothing that tells us that even Life itself is "a good thing". In the absence of any ethical absolutes there is and can be no self-evident guide for social behaviour. Hence any individual or group making claims regarding such a guide or, indeed, purporting to be such a guide are themselves, inevitably, inherently flawed and there is no ethical or empirical reason to endorse their claims or to permit them to make rules for other members of society who are not part of their "enlightened" circle.

And if those arguments haven't persuaded you, then study human history and pull out of it as many examples as you can of successful dictators (who no doubt prefer the description "philosopher-kings") who have governed well and wisely, with obvious long term benefit to their populace. (Such as achieving a persistant increase in average life expectancy and quality of life).

But hang on! Clearly we have made amazing advances in all areas since the time of Athenian Democracy, and - in the first world at least - we are living much higher quality lives for much longer. If we've been ruled by a succession of dictatorships ever since, they must have been doing something right! - I hear you suggest.

Not so. Progress has been made largely despite our rulers, not because of them. As I've argued in [my blog](#) on "History Matters" day (17 Oct 2006)

> *True History is the tale of the struggle of humanity to survive the crass stupidity, arrogance and despicable authoritarianism of an almost unbroken chain of bumbling imbeciles. Today's leaders are almost enlightened by comparison. Yes there are great men and women dotted amongst them, but they have had far less effect on the overall course of events than their barbaric self-seeking peers.*
>
> *Human Progress has most often arisen not as the result of a sequence of carefully thought out plans for social and economic development but almost always in the form of measures required to correct the awful and often lethal mistakes made by predecessors.*

For example: Consider how long it has taken, since Athens, to regain even the first step on the ladder of democracy - universal suffrage. Our "wise leaders" have resisted it at every juncture, usually with

military - terrorist - violence and have only ever even partially conceded it when, essentially, they have drawn the conclusion that they could no longer win the battles necessary to prevent it. Given a choice between oblivion and a little token power-sharing, the bullies usually have the sense to concede the token. In other social areas, civil strife - up to and including civil war and revolution - has been necessary to achieve the necessary changes. At the very least it has usually required "mass protest" to force consideration of what should - had rational intelligence and wisdom been a part of the social equation - have been "obvious" to anyone not conditioned to regard "ordinary" humans as slightly more intelligent beasts of burden.

There are some notable exceptions of progress achieved without violent confrontation. The establishment of socialised medicine (the National Health Service) in Britain, following the second world war is probably the best example of a major social policy change which achieved something close to consensus (and still does), though, once established, the manner of its funding and control has reverted back to the typically incompetent form of monolithic management.

That case, of course, is a rare example of democratically inspired progress, still not something created by "rulers". I am open to suggestions but cannot immediately recall any example of a major social innovation *inititiated* (not merely conceded) by a "wise leader". If we think of the major social battles over the past couple of centuries:- Slavery, Child Labour, Apartheid, Universal Suffrage, Gay Rights, Womens' rights etc, none of these major social victories came from the beneficence of wise leaders. All required civil strife and conflict with the rulers. Let me know if you would like to nominate an exception.

Similarly, we can see slow improvements, throughout history, to the legal process from Magna Carta onwards. But history clearly also shows that none of this progress was inititiated by leaders. You never see a leader coming to power and making an uncoerced conscious decision to reduce their own power and influence. Power is always wrenched from them, sometimes violently, by the next strata of the hierarchy wishing to increase its own powers. We have reached the stage, today, where political power in any country is typically held by a few dozen people who make the real decisions whilst permitting a charade of elections to nominal posts whose job it is to present those decisions as though they emerged from some kind of democratic process. Fortunately, the web has arrived and is, at last, making it possible to expose the charade for what it is.

One consequence of this is that the authorities are becoming increasingly [desperate to control](#) ([cached](#)) the web, or at least access to it, so that subversive notions like these cannot infect their populations. Where it is too late to prevent access we see formerly liberal regimes becoming [increasingly tyrannical](#) and gradually trying to redefine "treason" - which is, today, called "[terrorism](#)" - as any source of opposition to themselves.

Democracy might well have failed first time round. But since then we've suffered two and a half thousand years of the glorious failures of the alternative.

This still, then, leaves us with the very real need to find a way to conduct social decision making in order to co-operate fairly with other members of society, to ensure fair access to scarce resources, to organise common defence against potential enemies and so on in ways which avoid the obvious pitfalls of all systems of government tried to date.

