

# A PARADOX IN THE THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

Richard Wollheim



Introduction, Polycarp Ikuenobe

THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER Richard Wollheim starts his essay by noting that the notion of democracy is typically associated with government and decision-making in political institutions. He also notices a difference between the classical and modern views of democracy. In the classical view, democracy is a sectional government, where the power of decision-making is placed in the hands of a section of the citizens. In the modern view, democracy places the power of decision-making in the hands of all citizens and not a section of the people. Thus, one of the justifications of a democracy is that it is a reasonable procedure for settling disputes and arriving at acceptable decisions. In the modern sense, everyone is supposed to participate in the decision-making process as implied by the idea of a government by the people. The pertinent issue has to do with how this can be realized if there are differences among people's views and interests. One solution is to reduce population to a manageable size where interests can be harmonized. This solution, Wollheim argues, is utopian. Another solution may be to weaken the requirement of what it means for a democratic rule to be effective, so that it does not necessarily imply that every person's view is represented and that everyone assents to a policy. It may only mean the opportunity for everyone to initiate policy ideas. In that case, the size and diversity of a population will not constitute a problem.

However, there is a problem: if popular rule is consistent with some degree of dissent by some people, then there is also a sense in which the notion of popular rule is inconsistent with dissent. We have to find a way to characterize the idea that a government by the people suggests a positive relation between what people will like and the government policy. It is in this regard that people will say that a government is democratic if its laws reflect what a majority concur with and are enacted as laws because of such concurrence. Wollheim identifies several problems with the principle of majority rule. One problem has to do with its ambiguity. It is not clear whether we should understand it to mean absolute majority or simply a plurality of choices. If it means absolute majority, then it will not result in a policy that is

intuitively unacceptable. The reality is that majority rule does not involve absolute majority when there is a wide range of possible choices considered to be what the people want. There is therefore the need to supplement the absolute majority principle with the plurality principle. But the problem is that the plurality principle may select a policy which is counterintuitive to the choices of the citizens. In other words, the plurality principle may select a policy which appears to be what the people want but is in fact not really what the majority want. And according to the democratic principle, people are being asked to accept this policy as what the people want. Here is the paradox: Why should a person accept a policy as something he ought to want (in deference to the democratic process) when indeed such policy is inconsistent with what he really wants?

Although it is possible to want something which is inconsistent with what we ought to want, what we want cannot be a reason for what we ought to want, and what we ought to want cannot be derived from what we want. The democratic process is considered justified because it is a way to select a policy that the people ought to think is the correct policy to accept and adopt. This suggests that a person is more likely to vote for a policy he evaluates to be the right one that he ought to accept, but which may not necessarily be what he wants. Wollheim suggests two ways to resolve this paradox: we may deny that a person is committed to the belief that the policy he chooses ought to be adopted because it is an initial or hypothetical choice but not a final choice. Or we may deny that the policy chosen by the democratic process ought to be adopted because the process gives us only a choice of what is prudent to accept. Wollheim argues that none of these ways is acceptable because, on the one hand, it is wrong to consider a choice as initial or hypothetical under certain circumstances. On the other hand, if the result of the democratic process is prudential then we will be content if such policy is replaced with what we really want. But in reality, this will be regarded as undesirable. Wollheim argues that the reasonable way to resolve this paradox is to argue that these situations are not inconsistent. His reason for saying so is that the reasons for rejecting it are misguided.

As you read Wollheim, consider and reflect on the following questions: How is the modern view of democracy different from the classical view? What are the factors that may prevent using democratic procedures to arrive at generally acceptable decisions? In what way does the democratic process of making public policy decisions involve a paradox?

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**T**he invention of Democracy is traditionally attributed to Cleisthenes. Many will object to this attribution, not so much on factual grounds, as because it savors too much of a heroic or Promethean view of history. But in this case at least such a view might seem justified. We know little enough of the motives or sentiments of the great reformer, but of the enduring significance of what he achieved there can be no reasonable doubt. . . . By the middle of the fifth century B.C. Democracy existed as a set of institutions, as a theory of government, and as a word. Since the institutions came first and prompted the rest, he who devised them may with good reason be celebrated as the inventor of Democracy.

