



DEMOCRACY BEGINS AT HOME

Mortimer J. Adler

When people say “Charity begins at home”, they sometimes mean it stops there. Without being able to look into their hearts, we have reason to suspect that, for them, it does not even begin there. The man who says he is willing to love his neighbor if he can pick his neighbors is adding a reservation that was not intended by the Divine precept—“to love thy neighbor as thyself.” But, such reservations aside, the commandment does indicate why charity really begins at home. You are told to love yourself, and your neighbor *as yourself*. A proper self-love is the measure of loving others well. And, similarly, the way in which you should treat those who are near and dear to you provides a model to

follow in your consideration of all others—the neighbors near and far who are not members of your family.

When I say “Democracy begins at home,” in the good sense I have just indicated. It begins there because the household is the basic community in which we all live. The domestic community is the state in miniature. It may even be the historic origin of all the larger communities that have grown up with the ever widening association of men. Every type of civil government has its prototype in the organization of the family. All the problems of government—even the problems of war and peace—occur within the confines of the home. Unless the democratic spirit prevails at home, it is not likely to flourish in the country.

We have been hearing a great deal of talk about education for democracy. It is largely concerned with how the schools can prepare the young for citizenship. We often forget that their elders, their parents also need such training. There should be adult education for democracy, and the place for adults to get it is, not from lectures or forums or books which preach the gospel, but in the home. They can get it best there because they can get it most practically. The problems of family life give the householder—father or mother, husband or wife—ample opportunity to put into practice the principles of democracy.

Let us consider a *complete* family. A family may consist of more than a man, his wife, and their children. It may include in-laws in various degree—even to one’s sisters, and one’s cousins, and one’s aunts. And there are families which fall short of being complete. But what I have called a complete family is in our society a fairly normal one. In any case, it serves our purpose because it involves two relationships, each of which has significance for the comparisons I want to draw between the family and the state.

Out of each of these relationships arises a kind of government. In each, someone rules and someone obeys, someone gives orders and someone takes them. Let me give a name to these two kinds of government, according to the relationship of the persons involved. The government in which a wife or a husband rules or is ruled—or both—let us call “conjugal government.” The government in which father and mother rule their children, let us call “parental government.”

What is the nature of parental government? When is it just, and when unjust? The answers to these questions are based on the fundamental difference between parent and child—a difference in

age which normally carries with it a difference in maturity of character, in amount of practical experience in the affairs of life, and, consequently, in ability to take care of one's self. The child needs the parent's direction until he is old enough to take care of himself. This need is the foundation of parental government. It not only determines the parent's responsibility, but it also sets the limit beyond which the parent should not go.

Some parents are unwilling to recognize when their children have grown up. Parental authority should be strictly proportionate to childish incapacity for self-government. If it seeks to persist beyond the point where the child, having become competent in self-direction, really no longer a child, it is unjust. The parent refuses to terminate his authority over his progeny when they have ceased to be children is a domestic despot.

There are also domestic tyrants. Parental government is justified by the child's need for direction. But if such direction is to answer the need, it must be given for the sake of helping the child to grow up. To be just, parental government must be for the good of the child. There are, rarely one hopes, parents who consult only their own pleasure or profit in the treatment of their children. They are domestic tyrants, because the essence of tyranny is to rule another for one's own good, which is equivalent to using him as a tool, rather than respecting his dignity as a person.

Obviously parents who tend to be despotic or tyrannical in the government of their children—sometimes unwittingly—are developing traits of mind and character which fit them to be adherents of a Fuhrer, but not to be officials, or even citizens, in a democracy. But this does not mean that parental government at its best is democratic. Some "progressive" parents erroneously suppose that democracy in the home consists in treating their children as equals, and even in submitting to being ruled by them, despite their immaturity. This is a travesty on democracy, a false application of its principles. All men are born equal, but the infant at birth is not equal to his father and mother in character or intelligence. Parental government takes its character from the inequality between parent and child, which justifies such government and makes it necessary.

