



Mortimer Adler on Opinion and Majority Rule

The problem of majority rule and the problem of the conflict between majority opinion and all the minority opinions, and the other related problem of controversy about basic social issues.

MORTIMER ADLER: First, at the center of opinion is the realm of our freedom in regard to action. Not only are individuals free in making up their minds about matters of opinion, but where opinion concerns action, individuals have a right to disagree about what policies to adopt or what courses of action to pursue. This leads to a second major point, that there must be some way to resolve or settle reasonable differences of opinion if human beings are going to live together peacefully and harmoniously, if people in society are going to act in concert for a common goal.

MAX WEISMANN: Before you go on, I'm not sure that I see, and it may not be clear to others either, why such differences of opinion on political problems can't be settled in just the same way as we settle problems in science or philosophy. In these disputes, we simply look at the facts or weigh the evidence.

ADLER: Well, that all depends, on whether you regard science and philosophy as knowledge or as opinion. If you regard it as knowledge or more like knowledge than like opinion, then such disputes can be solved in a way that is not available for settling political differences of opinion.

To the extent that science and philosophy are knowledge, not opinion, you are right; these disputes can be settled by investigating the facts or examining the reasons. But if in politics we act on opinion, not knowledge, then there must be some other way of resolving disputes and reaching practical decisions which all parties will accept.

Let me try to make this point concretely clear. Let's consider the case of the Supreme Court of the United States. Now let's suppose that the Justice to whom the case is assigned, after studying it, comes back to conference with his colleagues and tells them that he is able to demonstrate the right decision of that case. Be sure you understand the supposition I am asking you to make. I admit it may be some strain on your imagination, but imagine this one of the nine Justices telling his colleagues that he can demonstrate to them as rigorously as a mathematician can demonstrate a conclusion in geometry that this decision of the case is the only right decision. If that were possible, then you can see at once that there would be no room for dissenting opinions. And there would be no point in taking a vote to see whether the majority stood on one side or the other side of the decision that was up for consideration.

But now let's return to reality. As Aristotle said, "We don't expect demonstrations from judges any more than we expect deliberations and the taking of votes from mathematicians." It would be preposterous—wouldn't it?—for a congress of mathematicians to decide whether a certain solution to a mathematical problem was the right solution by taking a vote. But since political and judicial decisions are matters of opinion and not knowledge, then it seems to me it is not preposterous to take a vote and let the majority decide; for that is a reasonable way to proceed whether the case is a kind of case that is before the Supreme Court of the United States, whether the issue is the kind of issue that is before the Congress of the United States, or whether it's the kind of issue that's before the whole people in a national election. I almost was about to say that that is the only reasonable way to decide the case.

WEISMANN: I really wish that you had said it because, then I could ask you, Why is it the only reasonable way to proceed? Is there no

other way of settling a difference of political opinion than the one you've just described?

ADLER: Yes, there are at least two other ways. One of them, by the way, is force. We all know societies in the world today where differences of opinion are settled by shooting the opposition or by putting them into concentration camps. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that in the totalitarian societies in the world today, differences of opinion are not even allowed to arise. Force is used to suppress differences of opinion, or certainly to prevent them from being heard. Now this is hardly a reasonable way of settling differences of opinion. And even if differences of opinion cannot be settled by reasoning, as matters of knowledge can be settled that way, nevertheless they should be settled by debate rather than by force, because matters of opinion are the sorts of matters about which reasonable men can always disagree and therefore they should be heard. The sides should be heard in debate.

WEISMANN: Well, I agree and I am sure that most people agree that force is out, but for the reason that it is the very antithesis of the reasonable way to settle these political differences. But then what is the other way that you had in mind, if force is out?

ADLER: Well, the other way is giving one man authority to decide and having everyone else agree in advance to accept his decision and act on his authority. Now that might appear to be a reasonable procedure, especially if the one man who is given authority to decide happens to be the wisest man that can be found in a given society. Nevertheless I don't think it's reasonable. At least I don't think it's as reasonable as letting the majority decide, as giving authority to the majority's decision. In any case, I am quite sure that the latter way, giving authority to the majority decision, is a way that is compatible with human freedom and with the institutions of a free society.

Now let me summarize what we have seen so far and then see what remains to be shown. Individuals should be free to disagree about questions of policy or political action, because these are matters of opinion. Because they are matters of opinion, differences cannot be resolved by reasoning or proof. And concerted political action depends on (a) force, (b) the authority of one man, or (c) majority rule.

Now force is out. It's perfectly clear that force is an unreasonable procedure. What remains to be shown then is that, first, majority rule is the only principle of decision that's compatible with free-

dom. But that isn't enough. I would also like to show that majority rule is also preferable on other grounds, namely, that the opinion of the majority is likely to be the wisest decision that can be reached. When I have shown these two things I will face the problem of the conflict between majority opinion and the dissenting opinion of the minority, or one or more minority.