From the days of Cleisthenes onwards Democracy has enjoyed a continuous, if often exiguous, history in Western culture. The political experience of Athens has never been forgotten and never totally dismissed if only because it is recorded in texts that for quite extraneous reasons have made a sustained claim upon the attention or reverence of the educated.

However, although there has been continuity, there has also been change. In several important respects the Democracy of Antiquity differs, and should be distinguished, from the Democracy of the modern world: and this not just in practice, but also in theory. To take an obvious case: to the classical mind Democracy was linked *in an essential way* with certain specific political institutions. These links no longer exist. For the institutions with which the Ancients so intimately connected Democracy either are no longer held to be connected, or even consistent, with Democracy, as in the case of public scrutiny or the lot, or else *are* still held to be connected with Democracy but not in a way which can be directly derived from the nature of Democracy, as, for instance, with the Rule of Law.

But the most important respect in which modern Democracy differs from classical Democracy is that whereas classical Democracy was a form of sectional government, to the modern mind Democracy is opposed to all forms of sectional government. . . . And the *demos* in the Greek city-state or determinate section of the population: the populace or the poor.

By contrast the modern conception of Democracy is of a form of government in which no restriction is placed upon the governing body: the governing body is identical with the citizen body. We might put the difference

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between the ancient and modern conceptions of Democracy like this: in both cases Democracy is the rule of the people: but in the classical theory the people is identified with a section or part of the population, whereas in modern theory the people is identified with the population as a whole.

Immediately a problem arises: if Democracy means the rule of the people *as a whole*, how can it be realized? For in any modern state the people is bound to be both *numerous* and *diverse*, and either of these characteristics by itself—let alone the conjunction of the two—surely must make a group of individuals incapable of effective rule. In antiquity, or at any rate in the political theory of antiquity, the problem does not arise. For the *demos* of the Greek city-state was, in the first place, relatively small: and, secondly, it was, or was supposed to be, united in interest, and therefore uniform in desire or want.

One solution to this problem is to suggest a return to the Greek conditions: or the suggestion is, rather, that the conditions which hold for the Greek *demos* should be made to hold for the population of a modern democracy. This population should, in the first place, be considerably reduced in size. And when it is no longer numerous, it will automatically cease to be diverse. Or if any diversity remains, this diversity will be purely phenomenal or apparent. This solution—which can roughly be equated with Rousseau's ideal of 'legitimate rule'—is obviously unacceptable. The restriction upon population is Utopian: and the 'true' or 'real' uniformity that it advocates, which is consistent with any degree of conscious diversity, is worthless.

Another solution consists in weakening the criteria attached to the notion of effective rule. For if we mean by 'ruling' 'devising and composing laws'—as the Greeks did—then it is clearly impossible for a numerous and diverse population to exercise collective rule. One answer, as we have seen, is that we should bring it about that the population in a Democracy is neither numerous nor diverse. Another answer is that we should mean something different by 'ruling': or that in elucidating Democracy we should employ a different concept of 'rule'. And it is this second answer that is, explicitly or implicitly, incorporated in most modern democratic theories. If modern theory insists that in a democracy the people in the sense of the whole population, not just a section of the population, should rule, it also insists that the people should rule in the sense not of devising or initiating legislation but of choosing or controlling it. And the significance of this is that it permits a people to rule despite its size and its diversity. . . .

However, even if popular rule is consistent with some degree of dissent, there must also be a degree with which it is inconsistent. Or to put it another way: for legislation to be said to be by the people, it must stand in some positive relation to what the individual citizens would like legislation to be like. How is this relation to be characterized?

In practice, of course, we say that legislation is democratic if (1) it concurs with what the majority of the population would like and (2) it is enacted because of this concurrence. It has however been argued that though the majority principle may be all right in practice, it certainly is inadequate to any ideal construction of Democracy: and since any justification of Democracy is most likely to relate to an ideal construction, this is important.

