

An Attack on Democracy

This paper (translated from the original Dutch copy) was handed in as an assignment for the course 'Ethics and Society' at the Institute of Philosophy of the KU Leuven in 2015. The task was to write a philosophical paper of less than 3750 words about a topic that was predefined by a text on political and moral philosophy. The concerned text was Robert Paul Wolff's essay 'In Defence of Anarchism' (1970).

Introduction

In this paper I would like to make some critical considerations on the political system that we have come to call democracy. Since we find this form of political organisation as self-evident we can barely imagine ourselves an alternative system. This is certainly the case in the west where we are so convinced about its merits that we want to impose this model all over the world. Do not understand me wrong, I believe that democracy, under certain conditions, remains the most moral form of authority, but as long as we don't meet these conditions it is also my opinion that democracy remains an inadequate and even morally irresponsible choice.

Of course, criticizing is only half of the job (and most of the time the easiest part) and that is why I also make a proposal that should help us reach these conditions. This proposal must be seen as a temporary mean to achieve the end, which is the ideal state or better said, the end of the state. With this, I hope that I can at least clarify that we must first satisfy some additional conditions before we wish to find an adequate form of authority for society.

To clarify my position I used Robert Paul Wolff's essay 'In Defence of Anarchism' (1970) and some critical reactions of Harry Frankfurt (1973) and Graham Baugh (1986) as a reference. Wolff begins to ascertain that authority and autonomy are irreconcilable concepts and that therefore a legitimate state cannot exist. According to him the only remaining alternative is a form of civil disobedience.

Although I admire Wolff's image of an

ideal political organisation, he makes a few assumptions that, in my opinion, make a morally dependable and realistic evolution towards his ideal impossible (and that is why he must fall back to civil disobedience). He has high demands for his 'ideal' citizen and he overvalues individual autonomy (he uses a Kantian definition of autonomy). In my plea for another form of political organization I take these somewhat naive assumptions into account.

Start with the End

It is important to realize that means are defined by the end and not vice versa. This is no different when you are striving for the ideal form of authority for a society. The classical goal of every 'good' society is to achieve an organization that makes it possible to give each member of that society enough freedom so that he can realize his idea of a 'good' life. In order to achieve this it is important that each member *can* possess enough autonomy (the citizen must at least have the choice) but this autonomy must also be restricted so that it does not limit the freedom of the other citizens. Additionally, each member must feel responsible for the consequences of his own actions.

But with this definition of what to expect from a society we make it ourselves very easy: we assume a random interpretation of what freedom of the individual means (we equate this without suspicion with a 'good life'). Wolff says this clearly in his introduction, that 'I have been forced to assume a number of very important propositions about the nature, sources, and limits of moral obligation' and a bit further he admits that he has 'simply taken for granted an entire ethical theory'. In other words, he assumes perfect citizens. It is understandable that he makes this assumption as he is not looking for this ethical theory his citizens must possess (which he explores into more detail in another work) but instead he is looking for a solution for the dilemma between autonomy and authority.

By making this assumption he does not bring into consideration the moral culture of the citizens in his reasoning about the ideal form of authority. Baugh's (1986) critique even

concluded that the citizens in Wolff's assumption are being reduced to 'individuals with no notion of a promise or responsibility whereby striving for autonomy becomes pointless or undesirable'. Whatever model Wolff uses for his citizen, as long as we do not have a clear image of what that 'good life' consists of we cannot create a society were it can be realised.

With this I do not mean that I have to work out a complete ethical theory before I can proceed in my inquiry for the ideal form of authority. I simply want to introduce this parameter, which I call the 'moral culture' of an individual, into the formula. I don't have to define this parameter into more detail to make my point. It is enough to state that in an ideal state every citizen can act autonomously and that it is morally acceptable to do so (because every citizen has the highest moral culture). That is why I would define the goal of society differently: the goal of every good society is to strive towards a society where each citizen possesses the highest moral culture. As each member knows what is acceptable and what is not, we can hardly talk about authority and that is why an ideal society barely needs a form of authority. This definition is somewhat more refined than Wolff's definition in the sense that the solution between authority and autonomy depends on the moral culture of the citizen.