Now let me go at once to the defense of majority rule, and first, its defense on the ground that it is the only procedure consistent with human freedom. To explain this let me just tell you quickly of the two essential ingredients in political liberty, the liberty that is possessed by the citizens of a republic. The first ingredient is that they be governed for their own good or for the common welfare of the State. Men are free under government when it is government for the people, not for the private or selfish interests of their rulers.

The second ingredient is that the men who are governed in that way have a voice in their own government. Men are free under government when it is government by the people, when they have some say in the making of the decisions that affect their own welfare or the common good of the society in which they live. Hence it is perfectly clear—is it not?—that the subjects of an absolute monarch or a despot are not fully free, even if that absolute monarch or despot is the wisest and most benevolent of rulers. For even if he is that, and even if he decides everything for their good, that way of deciding things takes away from them the second essential ingredient of political liberty which is having a voice in one's own government. Only the citizens of a republic are completely free, for only when the opinion of the majority prevails by voting or other means, does the voice of each citizen finally have some weight in the making of the decisions that govern the society and the individuals in it. It follows therefore from the very basic requirements of political liberty that majority rule as a way of deciding questions of action or polity is the only way that's consistent with the fullest political liberty that men can enjoy, and by right should have.

WEISMANN: I follow the argument so far and I agree with it as I'm sure most Americans certainly would. But you said a little while ago that majority rule is preferable on other grounds. And I think at that time you said that it had a greater chance of reaching a wise decision, for example, than the rule of one man even if he would be the wisest man to be found.

ADLER: I did say that.

WEISMANN: Now that's not so clear to me, because I'm sure that

you know even better than I that there are eminent political philosophers who disagree with this point of view. In antiquity it was Plato and in modern times it was Hegel. And so, as I understand both Plato and Hegel, they felt that it was better for men to be ruled wisely for their own good rather than to have a voice in their own government. Their precise point was that the opinion of the majority is likely to be unwise and usually men are ill-advised, aren't they, even as to their own good, their own common interests?

ADLER: Well, I know that the greatest political theorists disagree on this very point. And that fact tells me that this point in political theory is a matter of opinion, not of knowledge. Hence the best thing I can do is to present as strongly as I can the opinion on the opposite side. And I'm going to do that by reading you some passages from eminent authors in which majority rule is defended as being on the side of wisdom as well as on the side of freedom—that is important—on the side of wisdom as well as on the side of freedom.

Let me read you, first, a passage from Thucydides. Thucydides wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, and he saw a great deal of struggling in the ancient world between democracy and the opponents of democracy. And Thucydides says in this passage, "Ordinary men usually manage public affairs better than their more gifted fellows." "For," he says, "on public matters no one can hear and decide so well as the many."

And then let me turn to some passages from Aristotle's *Politics*. It always surprises me that Aristotle comes out as strongly as he does, as I am going to show you, on the side of the majority. Listen to this very carefully. Aristotle says, "The many of whom each individual is but an ordinary person when they meet together are likely to reach a better decision than the few best men. For each individual among them has a share of virtue and prudence. And when they meet together they become in a manner one man who has many feet and hands and senses and minds. Hence the many are better judges than a single man; for some understand one part, and some another, and together they understand the whole."

And then in another place he says, "If the people are not utterly degraded, then although individually they must be worst judges than those who have special knowledge, as a body they are as good, as better." And in still another place he says, "As a feast to which all the guests contribute is better than a banquet furnished by one man, so the multitude is a better judge of most things than

any individual.” And it is here that the multitude includes all sorts of opposite and conflicting interests that tend to cancel each other out. He adds, “The many are more incorruptible than the few, just as a larger body is less subject to contamination than a smaller body.”

Finally I would like to read you two passages from our own American writers, writers in *The Federalist Papers*, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton. John Jay says, “The people of any country, if like Americans they are intelligent and well-informed, seldom adopt and steadily persevere for many years in an erroneous opinion, respecting their interests.” And Alexander Hamilton adds, “The people commonly and usually intend the public good. They sometimes do make errors, but the wonder is that they so seldom do.”

Now I think these passages are an eloquent defense of majority rule both as wise and as on the side of freedom. And this view of the wisdom of the majority and the soundness of majority rule is a view taken by those who defend republican and constitutional government against absolute monarchy or despotism. That is why Aristotle says it is essential to every form of constitutional state or republic that whatever seems good to the majority of the citizens should have authority. And certainly any democrat would agree to this, for democracy rests on faith in the sound sense of the people as a whole.

John Stuart Mill, a defender of democracy in the modern sense, tells us that democracy is the government of the whole people, by the whole people, in which the majority outvote and prevail.