Before the inadequacies of the majority principle can be brought out, an ambiguity in its formulation needs to be resolved. For the principle may be insisting on a concurrence of the legislation with an absolute majority, or merely with a plurality, of citizens' choices. If an absolute majority is intended, then the majority principle is acceptable in that it never selects legislation that is intuitively unacceptable, given the choices of the individual citizens: the trouble is, however, that over too large a range not just of possible but of likely cases the majority principle selects no absolute majority legislation at all. Accordingly if government is to be continuous, the absolute-majority principle needs to be supplemented by another principle, and for this role the obvious candidate is the plurality principle. This principle in all likely cases at any rate *does* select specific legislation, but the trouble is that the legislation it selects is in some cases counter intuitive—given, that is, the choice of the citizens.<sup>1</sup>

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Following up this kind of criticism of the majority principle, political scientists have envisaged the problem of Democracy as that of devising a function which would allow us to derive what might be called the 'democratic choice' from the ordered choices or preference-schedules of the individual citizens. It is only if we can construct such a function—the argument runs—that we can claim to have explicated the weak sense of 'rule' in which, according to modern theory, the people rule in a Democracy.

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For the purpose of this paper, I intend to assume that the so-called problem of aggregation has been solved: that there exists a method or rule<sup>2</sup> for

going from individual choices to some specific legislation such that we can justifiably call the enactment of that legislation an instance of democratic rule.

Having made this assumption, I now want to go on and envisage Democracy in terms of a certain machine which operates according to this method or rule. The machine—which we may for convenience call the democratic machine—operates in a discontinuous fashion. Into it are fed at fixed intervals the choices of the individual citizens. The machine then aggregates them according to the pre-established rule or method, and so comes up with what may be called a ‘choice’ of its own. Democratic rule is said to be achieved if throughout the period when the machine is not working, the most recent choice of the machine is acted upon. The question now arises: What is the authority of the choice expressed by the machine? More specifically, why should someone who has fed his choice into the machine and then is confronted by the machine with a choice non-identical with his own, feel any obligation to accept it?

In order however to advance the inquiry we must now note a distinction. For the choices that the individual citizen feeds into the democratic machine and on the basis of which the democratic ‘choice’ is made, are susceptible of two very different interpretations.

On the one hand, we may regard the choices as expressions of *want*. To say that a certain citizen chooses policy A or that he prefers policy A to policy B, is to say that he wants policy A more than any other policy or that he wants it more than policy B. The wants which the citizens’ choices express need not, of course, be selfish or egotistical wants. When a man decides that he wants policy A more than policy B, he may well be moved not just by his own narrow interests but by a concern for the welfare of others. But all the same, in choosing A he is not asserting that the others want A, nor that A is in their interests, nor that A would be an ideal solution, nor that A ought to be realized; he would be asserting *tout court* that he wants A.

If we conceive the democratic machine as operating on choices in the sense of expressed wants, then our question resolves into something approximating to the old Utilitarian problem: Why should a man who wants A think that B ought to be the case, when B is not consistent with A but is arrived at by considering the wants of all the other citizens of the society? And I think that in this connection it is only necessary to make two quite brief observations.

In the first place, there is no inconsistency whatsoever in wanting A and thinking that B ought to be the case, even when A and B are themselves

inconsistent. We may well have a desire and a moral belief that runs counter to that desire. Indeed there are moral philosophers who have held that morality would be inconceivable unless *some* of our moral beliefs ran counter to our desires.

However, though there is no inconsistency between wanting A and thinking that B ought to be the case, it should be equally obvious that the former could not serve as a reason for the latter nor the latter be derived from the former. Yet there seems a presumption in the question that just this is what is to be shown. Paradoxically though, Utilitarians (and I use the expression in a rather general way) seem to have held both that there was a *prima facie* inconsistency between wanting A and thinking that B ought to be the case, and also that this inconsistency was to be removed by showing that the belief that B ought to be the case was grounded in the want for A. But course this last demand is an absurdity. . . .

In fact the citizen who expresses a want for A and then, in deference to the operation of the democratic machine, thinks that B ought to be the case, thinks that B ought to be the case as the result of applying some higher-order principle to the effect that what the democratic machine chooses ought to be the case. He consults, in other words, his principles, he does not go back and consult again his wants. All he needs to be certain of is that his principles and his wants, though they may lead in different directions, are not actually inconsistent: and it seems very difficult to attach any sense even to the *possibility* that they could be.