Given History's lessons that no individual or group has any monopoly of the truth, the only rational course is to debate issues and reach as near consensus as possible. This does not, as the Platonists claim, preclude "wisdom". But there is a real problem with the democratic paradigm. Which is that wisdom does not emerge automatically from debate. Wisdom isn't necessarily recognised as such, particularly by an ill-educated populace. Instead, they will tend to be moved to support the persons who are most eloquent and flamboyant in their presentations, or worse, the ones who can shout the loudest. This can lead (and has) to bad social judgment - call it "mob rule" if you like - more often than it leads to "good".

What is more common, though, is that charismatic leaders are, first, acclaimed as natural leaders and given authority their populace believe they deserve. Once in such positions, these leaders suddenly see the ready made template of the Platonist Republic and see themselves as worthy philosopher-kings who know what is best for their people. This usually includes suppressing the activities of other potential competitor philosopher-kings or even other ideas relevant to common social problems. One way or the other, with a poorly educated populace, dictatorship is almost always inevitable because there isn't a critical mass of "charismatic dissent" to prevent it forming.

More briefly, in modern terms, the tabloid press and Fox News are much more influential as opinion formers than, say, Noam Chomsky could ever be because most of the populace have been conditioned to have a very short attention span and thus have no hope of following the Chomsky logic trail and he (or at least his style) is certainly less charismatic than the average tub-thumping politician. How else can we explain extraordinary phenomena like the election to leadership of "the free world" of an incoherent and ignorant fool like George W Bush? (More charitably, some argue that the apparent low level intellect of the President is actually a sign of illness because he wasn't performing this badly in 1994; in which case, get well soon George. Please.)(cached)

In fact any potential philosopher-king who genuinely had the kind of wisdom which *might* guarantee a "good" society would - as a direct consequence of that wisdom - refuse to serve in such a role. Can you *imagine* Chomsky running for President??? Conversely, there are many who lack wisdom, but crave power and authority who are more than willing to adopt that role. They are the very ones who should be banned from even applying. There is a great deal of wisdom in the Athenian "selection by lot" system. You can't run for office - you can merely volunteer to be one of those from whom a short term post holder is randomly selected. No career politicians allowed. Much safer.

Present day America is being run by men who have a somewhat distorted view of Platonism as their guiding light. We discuss their illicit behaviour in some detail in Chapter 10, but discussing their perverse philosophy is appropriate here and now.

The Neocons who run America are all first or second generation disciples of the late Leo Strauss. Studying the warped views of Strauss provides significant insights into the Neocon mindset. Neil Robertson has carried out a detailed dissection of Strauss' Platonism (cached) but here are the main points we can draw from it:

Strauss reached (or concurred with) the same conclusion that many philosophers have reached, including the author of this work, that there are no ethical absolutes. But, whereas some of us see this as gloriously liberating - because it means we're free to make up our own rules (which we prefer to do by agreement, where necessary, with others) - he sees it as a threat - the "Crisis of Nihilism". The idea of people born into a world of unconstrained possibilities seems to give him nightmares. He prefers to think of the "natural" order being that we're born to be "citizens" of a certain "type" (class) and surrounded by a shared moral and political life; a shared culture.

Note: this is *not* supposed to be an empirical observation; - we plainly ARE born, today, as citizens into a society with more or less shared moral and political values and a commonly recognised culture. But for Strauss this is supposed to be an ideal state. Strauss has a vision of what that culture should be and although it probably has room for the appearance of liberty in many areas (like the right to buy almost anything you can afford; the right to choose which political party will be your rulers for the next few years; the right to change TV channels) there are certain fundamentals which must not be allowed to change; particularly the decision making process. This must be kept tightly under the control of the leadership caste. However, given the obvious popularity of the Democracy meme, we must make it look like the entire system is "the people's choice" that we rule, only by and with the consent of We The People. That's the clever bit. That requires control of the public meme space. The primary role of the established media is to manufacture that consent and help to bury all evidence of dissent. The web is making their job increasingly difficult too.

Anything which challenges this structure, by suggesting, for instance, that one's personal role in life is a matter for personal determination, or that "We The People" ought to be taking the decisions ourselves, rather than electing decision makers; any such concepts are deeply subversive to the project; a threat to that status quo and need to be repressed or, better still, eliminated.

Whereas, for instance, we see in the outline above how society's first class structures may have evolved in the early agricultural communes, Strauss wants to go a step further and define such developments as "natural" (which they may or may not be) and, therefore, "proper". In other words, having agreed that there are no ethical absolutes, he gropes for guidance in the "Natural Order". He grasps "Survival of the Fittest" as a tool with which to control society. You can see, here, the roots of the deeply conservative notion that people are born into a certain place in society and should "know their place". The Platonist - and Straussian - society is dependent on each class performing its functions and being content with their lot as members of that class.

