

Democracy and the Foundations of Morality

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Plunging into Professor Poulimatka's paper is like finding oneself in waters warmly familiar, comfortably deep, teeming with arguments which move tantalizingly past one in a discernable direction, but evade one's grasp and vanish when one approaches for a closer look. One as sympathetic as I am to democracy, rationality, and moral objectivity, could readily content oneself with the congenial pleasure of basking in the shimmering fishy spectacle of it all, little concerned about coming away from it empty-handed. But this is not the respondent's lot, nor the philosopher's vocation. Ours is not a calling to contentment and solidarity, but to reason.

Must we say, with Professor Poulimatka, that democracy *too* is *essentially* a call to reason, to a public examination of the good society resting in objective criteria of assessment? Are solidarity and contentment with the deliberations transacted in the public spheres he envisions really not enough to make a society democratic? He argues that:

The concept of democracy assumes that citizens should expose their claims to the critical scrutiny of others and assess the claims of others critically. Every citizen should, therefore, be educationally developed to enable him to take part in public discussion about the good society. Such an education assumes objective values since a critical citizen cannot assess the validity of reasons and judge them fairly outside a nonarbitrary framework of criteria.

I find these claims quite astonishing, for they present themselves as following from nothing more than the concept of democracy itself. They amount to an *ideal*, and one philosophers will heartily embrace, but they are not an aspect or implication of the concept of democracy *per se*. If there is any uncontested meaning of the word "democracy" at all, it is a slender shadow of what is needed to sustain the claim that true democracy requires that citizens be fair and impartial judges of the quality of reasons invoked in public debate. The historically dominant models of democracy are very far from assuming that citizens will be so penetratingly rational and impartial.¹ If the democracy of Athens was democracy, and democracy in the United States is democracy, then the citizen-philosopher who plumbs the depths of moral reality and the epistemic foundations of judgment is not essential to democracy. What *is* central to these traditions is the citizen-soldier who acquires standing through military service, and the citizen-proprietor who acquires standing through economic independence and contributions to public revenues.²

These observations suggest that at least some of Professor Poulimatka's arguments are unsound, so I should be more specific about where they go awry. By my count, there are in the opening pages of his paper some six distinct arguments for the claims that the concept of democracy entails "critical citizenship" and that such citizenship cannot be achieved without education. He then argues that education for critical citizenship is education "understood as a normative rather than a descriptive concept," and that education in this sense presupposes a distinction between objective value and the values dominant in a society. Finally, he suggests, without

argument, that judgments of objective value rest on the ontological reality of value, and thus on the truth of moral realism. Putting this all together yields the conclusion that democracy presupposes moral realism, or in other words, that democracy cannot exist unless moral realism is the correct meta-ethical theory, a result which even those of us sympathetic to moral realism should find alarming.

Of the six opening arguments, I have time to consider only the last and most definitive one:

The very concept of democracy entails the concept of critical citizenship, since democracy means the political rule by the people, which the latter cannot really exercise unless their political choices are based upon informed deliberation on the alternatives.

The problem with this argument is the word “really.” If it means “in fact,” and engaging in informed deliberation is equated with being a critical citizen, then the argument is valid but unsound: given the flexibility in what can count as popular rule, it is not true that popular rule cannot exist without “the people” engaging in informed deliberation. If the word “really” means “prudently” or “well,” then this crucial premise is true — prudent popular rule *does* involve informed deliberation — but the argument is invalid because this is no longer a claim about what is essential to democracy *per se*. The other five opening arguments all break down in similar ways, leaving Professor Poulmatka without proof of the conceptual link between democracy and education for critical citizenship that he seeks.

The next stage of the argument, which concludes that education for critical citizenship presupposes objective value, is also seriously flawed. What Professor Poulmatka could legitimately do at this point is describe the critical capacities which he thinks would be desirable, and explain what kind of education would be conducive to the development of those capacities. That kind of education might or might not turn out to rest in some way on assumptions of moral and epistemic objectivity. Instead, he asserts that a “descriptive” concept of education precludes judging schools by any standard that is not prevalent in a society, and is therefore deficient, and that the alternative is a “normative” concept of education which presupposes moral objectivity. He concludes on the strength of this that it is part of the idea of education that its aims can be judged by reference to objective values or “nonarbitrary criteria.” The problem here is that even if an argument of this form were a valid method for analyzing the concept of education, it would still rest on the same mistake involved in thinking that criticism of legal systems is compatible with natural law theories (“normative” conceptions of law), but not with positivist (“descriptive”) theories of law. On the contrary, it is possible and altogether too easy to identify the legal and educational institutions of a society by their descriptive attributes and see that they are bad.

Finally, even if it were shown that democracy and education rest on moral standards that are not reducible to prevailing social norms, this would not entail any commitment in principle to moral realism. Any number of *normative* ethical stances would provide the moral standards required, and even if *meta*-ethical assumptions were somehow unavoidable, we have been given no reason to think that it is moral realism in particular that is assumed. Theories of the justification of moral standards

may be divided into the epistemic and the practical.³ The former, which include foundationalist and moral sense theories as well as realist ones, hold that the good moral standards are the *true* ones. The latter, which include contractarian and rational choice theories, hold that the good moral standards are the ones it would be *rational* to adopt. Professor Poulmatka does not eliminate the non-realist varieties of epistemic theory from contention, and his observation that Rawls appeals to moral considerations in developing his constructivist theory of justice is no objection to the practical theories, since Rawls's theory is not an instance of one. The most recent example of a practical theory, and one I can both warmly and rationally commend for your consideration, is Kurt Baier's *The Rational and the Moral Order*.⁴

1. This is easily confirmed by a review of the models surveyed by David Held in *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

2. See Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) and Moses Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

3. See David Copp's introduction to David Copp and David Zimmerman, eds., *Morality, Reason, and Truth: New Essays on the Foundations of Ethics* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984).

4. *The Rational and the Moral Order: The Social Roots of Reason and Morality* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995).