



The Crisis of Democratic Pluralism

The Loss of Confidence in Reason and the Clash of Worldviews

Brendan Sweetman



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*In memory of my mother, Anna Sweetman,
and of my uncle and aunt, Dennis and Patricia Fagan*

PREFACE

I attempt to develop in this book a line of inquiry that suggests there is a looming and quite deep crisis facing the liberal democratic form of government. The problems that seem to be leading to a crisis involve the very *foundations* of the democratic system. They have to do with the consequences that result from the operation of freedom and pluralism within a democratic structure over the long term. The supreme prominence placed on, and absolutist interpretation of, human freedom has led to a contentious pluralism, marked by the emergence of incommensurable world-views and a spirit of relativism that have become characteristic features of modern democratic nations. I call this phenomenon the problem of *world-view pluralism*. It is not a disagreement over this or that economic or social policy, or over the worthiness of a political party or political leader, or about the foreign policy of a particular country, or whatever; it is a far deeper disagreement concerning what are largely incommensurable views on the meaning of life, the nature of human fulfillment, the correct approach to ethics, law, politics, and culture. This phenomenon is further compounded by a loss of confidence in the power of human reason to lead to productive dialogue and the discovery of objective truth that might go some way to resolving or at least alleviating our disagreements. Thus, we are concerned with a deeper form of crisis than current critics of democracy focus on today, where recent electoral trends and other disturbing developments have inspired some to bemoan the present state of the democratic system. Contemporary worries about liberal democracy are often inspired by the attitude that the general populace is uninformed, stupid, perhaps even prejudiced and immoral, and that if only we could correct

these vices, we would then have an enlightened electorate who would make wise and moral decisions (meaning, often, decisions that accord with those of the critics!).

Our claim is that the crisis goes deeper than such worries would suggest. For even if we had a fully informed, extremely well-educated and perfectly moral general populace, there would still remain serious disagreement on central worldview questions of life and culture, giving rise to a contentious pluralism to which there is no obvious or easy solution. I will develop an argument to illustrate how we ended up with a loss of confidence in reason, and how our difficulties are added to by various relativistic approaches to knowledge that have become widespread, and also by the *practical* failure of public discourse. It is also essential, as we will illustrate, to recognize that a growing and increasingly influential worldview of secularism contributes significantly to the clash of worldviews. In illustrating this latter phenomenon, secularism must be distinguished both from the process of secularization that is occurring in many democratic countries and from the concept of the secular state. Consequently, a sub-theme of this book is to clarify the role of religion in democratic societies, especially at the political level, and to show why and how religious worldviews, contrary to the position of liberal political theory, must be allowed some limited role in public discourse in the modern state.

Although our intention is to offer a modest, original reflection on the nature of democracy and its current problems, it will also be important and enlightening to consider along the way the proposed solution to the problems of secular society in recent liberal political theory, and its failure. What we are therefore left with is a clash of worldviews in the modern state, both between various religious worldviews and between religious worldviews and secularist worldviews. Indeed, the rise of the secularist worldview, I will argue, changes completely the conventional understanding of the modern state, changes how we should think about profound disagreements involving defining beliefs, values, and political policy decisions in a democratic society. It also changes the way we should think about the presence and place of religious views. As a result, the time is now ripe for a re-envisioning of the relationship between secularism, religion, and the state.

In discussing these challenging but fascinating themes, I am not writing from the point of view of democracy in the U.S. or any particular country, but more broadly. I wish to consider the nature of the democratic form of government as it has developed over the past fifty years or so, but

especially in the past thirty years, in the many states in which it is practiced. Democratic societies around the world are facing the same set of problems, perhaps most especially in the Western hemisphere. Different countries are at different stages in confronting these problems; some nations are behind others with regard to the extent of their experience of various concerns, but all are struggling to deal with similar societal developments, trends, and tensions (which often manifest themselves in intense and acrimonious public disputes, disputes to which there seem to be no obvious resolutions that do not end up violating the principles of democracy themselves). I am mainly concerned with democracy as it is practiced in developed Western countries, the countries of Europe, the U.S., and also in the Southern hemisphere, especially in Australia and New Zealand. The countries of South America are not as advanced on the path of democracy, nor are the countries of Eastern Europe, such as Poland and Slovakia, but nevertheless many of the themes of this book are still relevant to these nations, albeit affecting them at an earlier stage of development. Indeed, some of the same concerns arise even in Asian countries, such as the Philippines and India.

