To Rule in no Matters, To Obey in All: Democracy and Autonomy

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Introduction

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, well before democracy became the practice or the aspiration of the peoples of Europe, Johannes Althusius was perhaps the first thinker to work out a full-blown theory of popular sovereignty and democracy. He characterized its appeal as follows: "The nature of democracy requires that there be liberty and equality of honours, which consist in these things: that the citizens alternately rule and obey, that there be equal rights for all, and that there be an alternation of private and public life so that all rule in particular matters and individuals obey in all matters" ([1603/14], 1965, p. 200). This sounds consistent with the modern concern for individual autonomy. Unfortunately, Althusius's vision of the requirements of democracy suggests, in the light of contemporary experience, that democracy may be practically impossible. The striking fact of contemporary democratic practice is that most individuals rule in no matters but more nearly only obey in all matters.

Nevertheless, autonomy and democracy are thought to be closely related in most contemporary political philosophies, most of which are generally democratic in their thrusts. Autonomy takes such precedence in libertarian theory that democracy, and certainly majoritarian democracy, is in doubt. In consent or contractarian theory, autonomy also takes central place, but in contemporary versions of such theory the desirable content of the person is a matter for rational determination. In utilitarian

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* I wish to thank participants in the Wednesday evening moral and political theory seminar at the University of Chicago and at the Reals Conference (Estes Park, Colorado, August 1991) for comments on a preliminary draft. I also thank the Mellon Foundation for general support.

political theory, democracy is a means of determining collective interests but, as is often true of means in general, a plausibly inaccurate one. Similarly, for utilitarians the protection of autonomy of choice and action is a means of securing individual welfare. Again, it may be a faulty means.

There is one exception to this commitment to autonomy to some substantial degree among contemporary theories. In the recent efflorescence of communitarian political theory, autonomy is largely derided as a meaningless notion, an arid fabrication of abstract philosophizing out of touch with actual human life. Communitarian theory is insufficiently developed as yet for us to conclude very much about its commitment to democracy, although democracy at the community level might seem to be a naturally communitarian value.

It is their opposition to the vision of the abstracted individual in these other theories that seems most to unify communitarians, who lump these other theories together under the rubric of liberalism. There is some historical justification for lumping the three strands of theory together. Liberalism owes its Anglo-Saxon origins to the discovery of self-interest and its elevation to moral status as much as it owes them to any other body of ideas, such as the development of modern secular rights theory. Libertarians commonly trace their views to the rights side of Locke’s arguments – in large part, no doubt, because Locke’s rights are about protecting self-interest. Utilitarianism in its Hobbesian and Humean roots similarly has a central concern with self-interest that is well articulated by J. S. Mill. And contractarians, who often trace their lineage through the contract side of Locke’s theory, make individual consent the principle of political morality. My consent to a political regime is likely to turn on how that regime affects my interests, although “my” becomes very abstract in contemporary contractarian thought, as it does in the putatively contractarian theory of John Rawls (1971).

In all these branches of political philosophy, it is necessary to move to the institutional level of analysis. Although we may have concern for individual autonomy, rights, or welfare, we can address the concern in practice only through political institutions. Therefore, a coherent version of any of these theories must be institutionalist. But an even stronger claim is true: a coherent libertarian, contractarian, or utilitarian political theory is constitutively institutionalist. Communitarianism may not be institutionalist to such a strong degree.

In what follows, I will address libertarian, contractarian, and utilitarian democratic theories and the role of autonomy in them. Autonomy is problematic in each of these, but in distinctively different ways. I will not separately take on communitarian theory, in part because its thrust has largely been critical and it does not yet offer articulate answers to many of the relevant questions. Consider, for example, two issues. First, does communitarian theory have practical implications for the structure of political institutions? Opening communitarian values to democratic choice may undercut them. These values may therefore have to be protected by super-majority requirements, as in the procedure for constitutional amendment in many nations. Second, in large nations comprising many communities worthy of protection, such as the United States, should we have fully proportional representation with election by status group rather than by geographical district to accommodate the multiplicity of ethnic and other interests? Perhaps not, because a system of proportional representation might accommodate ethnic minorities by splitting them off from the more eclectic parties. As a result, virtually all issues might be addressed from ethnic perspectives, so that ethnic conflict might be exacerbated while overall effectiveness of government might decline. We might say that ethnic autonomy had increased in some – ugly – sense, but we would also have to note that all were worse off as a result.