The Necessity of Authority

In every quest towards the ideal society Man always faces the same insurmountable obstacle: the limits of human morality. However much you think about it, the world will always consist of humans with a higher and a lower moral culture. Granting all these people the same autonomy becomes less than self-evident. Humans who commit crimes have a lower moral culture and society has to limit their autonomy in order to not further threaten those who have a higher moral culture.

We can say that as long as not all citizens have the same relatively high moral culture a certain form of authority will be necessary. Citizens must demonstrate a certain degree of self-control before they can eliminate the external controller – the state.

That is why people have such a negative image of the concept of anarchism. The lawlessness would mean total chaos where the old logic of 'survival of the fittest' seems to be the only remaining law.

Long Live the Citizen?

The fundamental principle of a democracy is that the citizens in one way or the other define the organization of their society. In our democracy, and in most others, you need a majority to have a legitimate government, meaning that the authority is recognized by the people and by law. This majority, whether it is formed through coalition or not, has the right to exercise authority on its citizens. The minority (opposition) can challenge this majority but because of her numerical inferiority it is never strong enough to impose its will.

*“In a prison the guards are not elected
by the inmates and there are good
reasons for it being so.”*

In every democracy it is assumed that the people (or at least the majority) knows what is best for itself and for society as a whole. No questions are asked about the moral legitimacy of the government as long as the majority supports it. With the limited morality of the human individual in mind I cannot approve this assumption and the question remains: is it morally acceptable that every citizen has the political autonomy to choose its own leaders? In a prison the guards are not elected by the inmates and there are good reasons for it being so.

The Utopia of Universal Autonomy

With the necessity of autonomy in mind and because of Wolff's assumption that universal autonomy is necessary for a legitimate state, it is straight-forward to conclude that philosophical anarchism (disobeying the state because its rule is illegitimate) is the only alternative (Frankfurt, 1973). By refining this strict condition it is my opinion that it is possible to find an acceptable

alternative: it is necessary to limit the (political) autonomy of certain individuals because as long as there is moral inequality universal autonomy remains impossible.

Concerning the adequate means there are differences in the anarchistic movement. Baugh (1986) criticizes Wolff for pleading for a strong state in order to achieve its goal but I think this critique is unfair. On the contrary, Wolff still has hope in the utopian idea that humans can put their differences aside and unite for the common good. One fact is clear to me, if we want to strive for a better world then we must ask ourselves some serious questions about the inherent limitations of the current democratic system.

On the Feasibility of the Ideal

Wolff's assumption that he appropriates a certain ethical theory to its citizens naturally has a consequence on the feasibility of a legitimate authority. Adding to this he says in his introduction concerning the practical realisability, that he 'mentions almost nothing about the material, social, or psychological conditions under which anarchism might be a feasible mode of social organisation'.

In the second chapter in his defence of anarchism, Wolff discusses the ideal form of democracy, the unanimous direct democracy. In such a democracy every citizen must approve the law before it can be implemented. If everybody is limited by laws that he accepted then you can talk about an authority that is not in conflict with the autonomy of the individual. With a direct democracy it is meant that the citizens themselves show their approval (or disapproval) directly instead of using a political representative (another individual or a political party). This ideal democracy is indeed very difficult to realise and not very stable. As soon as one citizen disapproves a law he can paralyse the political debate and the state can even stop functioning. Everyone will approve that this is the ideal democratic system but in order to realise it we must first ensure that the differences between citizens are kept to a minimum. In order to achieve this I believe there is only one solution: address and neutralize the cause of moral inequality among citizens.

The Origin of Moral Inequality

I am convinced that every human – in a certain society – can achieve the same moral culture. Every person growing up in the same environment where his primary needs can be sufficiently satisfied, will largely share the same set of values. Morality is not due to the physical potential of the human body such as athletic capacities. Not everybody will be able to deliver the same physical performances. Nor is morality a matter of intellectual capacity. Everyone who grows up in a pacifist society will not accept murder or theft, although all the members of that society do not have the same intellectual capacities. Thus the factors that define moral inequality must be external, they lay outside our physical and intellectual capacity.