It is my contention that all democratic countries, whether they are fledgling or mature, will have to deal eventually with the problems that arise from worldview pluralism, moral relativism, the loss of confidence in reason, and the rise of secularism, in one form or another, and that these problems will not be easy to resolve. Indeed, part of the crisis is that there does not seem to be an uncomplicated solution, that it is difficult to see an obvious remedy, or hopeful way forward. Nevertheless, I will develop my own approach to pluralist disagreement which requires a rethinking of the relationship between religion, secularism, and politics, and which allows a limited place for all major worldviews in the state, including religious worldviews. I also develop some suggestions for how best to conduct public deliberation today. It is possible that the foundational problems arising in the democratic form of government could lead to major instability in various countries, and perhaps the democratic system may even begin to unravel. This book then is a reflection on the nature of modern pluralist democracy, particularly with regard to its foundational ideas, their origin and development, and the crisis they have led to today.

Chapter 1 introduces the problem of a threatening crisis, then distinguishes my position from other claims that liberal democracy is in crisis. We explain what we mean by democracy, consider briefly its history, and provide an overview of its main values, as well as the distinction between

democracy and liberalism. We consider a list of practical problems facing the democratic system that, while serious and irritating, are not fatal to it, and are not what we mean by crisis in this book. The last section introduces the key arguments and issues of the book, which revolve around the following six themes: 1. Freedom as an Absolute Value; 2. The Phenomenon of Relativism; 3. Loss of Confidence in Reason; 4. Secularism as a Worldview; 5. The Presence of Religious Worldviews in the Democratic State; and 6. The Failure of the Liberal Solution. Chapter 2 turns to the gradual shift in the understanding of freedom from the time of John Locke and John Stuart Mill onward. After considering Mill's arguments for freedom of thought and expression, we develop the argument that freedom of expression seems to lead inexorably toward relativism. In Chap. 3, we turn more directly to the loss of confidence in reason that is a characteristic feature of modern democracies. After introducing the notion of a worldview, and considering the phenomenon of pluralism in contemporary democracy, we then present what we call a causal argument/process to explain how we came to a loss of confidence in reason. We survey the causes for this loss of confidence, including the phenomenon of anti-realism about knowledge, reflect on how people respond to it, and consider how over time worldviews become ideologies.

Chapter 4 provides a full discussion of the phenomenon of relativism, including an overview of the philosophical approach of postmodernism. We distinguish between relativism as a philosophical thesis and the rhetoric of relativism, illustrating with the postmodernist approach, and other practical examples, before outlining the problems that relativism faces. The chapter goes on to examine the problem of incommensurability, clarifying three types of moral disagreement, before concluding with some guidelines for how to approach the difficulties relativism presents for public discourse in modern democratic culture. We explain how secularism has emerged and has become an influential worldview in Chap. 5. Its presence in society makes the problem of worldview pluralism much worse and forces us to begin to re-envision the relationship between religion and secularism, and democracy and politics. The chapter provides an overview of the Christian worldview and of the secularist worldview, in terms of their main beliefs on central topics, such as human nature. The last section of the chapter considers a sophisticated, serious example of the philosophical case for secularism in the work of philosopher, Philip Kitcher.

It becomes necessary to offer further analysis of the secularizing characteristics of contemporary society, which we do in Chap. 6. After first

distinguishing carefully between secularism, secularization, and the secular, we introduce helpful notions of passive and active secularism, before considering the case study of Ireland as a country that has recently undergone a process of fairly radical secularization. Given the phenomena discussed in previous chapters, including the rise of relativism, the loss of confidence in reason leading to a clash of worldviews, in addition to the influence of secularism in modern democracies, the question inevitably arises: how are we to govern and make progress; how are we to navigate through our serious disagreements about morality, politics, and culture? Chapter 7 considers the standard way of thinking about these matters in recent liberal political theory, in the work of philosopher John Rawls. We present an overview of his position and solution to the problem of pluralism, and introduce and explain the notion of public reason—the idea that in public deliberation, one must present arguments that all reasonable people can accept; this excludes religious reasons. Turning then specifically to the argument that religious views should be excluded from the process of democratic deliberation, we examine the work of Robert Audi. We then consider the notion of public reason as a possible solution or way of alleviating the problem of a contentious pluralism in Chap. 8. Distinguishing first between a worldview being reasonable and being true, and how we might decide if a person (or a worldview) is reasonable, we go on to examine various views of public reason, including those of Rawls and Cécile Laborde by means of a consideration of concrete cases.

There is often a general suspicion of the liberal response to the problem of pluralism, especially for its exclusion of religious views from public discourse. In Chap. 9, we illustrate the problems with the proposals of liberal political philosophers further by means of a detailed case study of Martin Luther King Jr.'s religious arguments for civil rights in U.S. society. This leads to an overall critical assessment of Rawls' view, both in the light of and in contrast to our King analysis. The chapter then brings together our views on the role of religion and politics, arguing that all views presented in public political debates need to be reasonable, and providing an overview of what it means to be reasonable. Given our critique of the liberal solution and our conclusions about public reason and our argument that the religious worldview should have some limited place in public discourse, it becomes necessary to re-envision the relationship between religion and the state. We turn to this challenging topic in the last chapter. After a brief overview of the conventional view, both morally and legally, we develop an argument that it is no longer possible to put religion into a

separate category (either to its detriment or for its protection). This prompts us to consider the question of the limits of what is allowed in public deliberation and to consider a worry about the tyranny of the majority and the related phenomenon of populism (which is garnering renewed attention today in democratic nations around the world). The chapter concludes with ten suggestions for how best to engage in public discourse in a democracy.