If I were to describe parental government by calling it "absolute" I would mean only that the child does not actively participate in his own government, as a citizen of a democracy does in his. Parental government is *for* the child, but not *of* the child or *by* the child. In the family council to determine what is for the child's good, the

child's opinions and desires may be heard, but he should not have a vote, much less a veto. When he is genuinely entitled to either, he is no longer a child. So long as children are unable to determine what is good for them, there is nothing wrong with the absoluteness of parental government. It can be absolute without being either despotic or too radical.

The exponents of institutional government may, however, be right in saying that absolute rule is proper only when it is exercised by parents over children. The defenders of absolute monarchy or any form of dictatorship cannot justify such government outside the family by regarding the monarch or dictator as the father of his subjects. In the political community, government must be of and by the people, as well as for them. The despot who may be benevolent because he governs for his subjects good is no less the despot if he tries to exercise an absolute rule over them. To do so is not to acknowledge them as peers.

Thomas Jefferson epitomized his republican sentiments, and his antipathy to political absolutism, in a letter to Dupont de Nemours, in which he wrote: "We both consider the people as our children, and love them with parental affection. But you love them as infants whom you are afraid to trust without nurses; and I as adults whom I freely leave to self-government."

Where in the family, then, is a model for Constitutional Government—the sort of government in which equals participate, the sort of government in which the rules have a voice, and so can't be said to rule as well is to be ruled? It is in the conjugal relationship. Many centuries ago Aristotle said that just as absolute monarchy is like parental government in the home, so the government of wife by husband and husband by wife is like constitutional government in the state. In making this comparison, Aristotle did not go as far as he would in affirming the equality of men and women. He supposed that the male was naturally superior in reason and judgment, and so he should be granted a greater authority, the wife having authority only over some minor phases of the domestic establishment. Nevertheless he called the conjugal government constitutional because both husband and wife participated in the deliberations which decided things for the family's good.

Those of us who are Democrats disagree with Aristotle's views about the superiority of man, as well as his notion that some men are born to be slaves. In consequence, we see the possibility of making the conjugal relationship realize the ideal of democratic

government. If we do not think this to be so, our allegiance to democratic principles deserves suspicion.

There are two ways in which husband and wife can proceed democratically. The first is by a division of functions, each taking care of some department of the home's affairs. With respect to those matters over which the wife takes charge, the husband must recognize her authority and obey, as a citizen should obey the man they have chosen to govern because they regard him as especially competent to discharge his functions. This rule works the other way, of course, with respect to those matters which are assigned to the husband's care. By such division of tasks, both the husband and the wife rule for the family's good, and each is ruled by the other in a certain respect.

The second way setting up a democratic marriage is more difficult. Assuming that all domestic problems fall within the province of both husband and wife, this procedure requires that all problems be solved by deliberations into which both enter equally. But everyone knows that there are difficult practical problems, in the solution of which two people can disagree, no matter how rational they try to be. Yet such questions must be decided. They are often as urgent as they are difficult.


In the legislative assemblies of the state, a deadlock can be broken by recourse to a vote of the majority. But in the councils of husband and wife, nothing short of unanimity will reach a decision. To achieve unanimity without coercion or violence requires husband and wife to exercise their rational powers to the utmost. They must be skilled in the difficult business of trying to understand the other fellow's point of view. They must know how to argue and how to listen to arguments. They must have patience and perseverance for long hours of conversation. They must be able to effect an intelligent and honest compromise when the circumstances demand that conversation be cut short and decision be reached.

This is asking a great deal of ordinary human beings, you will say. The weakness of the flesh is too great for such heroic virtues. Yet such are the obligations which the ideal of democratic government imposes on all of us. What better training could there be for the duties and arts of citizenship and the ordeal of trying to run one's domestic affairs by democratic processes?

