Introduction

When Woodrow Wilson announced to the American Congress about one hundred years ago that the United States needed to fight in World War I on behalf of "all mankind … to make the world safe for democracy," he probably thought his audience knew what he meant by "democracy." But he elaborated later in his speech that "democracy" was a form of government in which the people had an effective voice in their government – unlike the autocratic government of the German State and more like the governments of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[1] Even as all three countries politically subordinated women, colonized and dominated non-white countries, and the United States (with Wilson's help) subjugated African Americans, "democracy" was understood to be "good," a virtuous exemplar of self-government. Since then, the meaning of democracy has justified dubious invasions of small countries and large, diminishing its moral authority and implicit goodness. Although a word's meaning is not reducible to its use, "democracy" now lacks a rosy aura and has more of a descriptive than evaluative meaning (although radical critics invoke "democracy" as the signpost of their critique). Its meaning is used ubiquitously to describe modern, liberal-capitalist republics – which are not *per se* democracies in which the people exercise authoritative political power. As a result, the meaning of "democracy" has become increasingly murky, its goodness subject to question. To be sure, the meaning and merit of democracy has been disputed since its introduction in ancient Athens and again when it favorably reentered popular political discourse in the early nineteenth century. Then, it described the emergence of republican constitutions that housed the economic engine of capitalism, the political de-authorization of public (i.e., Christian) religion, and the conceptual affirmation of equal rights for all. While the framers of the American constitution took

[1] Woodrow Wilson, *War Messages*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess. Senate Doc. No. 5 Serial No. 7264, Washington, D.C., 1917 (April 2). Cf. Wilson's "14 Points" for a post-war settlement, enunciated in a speech to Congress on January 8, 1918.

pains to differentiate the American republic from a "democracy" in *The Federalist* (1787), fifty years later the United States was commonly called a democracy.[2] Democracy's meaning these days is opaque, but it can be clarified. And because the word has such powerful and widespread resonance now, 2,500 years ago after its Athenian birth, we need to address carefully what it means as a linguistic and political term, and what makes its practice signify goodness.[3]

I shall not argue for its correct philosophical lineage or its primary theoretical features. I shall not assert an authoritative, architecturally sufficient meaning for democracy. Yet, for that meaning to stay close to its roots, it denotes a political work in progress, undertaken by a particular *demos* (a political people) that exercises *kratos* (in Attic Greek, forceful power). Its meaning changes as the makeup and actions of the *demos* in question evolve. Democracy by its very nature is *in media res*, always called upon to act, to address the uncertainty of the future so as to cohere with its present character.[4] That does not mean that only ancient Athenian democracy – especially given its utilization of slaves and subordination of women – can count as a true or genuine democracy or, on the opposite pole, that anything goes. Etymology and historical origins yield no single, dominant authority over linguistic and political usage, and it would be foolhardy to forbid the use of "democracy" to describe twenty-first-century societies that do not mimic the direct democracy of ancient Athens. But political discourse still should resist abuse, and it can indicate how a particular constitutional framework, social structure, or public policy is more or less democratic – roughly understood as promoting or inhibiting demotic agency – the political authority of the

[2] Madison defined democracy reasonably well, even if he took pains to reject it as a political model for the United States. In *The Federalist*, No. 10, he states, "Democracy [is] a Society, consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the Government in person." This definition was also used by Rousseau in *Du Contrat Social* (III.iv), when he criticized "democracy" for conflating executive and legislative powers (even as he based his ideal social contract society on authoritative, ethical, and astute political participation by all citizens). Of course, democracies by definition need not be small; Madison referred to them to improve the persuasive authority of his design for the American "republic." For the emergence of "democracy" as the moniker for the American republic, see Hanson (1985).

[3] A brief, perceptive account of the historical course of its usage appears in Dunn (2005). For a much different, French account of "democracy" as a concept for radical politics, see Ranciere (2006 (2005)).