**Autonomy in democratic “self” government**

Before turning to the democratic theories, let us consider the possible content of the autonomy of a citizen in a democratic polity. But let us keep the discussion relatively general and not specific to any particular notion of autonomy. Rather, we should focus on what must be common to all notions of autonomy that allow it any significant bite. At a minimum, we tend to think that autonomy entails something like control over one’s own destiny or life choices. What control over my life can I have through the democratic politics of my society? Given that there are more than 150 million adult citizens of the United States, I must surely want the average citizen to have very little impact on national policies, and I trust that other citizens would, if they once thought about it, fully agree with my view. Almost none of us should have any significant degree of control. An individual life is volatile enough without having 150 million other people with all their odd and idiosyncratic views making noticeable impacts on it.

Fortunately, we need not worry about the intrusions of 150 million separate persons in our lives. It would be impossible for so many people taken individually to have significant effects. Max Weber notes that

The term “democratization” can be misleading. The demos itself, in the sense of a shapeless mass, never “governs” larger associations, but rather is gov-
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Anthony Downs (1957, pp. 207–276) and numerous political scientists have argued and shown that voters are relatively ignorant of what they do and that they are not very active participants in democratic politics.

It follows that there can be very little active role for autonomy in politics for most citizens of large democratic states. At first thought, one might think this a sad or even bad fact of life. But, again, it is as one would want it, because the alternative in which everyone had significant impact would be horrendous. Perhaps someone concerned with individual morality would wish to create, stimulate, or protect autonomy. But the autonomy, the self-governance, that arises from the moral self has little or no room to play in politics. This is true, of course, not only of democracy but also of any other form of centralized government of a large population.

Hence, the role of autonomy in politics may well be more akin to that advocated by several contemporary interpreters of Mill’s views. Carole Pateman (1970, esp. pp. 28–35) and Jane Mansbridge (1980, esp. pp. 244–246), among others, argue for the autonomy that comes to us from our participating and developing our characters. This is not the autonomy that enables or even provokes us to participate. It is the product, not the cause of participation. This vision of the value of autonomy at the level of character development appears to yield a clear defense of democracy: democracy allows for individually autonomous choosing. Indeed, it is even argued that it is the natural form of government for autonomous citizens. It is merely sad that autonomous choosing is individually ineffectual for political outcomes.

What does this vision of the value of autonomy say for democratic practice? Mill (1859 [1956]) defended democratic participation on the contingent claims that the individual generally knows her interests best and that participation is good for character development. On this view, a person participates from interest and then receives the extra benefit of personal character development. Unfortunately for this view, the contemporary public choice school questions the fit of individual interests with collective choice procedures, including democratic procedures (Hardin, 1990b, pp. 184–203). Hence, an intelligent grasp of contempo-

rary politics may imply that it is not in one’s interest to participate for the sake of achieving some valued policy effect.

Some contemporary advocates of personal autonomy in politics seem to argue that participation per se is valuable, as though this were the residue of Mill’s view after the corrosive effects of public choice theory. Against this view, Jon Elster (1983, pp. 43–108) argues that one cannot participate well merely for the sake of character development, with no thought of achieving a political goal. If the goal falls away, participation loses its appeal and its central drive. It is that central drive—interest in a particular outcome—which produces, as a by-product, the kind of participation that can lead to character development.