However, it is now time to turn to another interpretation that can be put on the material which is characteristically fed into the democratic machine. On this view when the citizen chooses a certain policy or prefers one policy to another, he is expressing not a want but an *evaluation*. He chooses A or prefers A to B, because he thinks that A is the best policy, is the policy that ought to be enacted, or, alternatively, that A is a better policy than B or ought to be enacted in preference to B—not because he wants A more or needs it more than B. If it is objected at this stage that evaluations are based upon wants and therefore not to be contrasted with them, I can only reply that this may well be true if what is meant is that a man will often enough take his wants into account in arriving at his evaluations. . . .

Let us then regard the democratic machine as being fed with choices in the sense of evaluations. The evaluations are then aggregated by the machine in accordance with its established rule, and the machine comes up with a

choice of its own. Anyone who accepts democracy is then obliged to think that the policy that the machine selects is the policy that ought to be enacted.

But immediately a difficulty arises. Let us imagine a citizen who feeds his choice for, say, A, or for A over B into the democratic machine. On the present interpretation, he is to be regarded as thereby expressing his opinion that A ought to be enacted. And now let us further suppose that the machine into which this and other choices have been fed comes up with its own choice, and its choice is for B. How can the citizen accept the machine's choice, which involves his thinking that B ought to be enacted when, as we already know, he is of the opinion, of the declared opinion, that A ought to be enacted?

Observe that we are confronted with a far more serious problem now when we interpret choices as evaluations than we were when we interpreted them as expressions of wants. For on the original interpretation the problem was (it will be remembered) that the acceptance of the machine's choice did not follow from one's own choice, which one had fed into the machine: the problem on this new interpretation is that the acceptance of the machine's choice seems to be incompatible with—not just not to follow from, but to be incompatible with—one's own original choice. For if a man expresses a choice for A and the machine expresses a choice for B, then the man, if he is to be a sound democrat, seems to be committed to the belief that A ought to be the case *and* to the belief that B ought to be the case.

Now, this is a serious matter. For I think it is fairly self-evident that, even if the dichotomy of 'expressed want' 'evaluation' is somewhat harsh, the choices that the citizens of a democracy make when they are called upon to make a choice are far closer to evaluations than to expressions of want. . . . Accordingly he is more likely to vote in a way that reflects his evaluations than in a way that reflects his wants. If this is so, then the difficulty that I have described would seem to constitute a paradox in the very heart of democratic theory.

There are two obvious ways in which the paradox might be broken. One is by denying that in the circumstances the man is committed to the belief that A (i.e. the policy of his choice) ought to be enacted: the other is by denying that the man is committed to the belief that B (i.e. the policy of the machine's choice) ought to be enacted. Either of these two ways would be effective in resolving the paradox: both have considerable plausibility: but neither, I submit, is ultimately acceptable. Let me review the arguments:

1. It might be claimed that the man who feeds his choice for A into the democratic machine is not in fact committed to believing that A ought to be the case in the face of the machine's verdict, since, though the choice that he feeds into the machine is certainly an evaluation, it is an *interim*, not a final or definitive, evaluation. When he expresses his preference for A or for A over B, his preference (properly understood) is hypothetical. Written out it would be formulated in some such way as "I think that A ought to be enacted, provided that other people, or enough other people, are of the same opinion." The preference, the argument runs, is necessarily hypothetical, because when it is expressed, the man cannot know the preferences that will be expressed by his fellow-citizens. It is only when all these preferences have been fed into the machine, and the machine has operated on them and has come up with a preference of its own, that he has the requisite information on which to base a final as opposed to a provisional or interim choice. And then when he is in this position what he does is to reiterate the preference of the machine: he chooses as it has chosen—that is to say, in the present case he chooses B.

Once we understand this—the argument runs—the paradox disappears. No longer is there any temptation to think of the unfortunate citizen as committed both to the belief that A ought to be enacted and to the belief that B ought to be enacted—for it should now be clear that he continues to hold that A ought to be enacted only up to the moment when he has reason to think that B ought to be enacted: as soon as he has reason to commit himself to B, i.e. as soon as the machine has expressed *its* choices on the basis of all the choices in the community, his commitment to A dissolves. The man, in other words, withdraws his support from A and gives it to B.