[4] In this respect, democracy should be understood more as an *explanandum* than an *explanans* – that is, *not* a self-subsisting entity that needs explanation but a term potentially used to explain a political phenomenon. I take this important point from Raymond Geuss. I do not strictly follow it here because of my interest in dominant, conventional uses of the term, hazy as they may be in relation to its etymologically precise meaning in ancient Athens.

people understood as the many more than the few.[5] And if we concur with Aristotle's definition of democracy, as I do in this instance, it is the many who are not rich, since if the many are rich they would value wealth over and against democracy's principal values of freedom and equality.[6]

The problem raised in this book, however, is not primarily semantic, terminological, or rhetorical. It concerns the relation between democracy, as a kind of political power, and goodness, as a kind of political ethic. It defines and illustrates a political relationship between power and ethics, intentionally burdening them with historical valence and weight. In this vein, I assign "activity" as the necessary but insufficient feature of democracy, and prior to democracy's definition in theory. Even if human activity is imperfect, it must be the principally generative force for democracy. If democracy is read as fully encapsulated in "theory," then *action* becomes secondary – which undermines the participatory, actual, and fundamental elements of democratic life. Of course, if democracy is reduced wholly to practicality, it becomes merely a particular manifestation of power – as Plato's Thrasymachus identified it in the first book of Plato's *Republic* (338e) as one iteration of political orders that render justice as the interest of the stronger (338c).[7] If democracy is a work in progress, it must work on behalf of practical goals, and those goals must resonate beyond the majority that advances them – to keep the defeated minority an active participant in democracy as a collectivity, even if it will never practically enact the interests of all and so falls short of embodying perfect political justice. This requires a kind of constructive ethics and mode of conduct that transcends individual interests. It operates on the horizon of activity and power, offering immediately justifications and legitimations for answers to questions about what democracies ought to do in pursuing their flexible constituent elements of freedom and equality (freedom to do what? equality on behalf of what?).

Working with "democracy" as an ongoing activity whose meaning is constituted by politics and history, the book's argument possesses … two structural features. First, *democracy is not inherently or sufficiently self-legitimating*. Second, *democracy is not inherently self-justifying or self-explanatory*. Having the politically authorized people (i.e., the *demos*) rule (i.e., exercise authoritative *kratos*) may work out well, but

[5] Here, its meaning may emerge through democracy's negation. If a political order or practice *ipso facto* prevents or subverts democracy – as is the case with dictatorships, tyrannies, oligarchies, demagogic subversions of constitutional norms, fascisms, etc. – they, by definition, are anti-democratic.

[6] Aristotle, *Politics*, IV.4.

[7] Because Thrasymachus's statement begs the question of *what* is politically "stronger" and *who* or *what* is the ethical or political agent of strength, his attempt to define justice fails.

it also may not. The sheer exercise of power by the *demos* (or whatever one takes to be a current equivalent) is generally good for a citizenry, for it enables them to act. But on behalf of what should the *demos* act? toward what goal? with what justifiable consequences or relationship to its historical identity, insofar as *democracy* is always a *political* entity that at least minimally honors freedom and equality? Democracies require leaders who would help articulate these practices without undermining the power or virtue of the *demos*.[8] But democratic leaders and citizens require complementary ethics to justify their proposed courses of action, even as such ethics may endanger as well as enhance democracy.[9] For if one makes ethical standards fixed compasses for answering these questions, in response to perceived imperfections of the virtue or power of the *demos*, or simply relies on its extant ability to exercise *kratos*, that unduly constrains the meaning of democracy or its practical potential. In an age when "democracy" is ubiquitous, how democracies might become ethically legitimate, how democracy and goodness may become allies rather than opponents, is not well understood.

This scheme hardly settles questions about the meaning of democracy or how to understand it better. "Democracy" signifies very different political phenomena for radicals, liberals, and conservatives – each of whom may claim it as their friend (if understood "correctly") – and may assume different forms depending on irreducible world-views and historical contexts. For example, democratic skeptics, those with sour views of human nature and exalted views of philosophy (typically political conservatives or liberals), may have representative governments impose severe practical limits on authoritative democratic agency. Democratic visionaries, typically on the political left, alternatively may endow the power of the *demos* or democratic politics with a kind of political wisdom

[8] I do not explore the *logos* or *ergon* of democratic leadership in a sustained way in this book. However, the book's argument informs it. For democratic leadership presupposes an imperfectly democratic society, the challenges of practical, political reason, and coordination with the political ethics of the society leaders would lead. On the importance of political prudence, see the work of Dunn (1990), etc. For recent accounts of democratic leadership, see Keohane (2010) and Kane and Patapan (2014). For basic issues of democratic leadership in America, see Alexis de Tocqueville's classic work, *Democracy in America*. Genuine political conservatives (e.g., Aristotle, Walter Lippmann, Straussians, not congressional Republicans) seek leaders who can rationally and morally control the narrow-minded and overly emotional members of the *demos*. Most radical democrats envision leadership as an epiphenomenal problem the need for which, with luck, will diminish in historical time.