Liberian autonomy and collective constraints

Much of the libertarian criticism of modern liberalism is provoked by the following kind of problem. A large group (perhaps the majority) can achieve its members’ desired end “Q” only collectively and perhaps only by attaching penalties to “free-riding” (that is, penalizing efforts to acquire Q without sharing the costs of cooperation). But then we may have insurmountable epistemic problems determining whether an apparent free-rider is someone who desires Q but wants to free-ride or is someone who does not desire Q (perhaps even opposes Q) and therefore wants not to have to contribute to the group’s getting it. Or, even if I do not want Q and do not have to contribute to it, I may still suffer at least a minor loss from its provision. The libertarian typically or always supposes the individual concern trumps the collective, even though the collective concern is nothing other than a very large number of individuals’ concerns taken together. The liberal, who may be as much a methodological individualist as the libertarian, often supposes the interest of the many trumps the interest of the one or the few.

Oddly, both the libertarian and the liberal in this debate can claim to ground their positions in autonomy. Their difference is simply that the libertarian insists on focusing on the individual one at a time while the liberal is willing to think of everyone at once. There is no inherent difference between denying the collective interest here and denying the individual interest. Perhaps neither can be effected except through collective institutions. The gains and the losses of the individual and of the individuals in the larger group could be reversed and the debate would still survive. The issue is therefore neither negative versus positive liberties, nor individual versus collective provisions.
There appears to be a basic intuition at stake that falls one way for libertarians and the other way for many liberals, including welfarist utilitarian liberals. But the content of this intuition is not at all clear. I have put the apparent intuition that what counts is individuals taken one at a time to several libertarians for whom it clearly was a priori and not subject to doubt. I can attest that my own contrary intuition — that the claim of right is not weaker just because it is the shared claim of a group of individuals — is similarly not subject to ready revision.

One response to the libertarian is that the libertarian’s intuitionist rights theory cannot be articulated intelligently if it does not take strategic or collective interactions into account. There are no rights against nature, only against other people. Farmers may have rights against invasion of their farms and despoliation of their crops by neighbors. They have no right against the destruction of their land and crops by a volcano, a hurricane, or locusts.

As an example of the strategic nature of meaningful rights, consider Dutch legal property rights in the lowlands of the Netherlands, where water is always a potential threat. Through the ground water that comes virtually to the surface, how you use your property may have massive effects on the property of others. If I own a home next to yours, I will have a keen interest in what you do to your home. If you tear it down, your ground may rise while mine sinks on the side adjoining yours, and my house may crack or tumble. Lesser alterations in your building and even the ways you use it may affect the integrity of my building. Do you have an unrestricted property right to the use of your land? Not in the positive Dutch law. Is the positive Dutch law plausibly consistent with moral theory? With many it surely is consistent. For example, a utilitarian or a Kantian might readily say you are morally required to give attention to the external effects of your changing the use of your property.

The libertarian who really insists that the interests of individuals taken one at a time trump the interests of groups, such as the larger community of property owners in some quarter of Leiden or Amsterdam, now faces a difficult conceptual problem. It is evidently true that the interest that is protected by the positive Dutch law of property rights is the reciprocal interest that each individual owner most likely has in the actions of other individual owners. We protect individuals, but we do so by restricting classes of individuals. Or, one might prefer to say, we protect the class of property owners by restricting each individually. It is very hard to see a conceptual difference between these two ways of characterizing the result. Either way, individuals are constrained for the benefit of individuals. Seen ex ante, we might even say each individual is con-

strained for the benefit of each individual. And it is clear in this case that the constrained property right is inherently collectively determined — indeed, we would want it to be determined that way. We can easily enough say what the right means to an individual. But we cannot ground it in the individual alone.