This book is not aimed only at philosophers and specialists, but is intended to be accessible to the general, educated reader. My hope is that it will appeal to non-philosophers who have an interest in the theory of democracy, in the phenomenon of secularization, in freedom and pluralism, and in related topics such as the role of religion in a democratic state, the growing prominence of secularism, and the rise of relativism as a specter hanging over public discourse. My general approach is that of a religious believer who welcomes secular liberal democracy but who is concerned about recent trends of relativism and the attack on reason, and the incommensurability of worldviews that leads to a contentious pluralism. Unlike secular liberals, who wish to exclude religious perspectives from politics, the view I develop does not exclude secularist views from playing a role in political deliberation.

Our study is not intended to be yet another exhaustive reading of liberal political theory, nor does it get bogged down in painstaking reading of original texts or in excessive analysis of secondary sources. While obviously important in their place, such an approach is not appropriate for our topic because it requires delving too much into scholarly minutiae, which not only tests the patience of readers but can become a serious obstacle to the development and understanding of the general argument. Given that philosophy, in particular, is in real danger of becoming too specialized, we need to occasionally seek the indulgence of professional philosophers and academics as we try to discuss broader themes with the aim of making a fascinating and important set of topics accessible to a wider, interested audience. Nevertheless, my aim is to develop a plausible and rigorous argument, while trying hard not to be overly technical or to employ academic jargon to such an extent that the larger questions become obscured and stripped of their interest. From the point of view of the development of the argument, the central chapters of 7 and 8 will likely be the most challenging for the non-specialist.

I have tried to write in an engaging, accessible style, and to use detailed examples in order to make sophisticated arguments more concrete. This

study is not intended to be the final word on the topic (God forbid), but aims at a modest set of reflections in order to help us understand the present situation in the modern pluralist state, and to further the discussion about the future of democracy. The book may be of special interest to those who work more directly with issues of democracy, politics, and civic matters on a regular basis such as social workers, judges, lawyers, politicians, teachers, pastors, theologians and students of theology, workers in non-profits and other organizations that wish to have an influence on public policy. My overall aim is to stimulate further reflection on a vitally important topic for our times: the nature of democracy and its (foundational) problems, how it came to be in its present condition, how to understand and respond to that condition, and where it may be heading in the future.

Like all authors, I am indebted to others for helping me bring this book to fruition! I am especially grateful to Philip Getz, and the staff at Palgrave Macmillan, for their encouragement and early support of the project, and for making the editorial process as smooth as possible. I owe my great thanks to Professor Bill Stancil for his rich insights, stimulating conversation, and invaluable feedback on the whole manuscript. I also wish to thank Tina Baceski, Christopher Callaway, Desmond Egan, Doug Geivett, Catherine Green, Curtis Hancock, Mario Ramos Reyes, Craig Sasse, Tom Seaver, John Sheil, and Turner White for insightful discussion and advice along the way. I am grateful also for perceptive feedback from anonymous referees. I have sometimes used a phrase or two, or a couple of paragraphs, from material I have published previously, and I thank InterVarsity Press and the editors of the *International Philosophical Quarterly* for granting permission. Rockhurst University awarded me a summer research grant to work on the project, which was greatly appreciated. I also benefited from efficient, helpful assistance from the library staff at Rockhurst. As always, my greatest debt of gratitude is to my family for their strong support and encouragement, without which this book would not have been possible!

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PART I

Democracy and Freedom: Pluralism,
Reason, and Relativism



Introduction: Democracy in Crisis?

The political system of democracy, often regarded as one of the most advanced and even perhaps as the only legitimate political arrangement, even possibly as one of the achievements of humankind, may in fact be reaching something of a crisis. The crisis runs deep into the very foundations of the system, and it is difficult to foresee or predict the eventual outcome. The political arrangement of monarchy lasted for more than a thousand years, only to be gradually replaced by democratic forms of government, which have really only existed for two hundred and fifty years, even though a form of democracy actually goes back to the time of ancient Greece (800–400 BC). Yet, several current developments that have become part and parcel of democracy as it is now practiced appear to have begun to slowly undermine it as an effective political arrangement, and raise a question from within it that was almost unthinkable fifty years ago: will the democratic form of government survive? Will it perhaps strengthen its influence in countries across the globe, or will it collapse and self-destruct, and be superseded by new political structures as the twenty-first century unfolds?