[9] While "morality" cannot be bad because we understand it as inherently good, ethics may be bad or good, since they need not be approved by all. Thus, Herodotus noted nonjudgmentally the ethics (*ethea*) of different societies (*Histories*, II.30.5, etc.).

and virtue that it does not *automatically* have.[10] This epistemological binary has morphed into different substantive perspectives on democracy. Critical discussions of political ethics and democracy since World War II, 1989, and 2001 have tended either (1) to dismiss substantive ethical standards for democracy as anti-democratic, politically dangerous, or irrelevant (democratists, poststructuralists, Marxists, and analytical realists); (2) to endorse ethical standards designed to constrain democracy because of its constitutive imperfections (conservatives, from Burke to Strauss); (3) to marginalize ethical standards of democracy for fear that democracy cannot tolerate their projection into the political realm (liberal theorists, from Locke to Habermas), or (4) to downplay the role of power in constituting democratic ethics (virtue ethics, communitarians, and capability theorists). From the perspective offered here, notions of virtue or goodness are either overly inflated or mistakenly ignored in relation to democracy – with the political right *overemphasizing* the importance of ethics for political understanding and the political left anxious about ethical concepts hardening into hierarchies that limit freedom or equality, *underemphasizing* the political importance of ethics. The political left typically fails to engage the actual political ethics and sentiments of voters, whereas the political right tends to exploit them while failing to attend to the actual sources of political problems. In turn, academic and journalistic studies of politics deny the centrality of the dynamic of ethics and power in constituting politics and our social world on behalf of misguided notions of a science of politics or the self-evidence of facticity.

The failure to understand the constitutive interdependence and potential complementary of ethics and power for democratic societies has vitiated political discourse and occluded prospects for accommodating democracy and goodness in political theory and political life. A major reason for the general *cul de sac* derived from the four aforementioned intellectual perspectives has been disregard of the historical dimension … By attending to links between political histories of power and ethics in (mostly) Western democracies, the book charts a way out of this intellectual *aporia*.

[10] This was the case with John Dewey, when he sought, for the sake of political inspiration, to define democracy not only as a form of government but as "a way of life" and inherently moral. See his "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." Thus: "democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact it is a moral fact" (see Dewey 1985 (1939), 226–8).

By reading democracy more closely in relation to activity and its historical logics, this temporal account of democratic ethics cuts against the grain of professional political theory that is mostly fueled by dismissal of history for one reason or another and encouraged by the anti-historical drift of technological changes and globalization. And yet it is history that bears much of the responsibility for presenting the dramas of politics and democracy. History records actions taken amid an ongoing dynamic, a moving river whose direction can be changed by its parts. *Political* actions address practical obstacles and pursue practical hopes; they compose the essential superstructure of social life. If one understands what has historically generated the disconnect between ethics and power – which exists in every society that falls short of perfect justice – then we can address usefully the ongoing tension all democratic societies experience between *democracy*, as an agency of popular power, and *goodness*, as the horizon of political action and discursive source of its legitimacy as an ongoing combination of ethics and power.

The focus on goodness as the overarching framework for understanding democracy avoids moralistic traps and lends itself to considerations of power. In Attic Greek, the adjectival form of virtue or excellence (*arete*) is "good" (*agathos*), and Plato's effort to define the good simply turned the adjective into a noun (*ho agathos*) and conjoined it with the virtue of justice (*dikaiosune*) – thereby linking ethical quality and power in his concept of justice. But that concept was decidedly ideal (as well as critical), and subsequent treatments of "virtue" had smaller or dubious political components. Thus, "virtue ethics" today refers more to questions about moral character than to politics. "Goodness," by contrast, has mostly a practical and ethical ring to it; it better suits the array of terms through history that have justified democratic conduct. As such, it signifies the linkage within all political judgments between considerations of ethics and power – as well as how ethics always have a power dimension, whether by means of religion or an enforced code of conduct – and how justifiable political power needs an ethical dimension to promote coordinated action among citizens.