Robert Nozick (1974), or a Nozickian libertarian might agree with most of this, even with the claim that rights are collectively determined. If everyone consents to changing the definition of some right, there is no rights violation involved in changing it. Hence, as the density of housing in Amsterdam increases over the centuries, we may imagine universal agreement on a new regime of rights. But the problem for the Nozickian, again, is what to do if we do not all consent to a proposed change. Suppose you are a nascent game theorist among us and you fully comprehend that, in bargaining over a new rights definition, all of the benefit is up for sharing among the group. You may hold out for as much of that benefit as possible. For most of us, the old rights definition has become a liability; for you it is suddenly an empowerment. For most of us, therefore, some of the autonomy our rights were supposed to protect may be lost. If there were a priori correct rights that we could stipulate, we would not face such problems. But in the world of real concern, little or nothing is a priori, and we cannot escape such problems. Without something more practical than a fairy tale about how we might have developed without rights violations into our present complex social state, we will not resolve them. Then we will want collective determinations short of unanimity.

In sum, we ground property rights in contingent facts that make the positive land law in much of North America justifiably different from that in the northwestern Netherlands. There are no a priori property rights that can be deduced from the nature of the individual and the individual’s own relationship to external property. Property rights in political philosophy are like positive rights in the law; they must be contingently derived. And the contingencies are likely to change with time, as demography and technology change. Our property and other rights are therefore sure to be changed along the way. Perhaps political philosophers can claim better reasons for their rights in the face of various contingencies, but judges can claim richer experience for theirs.

Autonomy and contractarianism

Contractarian theory is immediately more complex than deontological and libertarian rights theory and it is tentatively institutionalist just
because it must start from concern with more than one person. The simplistic model of contractarian thought is probably the classical vision of legal contract: two parties agree on some kind of exchange and then they are bound by law to fulfill the agreement. Contractarianism as a political philosophy clearly requires more and tougher analysis than this, however, because it must be undertaken in a context in which there is no law to enforce the agreement by binding the contractors. This effectuating role of law may be played by morality if the contractors are morally bound by their promises. But contractarianism needs more than this to make it a compelling theory because it is supposed to apply to people who need the agreement and what that agreement creates in order to regulate their interactions. If morality were enough, they would not need contractarian solutions (Hardin, 1990a, pp. 35–52).

But let us suppose we have resolved these issues and have before us a contractarian justification for political order, including justification for rights such as the libertarian might want and justification for democratic participation. Charles Beitz (1989) has given the best extant contractualist argument for a principle of relatively equal democratic participation. The argument is resolutely institutionalist. It goes so far as to say that we can only justify the whole package of procedures. An individual’s concern for fair treatment is already incorporated in the systemic justification. Hence, an individual cannot apply the contractualist principle (the criterion of reasonable agreement) to details of procedure or outcome once the principle has defined the overall structure of institutions for democratic participation (Beitz, 1989, p. 191).

Autonomy, which originally seemed to be the driving force for the contractualist principle itself, is pushed out of view by its own institutionalization. Indeed, on this account, claims for the prior rightness of individual autonomy sound a bit like libertarian claims that individuals have a priori rights that trump contingent collective concerns. Concern for autonomy or respect for persons ostensibly distinguishes contractualist from utilitarian thinking. The contractualist seems to think the utilitarian is benevolent to humanity as a whole but is oblivious to single human beings and therefore lacks respect for persons. But the contractualist’s respect turns out to be respect for the idea of persons, and the actual contractual theory pays no attention to actual individuals and their claims.2

As Kant, the greatest of the rationalist contractarians, says, it is not necessary that our “original contract” in fact brings us all together to form a common will (“and, indeed, is utterly impossible”) nor that there need have been any actual agreement by our forebears for us to be bound by such a contract. “Instead, it is a mere idea of reason, one, however, that has indubitable (practical) reality” ([1793], 1983, p. 77).

What is the status of autonomy in the justification of participation in a large democratic polity? In the United States, again, the odds are daunting. Surely no one can take seriously any claim that the normal citizen’s personal autonomy turns very much at all on the citizen’s role in politics. Yet is its fit with or contribution to our autonomy the ground on which we should justify the actual political system we have? That is what the autonomy theorists argue. Put that way, however, against the (impractical) hope for it under our conditions, the thesis of a fundamental connection between autonomy and democracy sounds very nearly absurd. In a large contemporary democracy there is little meaningful scope for substantial autonomy in or from politics. The best that can be claimed is that, through democratic procedures, we will likely be protected against various depredations and harms and that our general interests will be furthered. This will enable us more readily and freely to exercise and develop our autonomy in other spheres of our lives, the spheres in which we do almost all of our living.

