Historical Character of Democracy

Chapter X
PROTAGORAS

In Athens and many other cities, democracy was politically triumphant, but nothing had been done to diminish the wealth of those who belonged to the old aristocratic families. It was, in the main, the rich who embodied what appears to us as Hellenic culture: they had education and leisure, travel had taken the edge off their traditional prejudices, and the time that they spent in discussion sharpened their wits. **What was called democracy did not touch the institution of slavery, which enabled the rich to enjoy their wealth without oppressing free citizens.**

In many cities, however, and especially in Athens, the poorer citizens had towards the rich a double hostility, that of envy, and that of traditionalism. The rich were supposed — often with justice — to be impious and immoral; they were subverting ancient beliefs, and probably trying to destroy democracy'. **It thus happened that political democracy, was associated with cultural conservatism**, while those who were cultural innovators tended to be political reactionaries.

Athenian democracy, though it had the grave limitation of not including slaves or women, was in some respects more democratic than any modern system. Judges and most executive officers were chosen by lot, and served for short periods; they were thus average citizens, like our jurymen, with the prejudices and lack of professionalism characteristic of average citizens. In general, there were a large number of judges to hear each case. The plaintiff and defendant, or prosecutor and accused, appeared in person, not through professional lawyers.

Chapter XIII
THE SOURCES OF PLATO'S OPINIONS

Plato was born in 428-7 B.C., in the early years of the Peloponncsian War. He was a well-to-do aristocrat, related to various people who were concerned in the rule of the Thirty Tyrants. He was a young man when Athens was defeated, and he could attribute the defeat to democracy, which his social position and his family connections were likely to make him despise. He was a pupil of Socrates, for whom he had a profound affection and respect; and Socrates was put to death by the democracy.

But even if we suppose that there is such a thing as "wisdom," is there any form of constitution which will give the government to the wise? It is clear that majorities, like general councils, may

err, and in fact have erred. Aristocracies are not always wise; kings are often foolish ; Popes, in spite of infallibility, have committed grievous errors. Why anybody advocate entrusting the government to university graduates, or even to doctors of divinity? Or to men who, having been born poor, have made great fortunes? It is clear that no legally definable selection of citizens is likely to be wiser, in practice, than the whole body.

It might be suggested that men could be given political wisdom by a suitable training. But the question would arise: what is a suitable training? And this would turn out to be a party question.

The problem of finding a collection of "wise" men and leaving the government to them is thus an insoluble one. That is the ultimate reason for democracy.

Chapter XIV
PLATO'S UTOPIA

The word "justice," as still used in the law, is more similar to Plato's conception than it is as used in political speculation. Under the influence of democratic theory, we have come to associate justice with equality: while for Plato it has no such implication. "Justice," in the sense in which it is almost synonymous with "law" — as when we speak of "courts of justice" — is concerned mainly with property rights, which have nothing to do with equality. The first suggested definition of "justice," at the beginning of the Republic, is that it consists in paying debts. This definition is soon abandoned as inadequate, but something of it remains at the end.

No one thinks it unjust to put the best men into a football team, although they acquire thereby a great superiority. If football were managed as democratically as the Athenian government the students to play for their university would be chosen by lot. But in matters of government it is difficult to know who has the most skill, and very far from certain that a politician will use his skill in the public interest rather than in his own or in that of his class or party or creed.

Chapter XX
ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

This brings up a question which is half ethical, half political. Can we regard as morally satisfactory a community which, by its essential constitution, confines the best things to a few, and requires the majority to be content with the second-best? Plato and Aristotle say yes, and Nietzsche agrees with them. Stoics, Christians, and democrats say no. But there are great differences in their ways of saying no. Stoics and early Christians consider that the greatest good is virtue, and that external circumstances cannot prevent a man from being virtuous; there is therefore no need to seek a just social system, since social injustice affects only unimportant matters. The democrat, on the contrary, usually holds that, at least so far as politics are concerned, the most important goods are power and property; he cannot, therefore, acquiesce in a social system which is unjust in these

respects.

The Aristotelian view, that the highest virtue is for the few, is logically connected with the subordination of ethics to politics, if the aim is the good community rather than the good individual, it is possible that the good community may be one in which there is subordination. In an orchestra, the first violin is more important than the oboe, though both are necessary for the excellence of the whole. It is impossible to organize an orchestra on the principle of giving to each man what would be best for him as an isolated individual. The same sort of thing applies to the government of a large modern State, however democratic. A modern democracy — unlike those of antiquity— confers great power upon certain chosen individuals, Presidents or Prime Ministers, and must expect of them kinds of merit which are not expected of the ordinary citizen. When people are not thinking in terms of religion or political controversy, they are likely to hold that a good President is more to be honoured than a good bricklayer. In a democracy a President is not expected to be quite like Aristotle's magnanimous man, but still he is expected to be rather different from the average citizen, and to have certain merits connected with his station. These peculiar merits would perhaps not be considered "ethical", but that is because we use this adjective in a narrower sense than that in which it is used by Aristotle.

Revision #20
Created 2026-02-11 23:59:48 UTC by Dara
Updated 2026-04-05 01:27:30 UTC by Dara