Of course, we must be careful and quite clear about what we mean when we say that there is something of a crisis facing modern democracy. Our suggestion that there are looming fault lines must be somewhat tentative, for two reasons. First, the underlying problems that contribute to the crisis are at different stages of development and influence in various democratic countries; general trends may peter out and come to nothing

in some or even all of them, or certain defining forces may lead to the undermining and eventual breakup of the democratic form of government. Second, the crisis has its roots in modern developments that concern the *foundations* of democracy; it takes time for such developments to have an obvious influence at the practical level of public discussion and democratic decision-making, and indeed we are only now beginning to see these effects at this level. There is every reason to believe that the consequences at the practical level will only get worse as time goes on and that the crisis will become more evident. But there are enough signs of it now to identify it, discuss its causes and its implications, and talk about a way forward, though I am afraid that at this juncture the problems appear quite intractable and solutions may prove elusive.

WHAT THE CRISIS IS NOT

The suggestion that there is “something of a crisis” surrounding modern democracy is a bit of dramatic claim, so we need to be clear about just what we are saying. It is true that the word crisis is invoked with increasing frequency today to describe difficulties with the democratic political arrangement. Yet, more often than not it is used to convey straightforward, though strong, disagreement over political policy matters, or as a scaremongering tactic to express frustration that the democratic process does not yield the conclusions one thinks it should yield. My claim is that the crisis is deeper than these worries, one that originates in and threatens the very foundations of the democratic system of government. We should distinguish this understanding from several other possible meanings of the claim that democracy is in crisis that have become prominent in recent discussions of the topic.

One way to interpret the claim that democracy is in crisis might be that although countries officially adhere to the democratic political process, and are supposed to make most major decisions through popular sovereignty or representative governmental structures (both at local and national level), they do not in fact do this. One might refer to the Kingdom of Cambodia as an example; the country is officially a constitutional monarchy (like the United Kingdom), but (also like the United Kingdom) operates in practice as a parliamentary democracy, with representative government and national elections. However, despite this, the current Prime Minister (as of 2020), Hun Sen (in power since 1985), is accused of operating a *de facto* dictatorship, which the people tolerate because of

continued economic prosperity after the unstable and murderous prior reign of Pol Pot. Another more recent example of this phenomenon can be found in Venezuela, which is led by Nicholas Maduro, and, despite officially being a democratic country, it is now run as a dictatorship (with some constitutional rights actually suspended in 2017, along with the suspension of the National Assembly). It seems to be the case in Venezuela that many decisions are in fact made without the consent of the people because of voter manipulation, rigging of election results, intimidation tactics, and subtle and not-so-subtle manipulation of the political process with the aim of bypassing the will of the people. However, in developed Western societies, which we are mostly focusing on in our discussion in this book, although the claim is often advanced from time to time that this or that country does not adhere to the democratic process, this is not a major problem facing the democratic arrangement. In most Western countries, people are quite free to vote, and most elections run smoothly and the outcome is accepted by all. Even attempts to deny this fact are usually motivated more by dissatisfaction with the results of an election rather than by any real belief that the process had been compromised. Lamentations about the state of modern democracy are often inspired by a desire to reverse the results of an election rather than a genuine worry that these results were not arrived at democratically! While rigged elections, suppression of votes, and voter intimidation occur in some democratic countries (e.g., in some of the countries in South America), these are not serious problems in Western democracies.

A second meaning is that “special interest groups,” especially those that have significant public support and (most importantly) large financial clout, may use their authority and financial might to dictate the agenda of politicians without regard to the wishes of the electorate. (They also dispense largesse to politicians in many other ways, all too familiar to us, such as through dangling lobbyist jobs, future appointments to corporate boards, insider information about company stocks, fact-finding missions to the Bahamas, airline conferences in Tahiti, and other lucrative junkets, large and small!). These are certainly problems with the democratic system, and the word crisis is often used to describe and bemoan them. Yet these drawbacks arise mainly from abuses by people acting in immoral ways within the system, or at least against the spirit of democracy. While it is often very difficult to control and regulate against influence of this type, one of the differences between fledgling, immature democracies and mature, established democracies is that the latter have gotten better at

minimizing these kinds of abuses. Perhaps they can never be eliminated completely, and we should always be on guard against them, but I don't regard them as problems that emerge from the *foundations* of democracy itself. So although this failure to adhere to the spirit of the democratic process is worrying, regrettable, and serious, it is not the kind of crisis we are talking about in this book.