The man or woman who would rather submit to a domineering mate and suffer the burdens of democratic matrimony can hardly

claim that his spirit is equal to the demands of democratic political life. A man or woman who approaches marital problems with no other thought than getting his or her own way by imposing his or her will on the other, whether through force or guile, exemplifies all that is bad about power politics. Such people may pretend devotion to democracy in the state, but the way they live at home shows how little they understand democracy's demands, and how ill prepared to meet them they are in mind or character. The masterful husband or the seductive wife is an admirer of Hitler or Goebbels, not of Jefferson and Lincoln.

If democracy begins at home, it will not stop there. But if it is not practiced at home, how unlikely will be its realization in the state. Show me the despotic or too radical parent; show me the arbitrary husband or wife, the man who still thinks the head of the dinner table is a throne from which he issues ukases with a wave of his fork, or the woman who wins an argument with the tear; show me the henpecked husband or the submissive wife—show me these and I will show you the persons and the homes in whose spirit democracy has not begun to live.

Most of us living in glass houses dare not throw the first stone. But all of us can do something about reforming our domestic selves and our own homes before we start reforming the country or the world. The four freedoms which we want to give the whole world must begin at home, and that does not mean the United States. It means the place of our bed and board. The battles of democracy cannot be won at home, but the ideals for which they are fought must there be cherished. 

From our archives, c. 1941 The rationale for this date is Dr. Adler's reference to the "four freedoms" in the final paragraph of this lecture. The "four freedoms" came from a President Theodore Roosevelt's State of the Union Address delivered to the 77th Congress on January 6, 1941. It became known as the "Four Freedoms Speech." See TGIO441 and 442.
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MORTIMER ADLER CROSS-EXAMINES THE WITNESSES FOR DEMOCRACY

*Leading Philosopher Says We Need a Better Understanding
of Democracy and Asks for a Stricter Definition of the Ideal*

One of the minor sad effects of the world-wide hysteria seems to be our desire to believe that all the great and good and wise men of the past favored democracy and would be fighting—or at least writing—on our side today. That righteous and just men would oppose totalitarianism and nihilism, I have no doubt; but opposition to such foes is certainly not the same as an espousal of democracy because it is the best form of government. If all that the word “democracy” means is “the good society.” without any further definition of what constitutes a good society, then, of course, all right-thinking men of good will in every century must have been for it. Then we could go through the roster of great names in history, and call as many witnesses as we want to praise democracy’s good character. We could line up all the great books of human wisdom and pick passages from them almost at random to compile the testament of democracy. But if hysteria had not blinded us to the tricks of special pleading, we would be able to see that the anthologies of democracy are profound distortions of history—products of the same sort of wishful thinking that generates the mythologies the Nazis and the Communists call history.

Three New Anthologies

In the last year, three such anthologies have been published. Differing somewhat in intention and scope, they are alike in seeking to give the impression that the struggle for democracy, in thought, as well as deed, is not just, a matter of the last century. All three assemble passages from the great writers throughout the centuries, along with pronouncements from contemporary politicians and journalists. There was, first, Bernard Smith’s “The Democratic Spirit,” “a collection of American writings from the earliest times to the present day.” Then there was Irwin Edman’s “Fountainheads of Freedom,” subtitled “the growth of the democratic idea.” And, finally, we have Norman Cousins’ “A Treasury of Democracy.”

I have always been uncompromisingly opposed to anthologies which consist of excerpts (no matter how long) from the larger context of any respectable thinker’s work. Collections of lyric poetry do no injustice to the works of art they include in their entirety, but the sort of anthology which tries to compile the wisdom of the ages on any important theme inevitably does violence to the complex doctrine of thinkers worth studying. And this is particularly true in the sphere of political thought where

language is most treacherous, as any one of a half dozen semanticists is always ready to tell you. The word “democracy,” for instance, does not express the same idea, and certainly not the same sentiment, when it is used by Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Locke, Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey.