The argument has some plausibility; but not, I think, enough. For, to begin with, it cannot be correct to interpret the choices fed into the democratic machine as interim or hypothetical, i.e. as of the form "I think that A ought to be enacted if other people or enough other people are of the same opinion." And this for two reasons. First, a hypothetical choice, or a choice hypothetically expressed, generally implies some doubt whether the condition upon which the choice is dependent is or is not fulfilled. It would be inappropriate to express a choice hypothetically if one knew that the protasis was fulfilled: and it would be pointless to express it so if one knew that the protasis was unfulfilled. And yet in politics people sometimes vote knowing how the vote as a whole will go: sometimes, indeed, knowing full well that it

will go in the opposite direction to that in which they cast their own vote. And we don't think that the behaviour of such people is irrational. . . .

Secondly, to interpret the citizens' choices as hypothetical is to imply that there is a dependence between what policy the citizen prefers and some other condition—in this case, how he thinks that others will vote: so that the citizen allows this consideration effectively to enter into his calculations when he decides which policy he supports. But this implication is surely, in many cases at least, unfounded. The citizen who votes for A cannot, without further qualification, be understood as expressing a view that A ought to be enacted if enough other people think so: because he may well be of the opinion that whether A ought to be enacted or not is *in some sense or other* independent of what other people think. Or even if he thinks that there is some dependence between what ought to be enacted and what others think, he may not think that there is a *total* dependence: so that if a policy is outvoted, then it automatically follows that it ought not to be enacted. Indeed, it would seem that democracy not merely allows but positively demands that our political preferences have a certain constancy to them and that they do not fluctuate with the preferences of others. In other words, when the machine's choice has been declared and we have given our adherence to it, there is a sense in which we still do and should stand by our original choice. What this sense is is still unclear, but that such a sense exists is surely indubitable.

However, suppose we allow that the citizen's choices are really hypothetical. Once we make this admission it is far from clear why a choice which is reached by aggregating them on the assumption that they are categorical or unconditional should have any particular appeal or authority. It is not very difficult to see why a choice which is based upon what are genuinely the unconditional choices of individual citizens should have authority: for such a choice would have been arrived at by considering what the citizens of the society actually think ought to be done. But if the democratic choice is the result of aggregating hypothetical choices, then it is arrived at merely by considering what the citizens of the society think ought to be done *under a certain set of conditions*, i.e. when other people agree with them. . . .

Moreover, if we take this suggestion for resolving the paradox of democracy *as a whole* we shall find a far stronger reason for thinking that a choice reached by aggregating hypothetical choices, where these hypothetical choices are choices conditional upon general agreement with the voter, has no natural authority. For it will be remembered that the voter who votes "A if enough others agree with this," switches to B when the democratic

machine comes up with B. Now if this is so, surely he might equally, well in the first place have voted B—for in voting B he would on this view merely have been expressing the view (which *is* surely his) that B ought to be enacted if enough people are of that opinion. Indeed it now seems as if the voter could quite legitimately have voted for *any* of the policies placed before him—provided only, of course, that he neither knows that enough other people would prefer that policy nor knows that not enough other people will prefer that policy, i.e. if the uncertainty proviso, which, as we have seen, is necessary for the making of a hypothetical choice, is fulfilled. In other words, if the vote for A is interpreted as “A ought to be enacted if enough people are of the same opinion,” and the voter is prepared to switch to support B if enough people are of that opinion, it is obvious that “A” as it appeared in his original vote was a variable, not a constant: a variable ranging over all the policies that are not obviously either winners or losers, not a constant designating one particular policy. If this is so, then it would be quite improper to take his vote literally, as meaning what it says—as one surely would do if one accepted a choice arrived at by aggregating it and similar votes. Accordingly the first attempt to solve our paradox must be rejected.