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The external factor that is responsible for this inequality is the economic organisation of society. Wolff (1970) states that the 'pursuit of private interest results in the exploitation and enslavement of those whose roles in the economy carry relatively little power. Hence even the farthest advance imaginable of social knowledge would not suffice to liberate all men from their social bonds...!'

I can only further emphasize this. Every complex society needs an hierarchy and specialization in order to function properly. This division means that one layer has authority above another layer. Combined with an unequal distribution of material wealth (the means of production and the products themselves) within that society, the individuals of the lower social layers are easier to abuse (Roemer, 1982). They don't get the room to develop themselves morally and this is how the hierarchy is maintained. This becomes very clear in the western and capitalist system. Our wealth is maintained and made possible by the institutionalized inequality and this not only

within our own societies but also between different societies: think about how the dominant powers who abuse the poorer nations (making them dependable from each other). Here we can formulate an important condition: in a world where every citizen can achieve maximum autonomy each society must function autonomously as much as possible.

In an economic egalitarian state the means of production that manufacture the necessary services and products of society are distributed equally among every citizen. The material wealth should be better distributed so that every citizen gets the same opportunities to develop their moral culture. The unconditional basic income could be a possible measure to achieve this. But if we wish to evolve towards a more economic egalitarian society by democratic means, we must add stricter participation conditions to the current majority democracy.

Conditional 'democracy'

With conditional democracy I mean a political organisation where the citizen must comply to a set of requirements before he has the right to determine the future of the society (through voting for example).

To illustrate this I refer to the oldest democracy, that of Athens during the 6th century B.C.. At that time every male citizen of Attica that could afford a infantry uniform had more rights, including the right to vote (Aristotle, 1984). This mainly meant that only the middle-class and the rich had voting rights. Of course, you must see this in the context of that time. Athens was a young city state looking for democracy and was surrounded by hostile states that were not quite democratic minded. That political right was linked to military potential must then not sound surprising (the largest component of the army comprised of civil militia). But as an owner of such equipment you had extra responsibility too: you were required to take up arms during hostile periods. We may conclude that only the citizen that could and would fight for their society deserved the right to determine their society.

What would be the equivalent of such a law in the 21st century? This too we have to

place in the context of today. The greatest threat of humanity is still humanity but he is not the man from the neighbouring city state. The enemy is the omnipresent and juridically protected power structure of capitalism. Fighting in its violent form is also no option anymore but proactive behaviour is the new way of fighting. Setting the financial power as a condition (directly or indirectly) is also not an option anymore. That is precisely one of the reasons why our current democracy does not work: the mixing of financially powerful individuals in the political debate determine strongly the voting behaviour of the people (a good example of this are the threats of the National Bank of Scotland during the referendum for an independent Scotland). The right to vote should be limited to the citizens that show a sense of responsibility and have proactive behaviour. Restricting to adults that have two or less children or have a relatively low ecological footprint is a possible example. By setting such conditions you cannot marginalize anybody because they are all conscious and feasible choices that everyone can make (everybody can learn responsibility). Whether such radical conditions can still be called truly democratic is another question, but it is possible to start with less strict conditions before gradually increasing the restrictions.

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Divide and Rule

The process of economic equalization and the tightening of the conditional democracy would not develop in the same way in each society. Some societies will want to set stricter norms concerning political participation and others will want to keep a stronger vertical hierarchy in order to keep functioning.

To finalize the evolution towards the ideal society we have to disconnect this

diversity of state forms from each other so that each can evolve at its own pace. This makes it possible for a minority with a higher moral culture to keep developing itself without being limited by the individuals and societies with a lower moral culture. This 'divide and rule' strategy facilitates the achievement of the ideal state as it was the case with the Greek city states that had enough autonomy to develop themselves up to the point they interfered with each other. Athens could never have developed itself if it was not autonomous from Sparta (and vice versa) and only when the sphere of influence of one limited the autonomy of the other one had to stop existing.

