ARE WE GOOD ENOUGH FOR DEMOCRACY?
Jonathan Wolff

Is democracy a good thing? Most of us think so. And yet, as Jonathan Wolff here explains, Plato thought democracy was a very bad idea. If you favour democracy (and I'm guessing you do), then your challenge is to explain what, if anything, is wrong with Plato's argument. So can you?

What do we want from our governments? Just and efficient legislation would be a good start. How will we get it? If you think that democracy is going to be at least part of the answer, then, according to Plato, in *The Republic*, you are making a huge and dangerous mistake.

Consider an analogy. Suppose you were worried about some aspect of your health. Perhaps you have a severe pain in your arm, which has also turned a peculiar shade of green. What should you do? Get to the doctor as quick as you could, no doubt. What you wouldn't do is rush off to local supermarket, describe your symptoms over the public address system, and then take a vote of the shoppers to decide whether to treat your arm by drugs or to amputate. When we need advice, we should ask an expert. The people simply don't have the knowledge to make an informed medical decision. It would be an act of madness to put yourself in their hands. But, says Plato, the health of the state is of no less importance than the health of the individuals within that state. Taking a vote on matters of state is just as mad as taking a vote on matters of health. Democracy, then, is utterly irrational.

We can put Plato's argument somewhat more precisely in the following terms:

1. Ruling is a skill.
2. It is rational to leave the exercise of skills to experts
3. In a democracy the people rule.

4. The people are not experts.
   Therefore:
5. Democracy is irrational.

This is apparently a rather powerful argument. It seems vital for the defender of democracy to find a reply. As in the case of any argument, there are two primary ways of finding a response. First, we can try to show that one (or more) of the premises is false. Even a valid argument from a false premise proves nothing. Second, we can try to show that the conclusion does not follow from the premises, and thus the argument is invalid, proving nothing. Which strategy should the democrat attempt? Of course many could be attempted. But we have to start somewhere.

Let us look again at the fourth premise: that the people are not experts. Now in the parallel example we accepted readily enough that the people do not have sufficient expertise in medical matters to make it rational to rely upon them. They don't have the training and haven't acquired the specific medical knowledge to qualify them to have their opinions taken seriously. But should we assume so quickly that the people don't have the right sort of knowledge to qualify them as political experts?

At first sight, attempting to establish this positive case looks like a fool's errand. The people, in general, seem to have little interest in political matters, and don't show much inclination to spend the time and trouble necessary to come to terms with the detail of policy or principle. They have little knowledge, real experience, or interest. How on earth can we justify relying on the decisions of such a group?

Interestingly there is an answer. Although we may rightly have little confidence in any one person taken individually, if we take the group collectively we may do rather better. Indeed we might put it this way: although no individual in the group is an expert, nevertheless under the right conditions the group as a whole is an expert. An example will spring to the mind of anyone who has watched television in the last

year or two: 'ask the audience' on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Although it would hardly be rational to stake much on the opinion of a stranger, picked at random, when 80% of a group of strangers are urging one choice over, say, three others, then you somehow feel entitled to have a great deal of confidence in the group decision.

But why should this be so? The answer was first provided by the 18th Century French philosopher and mathematician Condorcet, who showed how probabilities accumulate in a very interesting way. Imagine we are to take a vote on a particular issue, for which there are only two possible answers. Now although we cannot always rely on a vote, under the right circumstances we can have almost absolute confidence that the majority will reach the right decision. The key variables to note are, first, the size of the total group, second, the average competence of the voter, and third, the size of the majority. Consider the following examples, from the philosopher and political scientist Brian Barry:

If we have a voting body of a thousand, each member of which is right on average 51% of the time, what is the probability in any particular instance that a 51% majority has the right answer? The answer, rather surprisingly perhaps is: better than two to one (69%). Moreover if the required majority is kept at 51% and the number of voters raised to 10,000 ... the probability that the majority has the right answer rises virtually to unity (99.97%).[1]

Does this show that the people as a whole are experts? Potentially, possibly, but it is a big step from potentiality to actuality. First of all, the average competence of the group must be above 50%. If not, then as Condorcet himself points out, the argument works in reverse, virtually guaranteeing that the wrong decision will be made. In fact this point is tacitly known by the contestants on *Millionaire*. If their estimation is that the average member of the audience cannot

be expected to have a reasonable chance of knowing the answer to the question in hand then they will not waste their 'lifeline'. If the average competence of each individual is too low, then the group as a whole is useless. Whatever this tells us about TV quiz shows, clearly the general point indicates the importance of education to democracy (at least if it is be defended on this basis).