A third possible meaning of the phrase "democracy is in crisis," especially understood as a reaction to recent election results in Europe (e.g., the Brexit vote in the U.K. in 2016) and America (the election of Donald Trump as President in the same year), is that a significant and influential minority, or various interest groups or adherents of a particular worldview, do not approve of or support the results of a particular election or referendum. This evocation of the term may perhaps be regarded simply as a parochial dissatisfaction with current election trends, a temper tantrum because a particular election did not bring the outcome one wishes for. Although he identifies several serious problems with the democratic system in an overall insightful discussion, this is the primary meaning of crisis appealed to in the work of philosopher, A.C. Grayling, and others who bemoan the fact that they do not approve of recent outcomes of the democratic process in various countries, and so are tempted to exaggerate their disagreement into a crisis!¹ Those who use the word "crisis" to express their disappointment and indeed abhorrence at recent election trends that do not accord with their preferences then sometimes mistakenly conclude that there must be something wrong with the democratic system as a whole! It must be in crisis because it did not arrive at the "right conclusions" (i.e., at my views!). The suggestion is that if only the electorate was more informed, more educated, less fickle, less emotional, less prejudiced, they would have voted for *my* preferred outcome or candidate. (We will return to this general criticism of democracy later in our chapter, and in our discussion of the notion of populism later in the book.)

While this reaction and judgment is perhaps understandable from a human point of view, especially in current democratic settings where there is sharp polarization between the different sides on many issues, it cannot be said to describe a crisis originating in the foundations of democracy. Indeed, in all such cases the democratic process operated smoothly in making decisions about the election of leaders and in the settling of questions of public and social policy. It is an overreaction to conclude that democracy is failing or is in crisis simply because it produced a result with which one disagrees (however wrongheaded one believes the result to be).

Of course, from the point of view of objective truth and especially of objective morality, the majority could vote incorrectly or make a wrong choice, but this is a logical risk one is prepared to endure as part of a democratic arrangement. (It is also important to keep in mind that the person who judges that the democratic majority has made a mistake might themselves be wrong, no matter how sincere or convinced they may be!) And so what we have in this particular case is mostly a political disagreement, not a real crisis with democracy itself. We will see later that part of the deeper crisis is that people who are equally well-informed and equally well-educated still fail to come to agreement on topics of life, law, and culture.

THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Our topic in this book is the crisis that is emerging gradually in many countries that favor the democratic form of government. So before we attempt to identify the ideas, trends, and cultural, moral, and political developments that are contributing to and leading to this crisis, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of what we mean by the democratic system, with a view particularly to identifying the central beliefs, values, and themes that provide the foundation for this form of government. We need to keep these central themes in mind for our purposes in this book, and they will be reflective of what we understand by democracy in subsequent chapters. There are obviously different versions of the democratic system, and several different theories of democracy as well.² The democratic form of government may be exemplified in different structures; indeed, we see this around the world wherever democracy is practiced (e.g., a presidential system vs. a parliamentary system); we also note that its structure occasionally undergoes significant change over time within a nation (e.g., senators to the U.S. Congress were initially appointed by State legislatures; now they are elected by the general population in each state). It may also be paired with different types of economic system, and individual forms of it may emphasize certain values over others in actual practice.

For our purposes, we do not need a precise and exhaustive definition of democracy nor a thorough understanding of the system, if there is such a thing. The word itself comes from two Greek words, *demos*, meaning the people, and *kratia*, meaning rule or power, reflecting the idea of rule by the people. We understand by a democracy a system of government in which the leaders and members of government are elected by the people

every few years by popular vote. In this system, every person over the age of 18 (usually) is eligible to vote. In modern democracies, elected leaders are representatives in the sense that they make decisions on behalf of the people and are subject to ongoing accountability (through regular elections). So all government legislation ideally is subject to the will of the people; the notion of *the consent of the governed* is therefore paramount in a democracy, at least ideally (we know that it does not always work out this way in practice). The notion of the consent of the governed (a phrase used in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, but the idea goes back to at least Aristotle³) reminds us that democracies decide things by majority vote; it does not mean that *everyone* living in the state must give their consent before a decision can be made at the local or national level, or before a piece of legislation can be passed. Consent also carries with it, crucially, the idea that everyone who is voting age should have a say in decisions that affect them (a key aspect of freedom, as we will see momentarily), but agree to be bound by the majority will. This system recognizes that logically everyone will not agree on every issue, and so those views that can only command minority support always lose out in any election or referendum. Democracy, however, should not be seen as just a matter of the consent of the governed, or of holding regular elections; democratic systems are also usually founded on three crucial moral values, justice, freedom, and equality, in addition to a strong emphasis on some scheme of natural rights, about which more in a moment.