Conversely, while we can accept the evolution of class (and note that Karl Marx, who was, ironically, as deterministic as Strauss, did a pretty good job in describing it), there is certainly no

logical reason why "what is" should dictate "what ought". If we can find better, classless ways, to manage society, there is no philosophical basis for opposing such developments and, perhaps, many reasons to encourage them. We have also unravelled the developmental pathways of many human cancers and other diseases. We don't argue that because cancer too is the product of a few million years of evolution that we should permit it to continue reducing our life expectancy. We use that knowledge to develop counter-measures to prevent or cure the disease.

> *for Strauss, modernity is founded upon the internalizing of the sources of morality*
> *within human subjectivity, and, as the necessary correlative of this, results in the*
> *oblivion of nature and total historicization of all moral and political standards*

In other words, the "crisis of nihilism" has arisen because human beings have woken up to the fact that there are no ethical absolutes and we're free to make up the rules. This is a threat - to Strauss - because, in the absence of clear ethical absolutes, we'll never agree on a coherent set of rules and society will, presumably, disintegrate. What you can see here is the Socratic basis of his fundamental opposition to democracy ("we'll never agree").

Strauss believed he had found a solution to this "problem" in Plato. This next bit should make your hair stand up.

The idea that Philosophy can shape society is - to Strauss - anathema. Why? Because:

> *philosophy is knowledge that one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what*
> *one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems, and, therewith, of the*
> *fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought*

Not only is this a somewhat naive view of what Philosophy is (see Chapter 2 for my own view) but it provides an eerie pre-echo of Donald Rumsfeld's famous "poem":

> ***The Unknown***
> *As we know,*
> *There are known knowns.*
> *There are things we know we know.*
> *We also know*
> *There are known unknowns.*
> *That is to say*
> *We know there are some things*
> *We do not know.*
> *But there are also unknown unknowns,*
> *The ones we don't know*
> *We don't know.*

—D. Rumsfeld Feb. 12, 2002, Department of Defense news briefing

Now you know where he got it from!

There is, in fact, nothing wrong with Rumsfeld's analysis; other than being trite and trivial. It is nothing more than a glorious SBO. But in sharing Strauss' view that this kind of thinking is deep, meaningful and representative of Philosophy, we learn that Donald Rumsfeld is no philosopher - any more than his mentor.

Strauss believes that Philosophy is merely the process of inquiry - but that it cannot provide any answers, for as soon as a philosopher provides an answer, they are denying the fundamental uncertainty of reality and thus dropping out of philosophy into mere opinion.

> [life is] *a quest for an understanding of the fundamental problems. But Strauss warns us that to resolve those problems by coming to a determinate solution is necessarily to collapse into dogmatism. The search for wisdom can never become wisdom but only dogmatism:*
>
>> *"Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the "subjective certainty" of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution"*

In other words, as soon as you find a whole or partial solution to a philosophical problem, you have invalidated your credentials as a searcher!! This is so naive it begins to explain the morass of fundamental errors being made by the Neocons. If it were true, then empirical research would be meaningless. No conclusion you reached as a result of any amount of painstaking research would have any greater status than an "opinion". We can see how this line of reasoning dovetails neatly with the "Intelligent Design" crowd and their ignorant protests that "Evolution is just a theory"; implying that it too is just an opinion. And we begin to understand the Bush administration's attack on Science.

Robertson confirms the impression that Strauss is fundamentally anti-rational:

> *Strauss's return to the ancients is premised upon the need for a contemporary recovery of a phenomenological or pre-philosophic awareness. That awareness is the **necessary beginning point of philosophy if it is to recover a rationalism that is non-technological.***

The basic flaw with Strauss' analysis is that it represents a distorted vision of the truth. As I describe

in [Chapter 3](), answering the [First Question](), we can indeed never reach logical certainty even about something as basic as the apparent phenomenon that we exist, however psychologically certain we all are. This much we agree on. But this fundamental uncertainty seems to be seen by Strauss as a barrier to rational inquiry and as a cause for literal "moral panic". For him, there is no point in the process of inquiry as, at the end of the day, we can't KNOW anything.

This produces attitudes like this one - reported by Ron Suskind in [this New York Times article]() in October 2004:

> *The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality - judiciously, as you will - we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."([cached]())*

The philosophical error, to be fair, is the same mistake the logical positivists made. The flaw in it is the ludicrously limited vision of what philosophy is. If it is narrowly defined as the search for objective reality, then we do indeed come to a dead end once we've investigated and answered the First Question. But "philosophy" doesn't even *mean* the "search for objective reality". The most common understanding of the word "philosophy" is "love of wisdom" and wisdom certainly isn't limited to the search for objective reality. Indeed, a better definition of it might well be "how to deal with the world given the absence of objective reality"!