So suppose we can be sure that, on the issue at hand, the electorate can be expected to have an average competence of greater than 50%. Are we then home and dry? Not quite. We also need the assurance that they will vote according to their ideas of the right answers. To explain, let me use the analogy of trial by jury. In some ways trial by jury is very similar to democratic voting. In a jury trial we ask the citizens in the jury to come to an assessment of whether the defendant has been shown to be guilty beyond reasonable doubt. It is essential that they cast their vote simply on this basis. If they cast their vote on some other basis – admiration of the good looks of the prosecuting counsel, or a grudge against the police, for example – then the trial will not do what it is designed to do: convict if and only if a sufficiently good case has been made. If the jury is to do its job, it must be motivated the right way.

Consider the O J Simpson trial. One juror, it is said, was disqualified from service when it was found out that he had made a bet with a workmate that O.J. would be acquitted. Aside from wondering about the stupidity of the person with whom he made this bet, the point is that once the juror had a financial interest in the outcome, he could not be relied upon to cast his vote in the required way. He might not vote on the merits of the case.

Here, then, is the point. It is one thing to say that the voters have the ability to make a correct judgement. It is another thing to say that they will have the motivation to do so. To bring this out we need to address a new question. When you are asked to vote in an election, what, precisely, are you being asked to do? Imagine that the vote is an an-

swer to a question. Well, what question? Consider these possibilities: first, which candidate is best for you?; second, which candidate is best for the country? To put this perhaps over-simplistically, we have a possible conflict here between self-interest and morality. Should you vote to pursue your individual interest (for example, vote for the tax-cutting candidate), or should you vote to promote the common good? Perhaps, in many cases, the two will coincide but in many cases they will not. What should we do?

First we might ask: what *do* we do? The answer is: all sorts of things. Some people vote on purely self-interested grounds, others on clear moral grounds. Some vote on 'mixed' grounds: I'll vote for the morally right thing, as long as it doesn't cost me too much. But social science tells us that people vote for all sorts of reasons, even to cancel out the vote of their husband or wife.

What is the relevance of this? Well, the Condorcet argument only works if people have the right motivation in casting their votes. Think back to the 'ask the audience' example. Imagine, now, that the audience is comprised entirely of people impatiently and jealously waiting for their turn to attempt to win the million. Would you trust them now? I thought not! Accordingly Condorcet's argument relies both on the competence and motivation of the electorate. Even if you can be assured of their (average) competence, can you equally be assured of their motivation? In the case of democracy it means that you must be assured that the vast majority of the voters will be prepared to cast their vote on the basis of what would be good for the country, rather than on the basis of their personal preferences, or, just to mess things up. Can we be assured of this? Of course not. No one has ever even told us how we should cast our votes. So even if the people together have the potential to be experts, in reality the decision they come up with may not tell us what is right or best. Rather all it shows is that more people cast their vote one way rather than another. And what is so significant about that?

Does this show that democracy is indefensible? Not at all. All I have done is argue that one way of replying to Plato's argument against democracy does not work. Specifically I have argued that one way of showing that the people together are experts (and thus refuting one the premises of Plato's argument) makes assumptions about individual motivation which are hard to sustain. We might think that this means that we learnt a valuable lesson: we will never be ready for democracy until we have learnt to act as responsible citizens, with a constant eye to the common good, rather than as self-interested individuals. Many have drawn this conclusion. But not even this follows. All I have shown is that one way of defending democracy against Plato's attack does not follow. There might be many other ways of replying to Plato. There might even be ways of showing how democracy can work even for the imperfect, selfish creatures we are. Well, there *might* be... !

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The arguments in this paper are taken from Jonathan Wolff, Introduction to Political Philosophy *(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 3: Who Should Rule?*

Notes

[1] Brian Barry, 'The Public Interest', in A. Quinton (ed.) *Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 122.