Democratic theory often distinguishes between a democracy and a republic, though the distinction is not universally accepted or used, and is often controversial. The usual way of drawing the distinction is to say that in a republic the rights of minorities are protected in some way in the law and in the constitution, if there is one. For example, a democratic republic with a majority religion would be expected to protect the rights of minorities to practice their religion, at least to some extent. "Minority rights" should be understood to refer to rights that every citizen possesses, but that only a smaller group would exercise. Most modern democracies are republics in this sense, since another feature of them is that they have a scheme of rights in place that all citizens hold by virtue of their nature as human beings, and this would include many of the rights that minorities might claim. Of course, there is often a dispute about what these rights are, a topic that remains contentious today (of which more later). It is possible to have a democracy that might not call itself a republic but in which the rights of minorities are also protected, so it is not a hard and fast

distinction. (Indeed, sometimes the term is invoked to describe a democratic nation that does not have a monarchy; it was also used in the past to distinguish between direct and representative democracy—this is how James Madison understood the distinction).

In many democracies there is a necessity for a certain amount of tolerance, since, especially in a pluralist democracy, different views will emerge on defining issues of human nature, morality, and human rights. This matter is a key theme in this book, one we will return to throughout (indeed, the fact that the values of tolerance and free speech are under pressure today, that democratic nations are becoming less tolerant of opposing views and are moving to impose a uniformity of opinion on the whole of society, is further evidence of our current crisis). But for now let us note that one would expect to find an emphasis on tolerance to a significant degree in a democratic society, at least in principle. Modern democracies have also tended to be strongly capitalist in terms of economic system, perhaps with some socialist tendencies, some more than others. Although not a major theme in our discussion, we will understand democracy in its modern forms to include a capitalist economic system, even though it is debatable whether it has to be capitalist in its definition.

In terms of its history, the democratic form of government goes back famously to Ancient Greece, to the time of Plato. The Greeks practiced a form of direct democracy in which the people (adult male citizens who had completed military training) were consulted directly about issues facing the city-states (as they then were), such as the makeup of the city Assembly and regarding the decisions of the Assembly. Plato was famously critical of this system of government in his best known work, *The Republic*, for various reasons. One of his main worries was that the mass of people, made up of ordinary members of the general public, did not have sufficient knowledge to make wise moral and political decisions. He also distrusted what he called “the democratic character” because it involved an unhealthy emphasis on freedom, and he thought it would eventually lead to behavior dominated by selfishness and licentiousness at the expense of the common good. He understands freedom as, or as mainly leading to, license, which encourages us to arrange our lives according to our (capricious) wishes. Hedonism and indolence follow, and eventually severe corruption, even tyranny.⁴

Although there were what might be described as democratic moments in various civilizations throughout ancient and medieval times, the democratic form of government was generally frowned upon throughout the

centuries, and we do not see its reappearance in a developed way until the eighteenth century in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. Its success in the U.S., coupled with the U.S. promotion of it worldwide, has led to the democratic system becoming a popular form of government in the last two hundred years, especially for new nations. Perhaps it can be accurately described as the presumptively most morally desirable form of government today. However, because of its relative newness when compared to other forms of government, its future is far from certain, and the recent trends that we will identify and discuss in this book raise worries about its long-term prospects. At very least, it is no longer alarmist or an overreaction to consider the question of its future, a question that prompts us to focus especially (as we will see) on the foundational values and structure of the democratic system.

The U.S. Founding Fathers (including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison) were influenced by the thought of several thinkers of the seventeenth century, such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baron Montesquieu, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, and perhaps especially John Locke.⁵ The work of these thinkers began an important debate about the next steps for government after the Reformation, and through the Enlightenment period (1660–1800 approx.). It was a time of political and religious upheaval in Europe and America, which involved not just a fascinating debate about political ideas, but significant political events such as the Thirty Years' War, the growth of democracy in England, and the French and American Revolutions. During this period, democratic values and the democratic form of government began to emerge as a serious political force in the world.⁶ It is perhaps too much of a reach to say that the Founding Fathers of the U.S. implemented the political theory of John Locke, but most of the main ideas came from Locke (with some help from other thinkers of the time), and were gradually refined to become associated with the democratic form of government.⁷ There are five key ideas that are usually at the heart of the theory of democracy, no matter what form it eventually takes in a particular historical setting: popular sovereignty, natural rights, equality, freedom, and justice.

Democracy is most associated of course with the idea of popular sovereignty, the idea of one person, one vote, or more generally that the people vote directly for their leaders, and that the leaders are held accountable periodically to the will of the people. As Locke argued, the people are ultimately sovereign in this type of government, a view that was a radical

break with previous systems, such as monarchy or plutocracy, where the general populace had little or no say in the running of their own affairs.⁸ The justification for popular sovereignty, although often not expressed this way, *involves appeal to a certain view of human nature*. It involves the idea that freedom is an essential feature of human nature, that people should have a certain range or sphere of freedom to make their own decisions about important issues that affect them such as who their leaders are to be, which economic policies should be pursued, which laws should be enacted, the content of educational curricula, the culture in which they will rear their children, and so forth. So in this way, democracy and freedom go together. Of course, in early democracies the populace did not initially have a say on many of these issues, but in principle these are the kinds of things on which the individual citizen, both logically and morally, should have a say. There is often debate about the range of topics on which the populace should have direct input; but again the key point in a democratic form of government is that this matter should also ideally be decided by the general population, whether they wish to restrict their own freedom in certain ways by law or by delegating some matters to their representatives.