WEISMANN: Well, on the subject of John Stuart Mill, am I wrong in recalling that he was a man who also greatly feared the role of the majority?

ADLER: No, you are not wrong at all.

WEISMANN: Mill says, “Democracy as commonly conceived and hitherto practiced, that is the government of the whole people by a mere majority of the people exclusively represented.” Did you get that? “A mere majority of the people exclusively represented.”

ADLER: Yes.

WEISMANN: That is the common conception of democracy. “And in contrast,” he says, “the pure idea of democracy is government of the whole people by the whole people equally represented.” “By

the whole people *equally* represented.”

ADLER: That is a powerful distinction.

WEISMANN: And I feel that even though Mill is a democrat, he accepted this principle of majority rule. Did he try also to get some safeguards for the minority?

ADLER: He did.

WEISMANN: And I recall that his idea of protecting the minority was a very ingenious system of proportional representation, was it not?

ADLER: It was. I don't want go into the merits of Mill's or any other system of proportional voting as a way of giving weight to the minority opinions. But I would like to talk about a subject closely related to that, namely, the question of how we make majority rule and the opinion of the majority responsible, how we make it live up to its responsibility. And the only way we can do this I think is by making majority rule fully responsible to the opinions of all of the dissenting minorities in this society.

Let me turn to this point at once and see if I can give you my statement of the case, of the way to make majority rule secure in its responsibility. This, I think, is the problem we face in our society today, the problem of how we take a stand with respect to political controversy or controversy on all fundamental social issues. In my view, three things are required to make majority rule responsible to the opinions of all minorities.

In the first place, we must regard political controversy as good, not bad. In fact, what we ought to fear is uniformity of opinion, not difference of opinion. Each of us, if this is so, has a moral responsibility either to engage in controversy or to be friendly toward controversy, to want it to go on, and certainly to pay attention to it when it does go on.

In the second place, we must take every precaution to safeguard political controversy, the public debate of public issues, from the things that could ruin it and make a farce of it. Just think for a moment about the Lincoln-Douglas debates. When the Lincoln-Douglas debates were going on, slavery was the hottest issue of the day. And yet, neither side in those debates was intimidated by sinister pressures or counteracted by insidious propaganda. When the majority tries to settle controversial issues by using pressures and

propaganda instead of resorting to rational persuasion, then the weight of numbers, the force of numbers is as bad as the force of guns and bombs.

The most important of these three points is this one: the public debate of public issues must be carried on as long as it is practicable to do so, until every side is adequately heard and everyone who has an opinion is given a chance to voice it. In fact, even after the decision is reached, his majesty's loyal opposition must continue to oppose and criticize the government's position and try to get the matter changed or rectified according to their own view. Only when all these things are done as much as they can be done, does the principle of majority rule have the fullest chance of reaching a wise decision on political questions.


But before I leave this point I would like to support the last thing I said by reading you a passage from John Stuart Mill that gives the reasons why every side in political controversy must be heard.

This passage, by the way, I think is so relevant to American life today that I would like to see it engraved on the minds of every American citizen. According to Mill there are three grounds for freedom in the expression of opinion. Let me read you what he says. "First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for ought we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility. Second, though the silenced opinion be in error, it may and very commonly does contain a portion of the truth. And since the general or prevailing truth on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinion that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied. And third, even if the received opinion be not only truth, but the whole truth, unless it is suffered to be and actually is vigorously and earnestly contested, it will by most of those who receive it be held in a manner of prejudice with little comprehension or feeling of its rational ground."

That, as I say, is something which I think every American citizen should keep in mind. I think it is a fitting conclusion to this discussion of opinion, particularly of opinion in the field of politics, in the field of our social life.

But there is one more thing I would like to spend a moment on. In my mind it is the most poignant of all differences of opinion. It is the difference of opinion between the generations, the conflict of the generations, the difference of opinion between parents and their children. This is a difference of opinion about which very little can

be done. The generations seem to be involved in an irresolvable dispute. I say this feelingly to the point of view of being in one generation, of having children, and feeling totally inadequate ever to persuade them of my point of view. I personally think that parents, being older, being more mature, having more experience, have a chance of being wiser than their children on immediate practical matters. But they have very little chance of persuading their children of this for the simple reason that the experience on which their wisdom rests is an experience their children do not have. The child has to suffer the same experience, has to live through it, suffer it, before he comes around, if persuaded of the opinion his parents tried to hand on to him. And then often it is too late; often the mistake is made.

I regard this as one of the saddest facts about the human race. If we could only do something about this, if we could only find a way of having children profit somehow by the experience of their parents, of accepting somehow the wisdom that is in their parents' opinions as a result of that experience, I think we could change the course of human history overnight. Progress could be made to move with much greater speed than it ever has in the whole course of human history. 

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