2. The other obvious way of breaking the paradox of Democracy would be by denying the other limb of the offending conjunction. Democracy—the argument would run—is government by compromise, and the role of the democratic machine is to function as a kind of impersonal arbitrator. In so far as the machine chooses a policy, it chooses a policy that it would be wise or prudent to follow, not a policy that the citizen ought to follow. And in so far as to believe in Democracy is to be prepared or disposed to accept the machine’s choice, it is to accept it as the most sensible thing to do. The functioning of the democratic machine influences one’s behavior, actual and potential: what it does not do is increase one’s obligations. On this view what one feeds into the machine are one’s evaluations to the effect that this or that policy ought to be enacted: and these evaluations one continues to adhere to even after the machine has operated upon them. What the machine comes up with is the choice of a policy that it would be prudential for all to support, and there is no reason to postulate any incompatibility between the acceptance of such a policy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the continued adherence to one’s own political beliefs. So once again the paradox disappears.

Once again the argument is plausible, but I do not think that ultimately it carries conviction. For, in the first place, it seems to me unrealistic to say that our commitment to the machine’s choice, when the machine’s choice

does not concur with ours, is purely tactical or prudential. . . . Then if our support for B were purely tactical or prudential we should surely be content if the B government were somehow outwitted and they found themselves, contrary to their own inclinations but with the continued support of their electors, putting through policy A. Yet I think it is fairly clear that if this happened in reality, we should be displeased and would think that something undesirable had occurred. If the machine chooses B, there is a sense in which we think that B ought to be enacted whether or not A could be. And this is more than tactical or prudential support.

Secondly it does not seem correct to equate—as the present argument does—belief in Democracy with a disposition to accept the successive choices of the democratic machine. For surely a man could be so disposed without believing in Democracy. He might, for instance, be prepared to go along with Democracy, because he thought that he could achieve power by no other means: although once he had achieved power he would probably try to end the democratic process. The problem, then, arises how we are to distinguish such a man from the genuine believer in Democracy. Surely the disposition to accept democratic results is common, and what must distinguish one from the other is the reason that each has for his acceptance. The genuine believer in Democracy is disposed to accept the successive choices of the democratic machine *because he believes that what the democratic machine chooses ought to be enacted*.

But once we make this concession the present solution to the paradox stands condemned. For if the believer in Democracy believes that what the democratic machine chooses ought to be enacted, then, whenever the machine actually chooses a policy, he must believe that that policy ought to be enacted: not just that it would be wise or tactical to support its enactment, but that it ought to be enacted. In other words, the believer in Democracy is in our example committed to the belief that B ought to be enacted.

So we must abandon this solution to the paradox: which, it might be said, requires the same sort of systematic reinterpretation of our ordinary behavior that Hobbes (on the traditional interpretation, at any rate) found himself committed to when he asserted an analogous theory about the obligation or commitment we have not just simply to Democracy but to government as such.

The paradox of Democracy cannot, it seems, be resolved by denying either of the limbs of the offending conjunction that gives rise to it. The only remaining way of resolving it is to show that the two limbs are, contrary to

appearances, not inconsistent, and therefore their conjunction is not offensive. In other words, what is now required is to show that in our example it is perfectly in order for one and the same citizen to assert that A ought to be enacted, where A is the policy of his choice, and B ought to be enacted, where B is the policy chosen by the democratic machine, even when A and B are not identical.

Now, if my arguments have been sound so far, it is evident that either the two assertions *are* compatible, or else Democracy is inconsistent. I doubt that any of us are prepared to regard Democracy as inconsistent: in consequence we are committed to the view that, in the circumstances of my example, A ought to be enacted and B ought to be enacted are compatible. What we need to see, though, is *how* they are compatible, and the rest of this paper I shall devote to expounding, I fear rather sketchily, one explanation.

The explanation I proffer presupposes a distinction between direct and oblique moral principles. Direct principles refer to the morality of actions, policies, motives, etc., where these are picked out or designated by means of some general descriptive expressions, e.g. *murder*, *envy*, *benevolence*, *birth-control*, *telling lies*, etc. Oblique principles, by contrast, refer to the morality of actions, policies, motives, etc., where these actions, policies, motives, etc., are not picked out by reference to some common quality or characteristic that they possess, but are identified by means of an artificial property bestowed upon them either as the result of an act of will of some individual or in consequence of the corporate action of some institution. . . . Examples of direct principles would be *Murder is wrong*, *Birth-control is permissible*. Examples of oblique principles would be *What is commanded by the sovereign ought to be done*, or *What is willed by the people is right*.