It was also recognized by Locke and others that representative democracy was a better form of government than direct democracy. Representative democracy requires that the people elect leaders to *represent* them in government decision-making on the issues of the day. Again, the actual structure of representative government varies in different countries, and has changed over time in some countries, as noted above. Each country has arrived at a practice that works well for them, and no doubt there are disadvantages and advantages in each arrangement. With regard to representative democracy, the system also recognizes a general distinction between reactive leadership or representation and proactive leadership or representation. Leadership is often reactive in the sense that the people's representative stays very close to the will of the people, and generally only supports or implements in government policy what the people wish for or agree to as gauged by public opinion and concern, as far as it is possible to do so. Yet there is a proactive dimension to leadership too, where leaders may have their own ideas about what is good for the people and the nation, even though the populace may not be convinced, and then attempts to persuade the electorate of their point of view. The best leaders would employ a combination of both approaches, but the main point is that the people will ultimately judge by virtue of their power of sovereignty which

ideas a representative should support. A representative government will obviously be reactive and proactive at different times, and would hope that at election time their proactive policies prove palatable to the electorate. This seems essential to the effective governing of a country, in which, inevitably, the government must occasionally support unpopular policies; for example, implementing an austerity program when a country is in the midst of severe economic distress.⁹ So perhaps the central meaning of democracy is that the people have an obvious say in *the running of their own affairs* by means of the exercise of popular sovereignty.

Initially, as we noted earlier with regard to Ancient Greece, the vote was restricted to certain classes of people, usually wealthy men. John Stuart Mill proposed an (elitist) system of plural voting, in which the more educated would receive more votes than the less educated because of their mental superiority.¹⁰ Gradually, however, the franchise was extended to include all men, then women.¹¹ There is still debate from time to time about the minimum age requirement for voters, and whether or not one should have to pass a literacy or some type of general knowledge test in order to be eligible to vote. Voting is compulsory in some countries (e.g., Peru, Belgium, and Australia), but in most nations the franchise is voluntary.

This brings us to the foundational value of freedom. A central tenet of the democratic approach to government is that people should make key decisions for themselves on important issues that affect their lives, and the lives of their families and children. The justification for this involves a claim about the nature of the human person, although, as already mentioned, it is not usually expressed in quite that way. But freedom has often been looked upon with suspicion by many thinkers and leaders because they believe it has a danger attached to it that could be detrimental to society. One can clearly see this in Plato's critique of democracy. The idea is that too much freedom for citizens is bad for society because people will often make uninformed, usually short-term type, and occasionally destructive, choices, choices that would be deleterious for them and their country. And so ancient societies generally held the view that it is better to have a paternalistic form of government where the ordinary mass of mankind are led by more educated and enlightened people or groups who dictate (if we might use that word!) the "correct" choices rather than allowing the populace to make such decisions for themselves. Plato and others believed that this was the best way not just to keep order in a country, but to produce a society that contributes to human fulfillment.

As we will see in the next chapter in detail, democratic political theory, especially under the influence of John Stuart Mill, challenged this view, and held that because freedom is a key part of human nature, society should respect a large element of (though not total) freedom for the individual. Though, even the constraints on freedom in a democratic society must be understood as constraints that people place (freely through laws) upon *their own choices*, rather than being imposed upon them in some way independently of the democratic process. And so, unlike in many other forms of government, freedom became a central feature of democracy, not just in the exercise of being able to choose one's leaders, but in choosing one's own path in life, one's beliefs, and worldview, within certain limits (which will turn out to be a matter of serious contention). This general approach also led to worries about what Mill called the "tyranny of the majority," the idea (paradoxically) that a majority in a particular nation could democratically, through popular vote, restrict the freedom of minority opinion and practice, another contentious and challenging issue in the democratic system, and one we will return to in the next chapter.