“A higher population density means a higher limitation of individual freedom and a more complex social organisation.”

Linked to this structural reorganisation is the necessary decrease of the population density. With the current population density in the west, which is well above the carrying capacity, it becomes very difficult to restructure society in small and sustainable parts. This 'reduction' process has other benefits. A higher population density means a higher limitation of individual freedom and a more complex social organisation (Kohr, 1978); with a smaller population it becomes easier to achieve a direct form of democracy. Finally, the economic inequality can more easily be neutralized when the power structure is divided into smaller pieces (Kohr, 1957).

A World without States

In his political and philosophical work Wolff ends with some 'Utopian glimpses of a world without states'. Although he pleads for philosophical anarchism, he emphasizes the necessity of a well organized society. He distinguishes three fundamental tasks that require a well developed social organization.

The first task, a 'foreign policy', must be responsible for the defence of the society against external threats and for (eventual)

economic imperialism. The second task is about the internal organisation of the public services like a transportation system and traffic safety and the third task is the maintenance of an industrial system that can provide the needs of all the citizen. According to Wolff these three tasks could be accomplished without the need of coercive measures.

For the first task he proposes voluntary participation. If the citizens are not motivated enough to protect their society then it has no right to exist. For me this is a convincing argument and I must remind you that it is the purpose to evolve towards societies that do not need economic imperialism and participate in war. For the two other tasks Wolff proposes an extensive economic decentralization and this is in my opinion also the only way possible.

The Cellular Society

A decentralized economy can best be imagined by making an analogy with organic material. The multiplicity of small 'city-states' with each their local economy form the cells of the common society (the organism). Just like the internal housekeeping of a cell, these city-states provide their own basic needs (primary goods) through the use of small-scale energy- and food producing plants (i.e. the organelles of a cell). Specialized products (secondary products like luxury goods) are made in specialized cells and are distributed among the neighbouring city-states by means of trade. Trade between multiple cells limit the autonomy of the cell, but by trading with goods of equal value this relationship can better be described as the social equivalent of mutualism or commensalism in ecology (because they do not depend on each other for their survival). Just like Wolff, Bookchin (2004) says that with the current level of technology it is possible to achieve such decentralization.

On the political side the authority of each cell would consist of a community council where only the internal organisation and task distribution are being defined and discussed. As everyone works in his own village citizens will be more motivated and will have more time to participate in local politics.

Conclusion

In this essay I wanted to clarify the inherent limitations of a democracy. The good functioning of a democratic society shall always remain limited by the moral value of its citizens. In a society where citizens vote with their wallet and remain indifferent of the ecological disasters capitalists will remain in power and politicians will undertake nothing to make society more sustainable. To bring this limitation into account when looking for the adequate political system I defend the point of view that autonomy and political rights (like voting rights) should be limited to citizens with a certain moral culture. We have to realize that the non-radical means are exhausted in a world where we know what to do but fail to do anything about it. Although I believe in the same Utopian system that Wolff describes, a unanimous direct democracy, I proposed an alternative approach for achieving utopia in this paper.

“In a society where citizens vote with their wallet capitalists will remain in power.”

But like with every philosophical approach of the Utopian the most difficult question remains unanswered: who determines the moral values that everyone has to have and how do we know when one meets them? To answer this question there is the need for a universal ethical reference frame which we can use to judge every statement in an absolute way. As long as there is a multiplicity of reference frames, the improvement of society (and of humanity) is unsure. About this much more can be said but that was not the purpose of this paper.

But instead, I have shown the direction we must take to get out of this status quo. Small scale societies with a strong decentralized economic system would create the necessary room to eliminate the sources of inequality (political, economic and social inequality). But this evolution is only possible if there is a decrease in the population density, and with the current culture of 'more is better' I

do not see any moral improvement of society happening in the near future.

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