The *historicist* political theory offered in this book promotes a kind of hermeneutic loop between the present, past, and future in ways that depart from received views of historicism. For example, the arguments offered here are admittedly contingent and spring from considerations that mark current democratic life. They do not rely on a belief in "fused" horizons that presume the immediate or eventual accommodation of conflicting beliefs and interests over time.[11] I turn to history for crucial

[11] The belief that historical interpretations properly may manifest "fused" horizons was claimed by Gadamer (1975 (1960), 269–74).

antecedents, most of which are not appreciated today. But the historicist perspective employed here avoids determinist views of power in action or nihilistic rejections of ethical values for persons and collectivities.[12] Nor do I adopt science or *techne* of history that directly informs political understanding. The historicism I deploy emphasizes the centrality of action to democracy and notes how that (1) draws on ethical guideposts that transcend power understood either as a potentiality or coercive force (*bia* or *kratos*) and (2) depends on a context of practical (albeit politically indeterminate) possibility.[13] By rooting politics in the lives and genealogies of individuals and institutions, this historicist perspective on politics deflates the moralistic or philosophically fixed dimensions of political ideals or so-called empiricism as a sufficient basis for democratic judgment. An immediate criticism is simply to condemn historicism as relativist, but that presupposes an authoritative standpoint or reason or religion which I prefer to bracket for the sake of democratic understanding (and discuss further in Chapter 1).

The book's argument develops incrementally, with theoretical claims, historical evidence, and political interpretation. But throughout it finds that democracy and goodness are best served when they are neither collapsed into one another nor categorically opposed. It notes how these poles are constructed but potentially avoided amid historical conflicts about democratic ethics that have sought to foster a politics of goodness. In this regard, the book does not address the discourse of political leaders who have disingenuously instrumentalized democracy for their own political gain – whether dictators or demagogues. *Democracy and Goodness* addresses particular ethical standards that have become ingrained in democratic life – even as their value and meaning are regularly contested. The versions of goodness discussed hardly exhaust a list of democratic virtues or practices; rather, they portray moments when conceptions of a democratic good are crucially formed in relation to particular societies, from antiquity to the present. They are *virtue*; *representation*; *civil rightness* (a neologism for equal opportunity to succeed according to merit); *legitimacy*; and *human rights*. They retain birthmarks and salience for

[12] See Popper (1957 (1936)) and Strauss (1953). Wilhelm Dilthey conceptualized historicism as a human science in the late nineteenth century, as an encapsulation of historical experience in the trajectory of time (see Dilthey 2002 (1910)). His concept of historicism will be discussed in Chapter 1.

[13] In Attic Greek, the English "power" could be rendered as *dunamis* – which meant "potential" for Aristotle (vs. "actual") but had a more coercive element in earlier Greek political discourse (thus, *dunatoi* referred to dominant politicians) – or as dominant, if not coercive, force (*bia* or *kratos*), each of which has a distinctive, ugly character in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.

contemporary democratic ethics. Need it be said, various other concepts are extremely important – such as community, obligation, self-interest (properly understood), authority, voting, the rule of law, religion, tradition, and so on, or, negatively, racism, sexism, imperialism, logocentrism, etc. But the ones I have chosen have clear, distinctive corollaries of ethics and power. They notably took hold amid different historical constellations but resonate politically today.

The book addresses interested citizens and professional political theorists who are open to more historical perspectives on political thought and action than currently are available. More particularly, it concerns political discourse about the merits of ethics and power in considering public policy – illustrated by the gaps between, e.g., David Brooks, Paul Krugman, Gail Collins, or Noam Chomsky – by interpreting their historical roots in political thought and action, as a means of illuminating the practical and conceptual dimensions of politics – so as to enhance political judgment that connects thought and action, addressing problems of collective life. The argument of the book is threefold. First, it argues for the major value of historical understanding for democracy in general and particularly democratic ethics. Second, it shows the enduring value of *differentiating* democracy from standards of goodness for political action while *maintaining* a dialectical and complementary relationship between democratic practice and ethical standards of action. Third, it identifies selected ethical ideas and their roots in specific historical periods as gauntlets through which democratic ethics have been centrally constituted for us. The aim is neither to fetishize the past nor to marginalize its significance but rather to illustrate how historical understanding can enhance democratic activity as a politically free and egalitarian conjuncture of ethics and power. Then, we may think about political action in a democratic society not as a matter of how to apply a principle in practice or react to putative accounts of the practically real or theoretically necessary, but as how to draw on histories and theories so as better to participate in and shape the life of an ongoing society. In what follows, I focus on distinct historical moments in which democracy found new ways to justify its existence. Invariably, they exhibit political dimensions that are mostly hidden from contemporary view. Under the rubric of "goodness," they collect around political moments in different societies.