Despite such ambiguity, the word “democracy” need not be given up, nor need it become merely a flag-waving symbol. But if we are to avoid verbalism and sentimentality we must define, not the word, but the ideal of democracy. Democracy cannot be defined, as the anthologists seem to think, merely in terms of *justice* on the part of rulers or *constitutionality* in the form of government. These are elements of a good state, but they are not enough for democracy, which extends political justice and constitutional rights to include *all* men, not just *some*. Only if we ignore what is essential to democracy, can we call our ancestors democrats. They approved of states which were built upon slavery or serfdom, in which large sections of the laboring population were excluded from citizenship, and in which the false principles of birth and wealth prevailed.

Democracy’s Sine Qua Non

Royal government can be just, rather than tyrannical; even despotism can be benevolent. And republican government is always constitutional. The Roman republic was not a democracy, nor is England one now. Our own government was founded as a republic, not a democracy. The *sine qua non* of democracy is the emancipation of slave and subject peoples, the abolition of all privileged classes, and the universal extension of suffrage. *Democracy is constitutional government under which all men are equal as citizens.*

Now who will speak up for democracy? Certainly not Plato and Aristotle, not Cicero and St. Thomas Aquinas! These men—like most other ancient and medieval thinkers—condoned slavery or serfdom, approved of class privileges, and regarded women as politically immature. The fact that Plato knew the difference between the just ruler and the tyrant must not obscure the fact that he thought democracy little better than tyranny, that his state involved rigid class distinctions, and that the well-being of the state itself took precedence over the happiness of individual men. The fact that Aristotle argued for constitutional as against despotic government must not lead us to quote the exponent of natural slavery in favor of democracy as we should understand it. What

Aristotle understood democracy to be, he quite properly damned as “the most tolerable of the bad forms of government.”

Jefferson Not Too Clear


If I could cross-examine other witnesses the anthologists have called, I could show that none of the great thinkers and writers up to the 19th century was truly a democrat. Our Founding Fathers were republicans (constitutionalism vs. despotism) and oligarchs (property rights vs. human rights), most of them believing with Sam Adams that the country should be run by the people who own it. Not even Thomas Jefferson was clear in his mind on the questions of slavery and suffrage unrestricted by heavy poll taxes. So far as I know, John Stuart Mill, in the middle of the 19th century, was the first eminent thinker to argue the case for universal manhood suffrage, including woman as human beings deserving the status of citizenship. A careful study of Mill’s *Essay on Representative Government*—the very beginning of democratic theory—would be worth a thousand anthologies of democracy, which make perjurers of the great men they quote out of context, and which delude us into supposing that democracy has been on the march from the dawn of time.

In one sense, of course, democracy has always been on the march. If every step forward in political thought or action be regarded as a step toward democracy, then such steps were taken by men who would have been horrified by their goal, could they have guessed it. The first battle of Thermopylae began the fight for constitutional government against absolutism, and the second battle on the same ground more than 2,500 years later re-fought the same issue. Neither was for Democracy, as something more than, constitutional government, though, like Magna Carta and all the Reform Acts in British constitutional history, they can be regarded as necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of democracy’s come to be.

The Naked Ideal

After constitutional government is firmly established in this world, we shall still have to win the fight against economic slavery, against oligarchical privileges, against suffrage restrictions—things which destroy democracy at the root. I am far from sure that most Americans today would be enthusiastic about democracy if they understood the ideal in its naked simplicity. Certainly most American educators are working against democracy, for they keep the population divided into freemen and slaves by reserving liberal

education, however diluted, only for the few, and giving the many vocational training which fits them to be economic tools, not, citizens.

If inspiration is needed in these dark days, it should be gained by thinking of democracy's future, not its past. And democracy is not likely to have an immediate future unless we do better thinking about it than these anthologies represent. Our task is to understand why most of the great men of the past were against democracy in principle, as well as in practice. Our task is to defend our conviction about democracy—if we really have one—by arguing against the greatest authorities, not by calling them to bear false witness to an ideal they never cherished. 

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