### Autonomy in utilitarianism

There are two ways in which autonomy comes into utilitarian discussions of politics. First, utilitarian theory is a theory of aggregate interests in which the interests at issue are those of individual persons. Hence, a utilitarian government will be concerned with accurately representing these interests. Second, we might take at least part of the task of utilitarian government to be to enhance individuals’ understanding of their interests, to make them more effectively autonomous. (This need not require paternalistic actions by government – the polity might agree that government should play this role in their interest. See Hardin, 1988, pp. 137–155). Let us address these two concerns in order.

### Representing individual interests

**Prima facie**, we may suppose that accurate representation will most naturally follow from democratic procedures. Despite Mill’s strong assertion of it,
this is, alas, merely a claim from common sense without good theoretical or empirical analysis to back it ([1861] 1977, pp. 404–406). Public choice theory leaves the claim without much support and the damning criticism that all extant and theoretically designed democratic procedures often reach random results and that they often reach profoundly biased results. Aristotle—arguing from common sense rather than theory—asserted that an agrarian society was, of all societies, best suited to democracy (Politics, 1984, p. 2093). Why? Because farmers would be too busy to participate very much in government. We might suppose participation could be harmful to individual participants’ interests in various ways other than taking time from their work in their fields. For example, heavy participation might lead to a perverse mob psychology detrimental to individual interests. Or perhaps a relatively high degree of specialization in governance produces better results than amateurish participation could produce.

At best we might conclude that the prima facie claim in favor of democracy seems plausible in many contexts, such as in modern societies with relatively high levels of education and political communication. It may be better suited than other practical forms of government to the task of eliciting and acting on individuals’ interests despite the force of Aristotle’s and the public choice theorists’ criticisms. This may not be a very strong or far-reaching claim. Democracy need not do a very good job to be better than most forms of government we have known. If it also did a good job of helping citizens develop autonomy, we might finally think it a very good form of government simply on grounds of autonomy.

**Developing autonomy**

Mill’s normative theory of government is sometimes taken to be directed more at autonomy than at welfare, although his utilitarianism would seem to require the latter (Pateman, 1970, pp. 28–29). As noted above, Elster criticizes both Pateman and Mill for emphasizing the role of participation in character development. Elster supposes that they think participation is beneficial even independently of its effect on policy. Thomas Christiano (1990, pp. 151–181) argues that Elster’s criticism misses its mark because Pateman, Carol Gould (1988), and other advocates of participation generally assume that citizens take political decisions seriously. Given that we want to make good political decisions, however, we may then consider the side advantages of participation in judging alternative decision making institutions.3

3. Christiano goes on to argue that the case for participation has been overstated by its advocates. 1990, pp. 156–157.

Insofar as this debate was started by Mill, it seems to have taken a wrong turn. Let us go back to Mill for his views in his own words. The merit of a set of political institutions, he writes,

consists partly of the degree in which they promote the general mental advancement of the community, including under that phrase advancement in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity and efficiency; and partly of the degree of perfection with which they organize the moral, intellectual, and active worth already existing, so as to operate with the greatest effect on public affairs ([1861] 1977, p. 392).

To reverse Mill’s order, government should take what human material there is to produce best policies but it also should work to improve that material.

The move Mill makes here is institutionalist. He does not simply say we ought to participate because that will be good for our characters. He says we ought to design government in ways that draw people into participating. To draw people in takes incentives, and the only plausible incentive is some kind of effect on outcomes. Hence the business of government and participation come together. Indeed, we ought even to organize the workplace to draw people into participating in collective management (Pateman, 1970, pp. 33–35). E. P. Thompson or another political activist might say, somewhat foolishly, that the whole point of their participating is the participation and not the goal for which they were contesting.4 But we could hardly motivate general political participation with such claims. And Mill does not seem to think we will or should.