Now, my suggestion is that two judgments of the form “A ought to be the case” and “B ought to be the case” are not incompatible even though A and B cannot be simultaneously realized *if* one of these judgments is asserted as a direct principle whereas the other is asserted as a derivation from an oblique principle—provided that the direct and the oblique principle are not themselves incompatible. . . .

Now I think it should be clear that my suggestion, if accepted, would resolve our paradox by the only means still available to us, i.e. by showing that the two limbs of the conjunction are not inconsistent. For—to return to the example—“A ought to be enacted” is asserted by the citizen who has been outvoted as a direct principle, whereas “B ought to be enacted” is

asserted by him as a derivation from an oblique principle, i.e. the principle of Democracy.

But the question now arises, What reason have I for putting forward my suggestion? How is its truth to be established? And the only answer I can give is, I am afraid, disappointing. The most I can do is to try to dispose of two reasons, two reasons which I am sure are misguided, for rejecting it.

1. Someone might maintain that “A ought to be the case” and “B ought to be the case” are clearly incompatible, and being incompatible they are incompatible in all circumstances: a fortiori, they are incompatible no matter what reasons may be adduced in favor of either of them. Against this forthright position I would like to urge a more skeptical attitude. It seems to me fairly evident that any judgment of the form “X ought to be the case” acquires a different meaning when it is asserted as a derivation from an oblique principle from that which it has when it is asserted directly, cf., e.g. Jews ought to be given privileged treatment asserted in the 1930s as a derivation from some principle to the effect that victims of persecution should be given exceptional treatment, and the same proposition asserted simply as an expression of Jewish chauvinism. Now if this is so, if the meaning of a principle can vary with the reasons for which it is asserted, and if—as is usually admitted—incompatibility is intimately associated with meaning, there seems, at the very least, good reason not to be dogmatic that of the two principles it is true that, once incompatible, always incompatible.

2. Again, it might be argued against my suggestion that “A ought to be the case” and “B ought to be the case” can never be consistently conjoined by anyone because the assertion of the first commits one to the implementation of A and the assertion of the second commits one to the implementation of B, and *ex hypothesi* this is impossible: for one cannot simultaneously commit oneself to the implementation of two policies that cannot be simultaneously realized.

Now this objection rests upon the identification of asserting (honestly asserting) that A ought to be the case with committing oneself to the implementation of A. And the identification is by no means self-evident. *Perhaps* honestly asserting “I ought to do A” does commit one to the implementation of A—but it is surely megalomania further to identify “A ought to be the case” with “I ought to do A” or to think that belief in the one commits one to belief in the other.

However, even if we do allow that there *is* an element of commitment in any evaluation to the effect that, e.g. A ought to be the case, it is by no means

clear in the present case that the degree of commitment is such as to preclude any commitment to the other. For it is surely evident that the commitment cannot be total. The democrat who believes in his political heart that A ought to be enacted cannot be totally committed to A. And if the commitment is short of totality, then there is in principle room for some commitment to B, even when B diverges from A. Indeed, when we think of the actual situation, it seems that our degree of commitment to the political policy we directly support never goes beyond arguing on its behalf, persuading others of its truth, etc.—whereas the degree of commitment we can plausibly be said to have to the choice of the democratic machine extends only to not resisting its implementation or perhaps to resisting any attempt to resist its implementation—and it seems perfectly possible to be simultaneously committed in these two different directions. Hence I conclude that the second objection to my suggestion fails.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Duncan Black, *Theory of Committees and Elections* (London, 1958), pp. 67–68.

<sup>2</sup> “Rule” or “method” here are to be understood in some very general sense that will satisfy even those who hold that “the essence of democracy is something which must escape definition in terms of any functional relation between decisions and individual preference.” I. M. D. Little, “Social Choice and Individual Values,” *Journal of Political Economy* 60 (October 1952), p. 432.