Along with freedom comes an emphasis on equality. Equality is a powerful idea in political history. There is dispute about its origins, whether it comes from the Judeo-Christian view that all people are made equally in the image of God, or whether it comes from the Enlightenment view of the natural rights of the person. In any case, the idea is to be found in both Locke and Hobbes, and expresses the view that all human beings, just by virtue of being human, have a fundamental equality with all other human beings. Of course, such a view was not practiced at the political level until quite recently (nor is there agreement in modern democracies about what it means in particular contexts). But the basic claim is that human beings are all fundamentally the same and so essentially equal, a conclusion that has far-reaching political consequences; for example, it will mean, as Locke noted, that everyone is entitled to a fair trial in a court of law (and not just members of the aristocracy, or the rich and powerful), that everyone has the same set of natural rights (whatever these turn out to be), that everyone is entitled to a certain amount of freedom in society (to practice one's religion, for instance). It is indeed a very powerful claim that there is a fundamental sameness about all human beings that cuts across ethnic, national, and cultural differences, and a claim that obviously has far-reaching implications for how society should be structured.

While equality and freedom are closely related, equality and justice may be even closer, because equality suggests the value of justice, and since

justice involves the notion of fairness, then it also demands a certain equality between people. The fundamental idea involved in the concept of justice is fairness, the idea not only that a particular person should be treated fairly (e.g., in the law courts, or with regard to government benefits or salary or tax issues) but the recognition that people be treated fairly in relation to each other, so the concept naturally leads to the idea of equality. Justice also has a broader application, especially in modern democracies, to include the view that economic disadvantages or hardships in society should not affect only one group or class of people, and that society should try to alleviate economic distress in a way that is fairly distributed. Of course, there is no agreement on how to decide or resolve many of these challenging issues in contemporary democratic societies either at the abstract or the concrete level.

This difficulty reminds us of a key truth about the values of freedom, equality, and justice, so central to democratic societies. These are *abstract* values, and problems usually arise when we try to elaborate what they mean in more *concrete* terms, or when we try to develop government or societal policies based on these values (e.g., in areas like economics, education, social welfare programs, tax codes). This was a point some thinkers worried about, such as Edmund Burke, who thought that governments would encounter a serious problem when they tried to express what he called “abstract rights” in a concrete form in a particular cultural context (such as French society after the coming Revolution) because it would likely lead to unfairness or injustice (even, as Burke correctly predicted, to violence).¹² Yet, these values do have some content even at the abstract level; for example, the idea of freedom in a democratic context suggests that individuals should have a significant sphere of freedom to make decisions on issues that affect them (more freedom than one would have in a monarchy or a communist state), and the idea of justice indicates that a person should be treated fairly in his or her dealings with individuals and with state institutions. Nevertheless, problems arise at the practical level because there is often disagreement about how far the sphere of freedom should extend (how far should freedom of religion extend; does the sphere of freedom extend to include legal gun ownership; to a right to euthanasia, etc.?), and also about which policy best expresses that freedom in specific cases (e.g., whether or not a particular tax code is fair to everyone in a society). These are difficult, contentious questions; the important point is that there is no ready-made or built-in answer to them, and so they are frequently the subject of dispute in modern democratic nations.

This brings us then to the last defining theme in the democratic system: the theme of the natural rights of a human being. Thinkers such as Locke and Mill framed much of their political theories, as well as their work on toleration and freedom, in terms of giving expression to the rights of the individual person. Rights (not uncontroversially) might be initially understood as a useful way of translating traditional moral values and virtues into a theory of rights and responsibilities; thus the notion of self-preservation and the value of life, as defended for instance in the natural law theory of St. Thomas Aquinas, could be expressed in the claim that every human being has a right to life. A further important part of the theory of rights is that a human being possesses rights *by virtue of being human*, leading to the implication that a main task of the democratic state is to protect and facilitate human or natural rights. Rights are therefore understood to be part of the nature or essence of what it means to be human; values that define the basic worth of a human being.¹³ They are often interpreted as an expression of more traditional religious notions of human dignity and respect. They are not to be confused with legal rights, which refer to rights given to citizens in law in a particular society (these will normally correspond to the set of natural rights in most democratic societies, but they may include other rights, such as a right to hire a lawyer when before the law courts, that is not part of the essence of being human). Over time in modern thinking about rights, the notion of the responsibilities of human beings toward each other along with their duties in society gradually disappeared in favor of an almost exclusive emphasis on individual rights. The main rights Locke and Mill had in mind were the obvious ones, such as the rights to life, property, and certain personal freedoms, but many other rights were later added to the list.

One of the issues that rights theories in the context of a democracy struggled with, and continue to do so, concerns how to determine the range of rights that belong to the individual, and how these rights are justified in a philosophical sense. Where do natural rights come from, and what is the range of rights possessed by human beings? Rights are usually described as “natural” or “human,” or sometimes as “moral” rights, which conveys the understanding that they are possessed in virtue of our nature as human beings, and are not earned, or simply given to us by the government, or some other privileged group; so the justification of rights becomes a problem if one denies the existence of human nature. Locke’s view was that such rights come from God, but if one rejects a religious origin for natural rights, one will need to find another way to ground rights