Mill notes that a benevolent dictator who could do the best possible job of aggregating and fulfilling our interests, as these are already determined, would be unable to develop in us the capacities that some degree of participatory government would develop. This is an unfortunate argument about a phony and implausible issue, posed, Mill says, by the common British saying that “if a good despot could be ensured, despotic monarchy would be the best form of government” ([1861] 1977, p. 399). Until someone genuinely believes the goodness of a despotism could be guaranteed, political philosophers can sensibly rebuff this question. All we need say is that a participatory regime that failed dismally at fulfilling our interests might be worse than a far less participatory regime. But between two regimes that are equally competent at the business of gov-

4. Thompson and others are quoted to their embarrassment by Elster, “States That Are Essentially By-Products,” 1983, p. 100 and passim.
erning and administering, the one that encourages greater participation may be better for us.

One might think Mill’s argument in the passage quoted above is strictly from virtue theory – or one might think it is eminently welfarist, as I think it is. But in either case, it is institutionalist. And it is richly institutionalist in taking into account the dynamic or incentive effects of the institution on further behavior as well as the immediate effects on aggregating from individual to public interests. To be successful, the institution cannot merely address given behaviors, it must also address the behaviors that will be stimulated by its effort to address them. And, positively, it can take into account how best to influence behaviors in the interests of all concerned.

So where does Mill stand on autonomy? He does not discuss it in the terms of the debate in our time and we cannot affect how he would stretch it to fit into the debate. But for him autonomy is fairly clearly an institutional creation, not merely a property of the self unvarnished. If this is so, he is forced to take his institutionalist view of the value of encouraging participation. In a society more than an order of magnitude larger than his own, which was already too large for his views on participation, he might be inclined, however, to find other avenues for developing citizens’ autonomy than merely in political participation, which cannot finally be a major part of the lives of most of us. Mill recognized this problem but did not draw out its consequences for his apparent concern with participation for the sake of one’s autonomy.\(^5\) In any case, the autonomy Mill sought is the autonomy of his Utilitarianism, the capacity for appreciating and benefiting from rich experiences ([1856] 1957, ch. 2). Again, not very much of that will come from politics in our time.

Incidentally, the utilitarian liberal would deal with cases such as the Dutch property law by looking to the institutional level of their resolution and choosing the resolution that seemed to work best on the whole for welfare somehow measured or compared in the aggregate. The utilitarian might simply commend democratic choices, perhaps even simple majoritarian choices for many such cases. Indeed, for areas in which interpersonal comparisons of welfare seem dubious, utilitarianism may entail democratic choice (Riley, 1990, pp. 335–348). For some cases, which would likely have to be substantively specified, the utilitarian might suppose, however, that interpersonal comparisons can be made

and, hence, that there should be more stringent conditions before a majority could have its way. For example, super-majorities might be required in certain realms and only independent, constitutionally protected judicial proceedings might be allowed in other realms.

Institutionalizing autonomy

Many arguments in political philosophy get their moral force from consideration of small-scale interactions, such as that in which two people choose to live together or negotiate over the exchange of labor for property, or that in which one person is coerced by another. Political philosophy, however, is generally about large-scale collective resolutions. Those resolutions may contingently affect the content of the small-scale principles they are intended to uphold.

Autonomy theorists, including Mill and many contemporary writers, including the rationalist contractarians and utilitarians, seem generally to think democracy, constrained by a panoply of civil liberties, is the form of government that naturally flows from concern with autonomy. But democratic institutions do not merely defend our autonomy in making the choices we would have faced otherwise, they also determine what are the small-scale interactions we face. Our collective resolution helps create the problems it is to resolve. If our concern with autonomy is consequentialist, this may not be problematic (for example, see Raz, 1988, p. 408). We can enhance the quantity of autonomous choosing by creating opportunities for it. But if our concern is deontological or procedural, it is quite puzzling to suppose that, out of a prior concern with individual autonomy, we should massively manipulate individual-level choices.