Only the First Question deals with the search for objective reality. Philosophy, however, deals with 3 other questions and our exploration of those questions is clearly constrained but not impeded by our answers to that first question. The absence of certainties does not inhibit our philosophical inquiries any more than it inhibits our everyday activities. Experience and perception remain the only guides we've got to what is going on in the world and it's perfectly rational to behave in accordance with that combination. You don't refuse to cross the road because you can't be *absolutely* certain that the road is as clear as it looks!

The only limitation it places upon us is that, in defining ANY aspect of what we believe to be the real world, we must always accept the caveat that our conclusions are subject to the fundamental uncertainty of existence.The implication of which is that, at any moment, it is possible that, for example, the laws of physics will spontaneiously transform and we'll find time running backwards or gravity repelling us from the planet or whatever. We don't believe that will happen but we can't assign a probability to it, other than as a blind guess. It's a classic "known unknown".

The need for external threats...

The Straussian reaction to that is wholly irrational. In the absence of clear truths which can be used to guide us in answering the Third Question, Strauss argues that a Platonist style elite should *invent* them. Furthermore, his answer to the question I pose above "Why do we need to find an intelligent basis for social decision making at all?" (in other words, why do we need some form of government) is this:

> *"Because mankind is intrinsically wicked, he has to be governed,"*

which is bad enough, but now he starts getting truly dangerous. He, too, dimly recognises the same need for consensus - or at least consent - that I will be arguing for later. He shares the Platonist objection to "squabbling democracies" but realises that something must - in the absence of democracy - hold the people together by their own consent. So he argues:

> *"Such governance can only be established, however, when men are united - and **they can only be united against other people**."*(emphasis added)

In other words we can only unite the people, in the Straussian world view, against an external threat. Shadia Drury describes this at some length in [her own dissection] of the ideologue.

> *"Strauss thinks that a political order can be stable only if it is united by an external threat... Following Machiavelli, he maintains that **if no external threat exists, then one has to be manufactured.**"*

Now are we beginning to shudder?

It is important to note that this is nothing new. This isn't an aspect of the American world view that has arisen since 9-11 or even one that arose with the now infamous "[Rebuilding Americas Defences] (pdf)" document published by the [Project for the New American Century] about 12 months before 9-11.

As Drury points out:

> *This is what Henry Kissinger was referring to in that often quoted statement he made about creating external future threats in order to guard the world order he wishes to see become more prevalent and powerful, the system we often refer to as the "New World Order". Thus for the Neocons, when the Soviet Empire weakened and a Unipolar world order was emerging, a new threat had to be there lurking to allow them to further their Straussian vision.*

Nor is it an attitude limited to Republicans. In "The Grand Chessboard" by President Carter's

National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, he is quite open about the need for America to protect its own interests by ensuring that nothing and no-one prevents access to the last remaining huge reserves of oil and natural gas in Central Asia, the key to which, he argues, is Uzbekistan. This obviously requires, he recognises, an agressive foreign policy and increased rather than decreased military budget. He also recognises that such policies will be unpopular in a generally relaxed and multicultural America:

> *"Moreover, as America becomes an increasingly multi-cultural society, it may find it more difficult to fashion a consensus on foreign policy issues, **except in the circumstance of a truly massive and widely perceived direct external threat.**" (p211)*

I hope by now it is becoming clearer
a) why we do indeed need to replace existing forms of government with a rational Social Decision Making process and
b) why it must never again be left to the Platonists - distorted or otherwise - or any other bunch of self proclaimed experts to make decisions on our behalf.
c) why it is time to dust off the Democratic model, give it an upgrade to make it fit for the 21st century and let it have another crack at the problem.

Let's just hope we can improve on all the failed efforts which have preceded us. We should take comfort from the observation that it would be difficult to do much worse. We're not, after all, just talking about incompetence - which we have all been guilty of at some time. We're talking about replacing a system which consciously bases its control of society on straightforward deception and treachery at the highest levels. If the Platonists only "talked" about creating external threats or merely exploiting them when they occurred, it would be worrying enough. But the evidence is mounting that they have done much much more than merely talk about them. The question is: Does the evidence yet support the widespread charges that: **It's all a Conspiracy?**

We'll examine that question in part two.

<div align="center">

Rewritten 2006 - last update 29 Dec 2006
(original version available here)

</div>