Political choice is collective, not individual. We choose in the face of necessity of collective, not merely individual, resolution. This is a constitutive, not merely a contingent, claim. Democracy must therefore be justified, if at all, systematically, not individually, although our justification of it may include reference to its effects on individuals. Democracy is good not because it instantiates autonomy but because it may help support or even produce it. But that makes commitment to democracy contingent, not deontological.

There have surely been times and places in which democracy could not be morally defended as superior to monarchy or other forms of government. Democracy serves individual interests only if individual political participants know enough to relate government action to their interests. But none of us involved in these discussions is so omnici-
tent in knowing our interests, even in our highly public and democratic society, not to be glad to be second-guessed on occasion. Indeed, most of us are willing, because we are so ignorant of how to serve our interests, to defer to experts on manifold issues throughout our lives. We all suffer from the rational ignorance that Anthony Downs says keeps individual citizens from knowing enough to vote their interests (1957, p. 236). That is to say, virtually all of us can expect to benefit more from investing our time and energy in knowing and mastering other things in lieu of knowing and mastering public policy.

It may be rational for us to be so ignorant, but is it wrong? On any plausible positive account of government and politics, it cannot be wrong in principle. There are clear limits to how much I can know about all of the many things that it might, if cost-free, be in my interest to know. I must choose, implicitly or explicitly, to be more ignorant of some things in order to know more about others. There is nothing special about politics that elevates it to priority in its demands on my limited knowledge. Knowing very much more about politics would eventually get in the way of my doing other things in which I could have a bigger impact on the welfare of myself and others. Hence, it could even be bad for me to know so much instead of remaining ignorant.

Yet, in some moments, it seems wrong to be politically ignorant. For example, if my nation is at war and is warring havoc on third world peasants, should I not become better informed and then take a more intelligent part in affecting my nation’s policies? Perhaps then I should, in part because I might no longer be rationally ignorant in the face of overwhelming news coverage. At this point, my participation might still be very unlikely to matter. However, if my motivation is concern for others in addition to myself, as it would be for a utilitarian, I should not further discount the value of my participation according to the self-interested logic of collective action (Olson, 1965; Hardin 1982). Still, there might be no expected value from my taking action. A slogan of the 1960s in the United States was, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” That was clever rhetoric but dismal logic. If democracy entails such a slogan, it is an offense to autonomy and to contemporary moral theories of all stripes.

If democracy is associated with autonomy in large modern societies, the relationship is not for many of us the by-product that Mill and Elster note, namely, the generation of autonomy as a by-product of participation for the sake of affecting outcomes. Through some complex causal chain, democratic institutions may make it more likely that various group interests will be taken into account in public policymaking even though few people will have participated to inject their interests into debate. The results will surely be messy and inegalitarian, so that many will justifiably be able to claim that their own or their group’s autonomy is sacrificed or dishonored. But insofar as many groups are benefited, their members may be better placed to develop their characters and to enjoy greater autonomy. This causal chain makes autonomy a relatively direct product of democratic politics and not merely a by-product of participation.

Apart from such a causal chain, however, is there no conceptual connection between autonomy and democracy? Contrary to Althusius’s theoretical view of democracy, there is not— or, rather, not much. We may claim that merely having the opportunity in principle of participation open to us enhances autonomy. Practical democracy does at least provide us that opportunity in principle. For those who wish to ground political philosophy in autonomy, this must be inadequate. But it might be enough to select democracy from possible forms of government, because democracy offers at least as much possibility of exercising one’s citizenship to affect one’s fate through politics and as much possibility of developing one’s autonomy through political participation as any system could offer everyone. Democracy offers very little to the play of autonomy or its development in a modern, large-scale society such as the United States. Perhaps the best an autonomy theorist can claim for democracy is that it may reduce the threat of government to autonomy more than—or at least as much as—any other system could.

References