The first chapter, "Historicizing Democratic Ethics," presents the book's approach in constructing arguments about democracy and goodness. Over and against "consent," it identifies the importance of "activity" for democracy as a public practice and the pivotal role of "history" for constituting that activity. Rather than determining that activity, I argue that the kind of historicism employed here is needed to avoid

being blindsided by politics. The role given to history is not as a set of shackles but as practical constituents of political freedom. In making this argument, I briefly note alternative views of historical meaning since the liberal revolutions of the late eighteenth century, but argue for the benefits of a historicist approach for understanding democratic ethics by pointing out how mostly ahistorical political perspectives provide insufficient critical tools for understanding democracy and its complements of goodness.

Chapters 2–6 offer accounts of my view of principal, extant components of democratic ethics in political life, embarking on a journey that begins in the present, turns to the past, and returns to the present. The second chapter, "Democracy and Virtue in Ancient Athens," opens with reflections on contemporary conundrums about the importance of "character" for politics – specifically the extent to which it is to be understood in terms of moral behavior (a matter of internal choice) or power (a matter of external constraint). It notes how political decisions invariably involve historical trajectories that inform the political conjuncture of ethics and power. It then turns to the first major democracy and pinpoints its chief features, explaining the nature of the *demos* as a judge for the exercise of power, how Athenian democratic politics invoked standards of virtue or goodness (*arête*) to justify public decisions, though criticized by dramatists, sophists, and philosophers. This argument challenges conventional views of Athenian democracy and its critics, ancient and modern, with regard to the relationship between democracy and virtue in classical Athens.

The third chapter, "Representation as a Political Virtue and the Formation of Liberal Democracy," provides a historical commentary on the crisis of political representation in contemporary democracies. Beginning with notation of low-level voter turnouts, the absence of trust in official politicians, the abundant but distorted distribution of money in politics (particularly in the United States since the Supreme Court's major decision of 2010, *Citizens United*), and the political problems of the more direct means of referenda, this chapter turns to the beginnings of liberal democracy, when representation acquired the status of a political virtue – the first time that a modern society that would identify its constitutional structure as democratic. This means that the chapter conventionally makes a big historical leap from ancient Greece to seventeenth-century Europe.[14] Against views that see representation as either anti-democratic or as the salvation for democracy, this chapter argues

[14] This may seem to reinforce the distinction between "the ancients" and "the moderns" (which, however, became significant earlier, with Machiavelli and the Renaissance), but I do not place any interpretive significance in that contrast when rendered as anything more than an ideal-typical construct (see Wallach 2016).

that political representation in democratic republics produces paradoxical results: expansion of the rights of the modern *demos* with diminished power for individual citizens. It analyzes the way representation was initially designed to make modern democracy politically virtuous but notes its problematic effects in the England/Great Britain, the United States, and France – historically and now, particularly in an era when populist politics have cast doubt on the authority of representative institutions.[15]

With the simultaneous advent of liberal, secular, representative democracy and capitalism as engine of modern economic life, the need emerged for an ethic in civil society that would be available to all, compatible with criteria that accommodated the hierarchies of large-scale organizations, and in accord with a secular version of social virtue – i.e., merit. That ethic came to be called "equal opportunity," more a legal and political standard than a coherent concept or social goal. Born in the nineteenth century as a goal sought by male workers, women, and subordinate races, it remains salient today as a legal and political standard – in relation to questions about affirmative action, political hope, or the market ethics of neoliberalism. It offers an accepted discipline for virtuous behavior for the implicit conventions of putatively non-political competition. Chapter 4, "Civil Rightness: A Virtuous Discipline for the Modern *Demos*," invokes a neologism to view the combination of equal opportunity and merit as a kind of goodness that ambiguously conflates equality, liberty, and inequality amid the putatively democratic context of modern civil societies.

The term legitimacy became salient for critical political discourse in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as England, England's American colonies, and France justified changes in their constitutional structures. But the term only became politically prominent in the twentieth century, with attempts to accommodate democratic ethics to the political form of the nation-state. Max Weber set the standard for its meaning, as a citizenry's acceptance of rule by governing authorities. But with harsh political contests in many contemporary states – because of, e.g., civil wars, weak public support, non-political motivations for acceptance of rulers, and transnational currents of power (see Marx, Foucault, Wolin), its meaning has become politicized. Chapter 5, "Democracy and Legitimacy: Popular Justification of States Amid Contemporary Globalization" addresses current crises of political legitimacy, explains its changed meaning since Weber, and shows how its meaning and use have acquired new dimensions. These have become extremely hard to determine amid the upsurge of critiques of conventionally legitimate

[15] See the acute, concise analysis of post-war populism by Mueller (2016) and the important survey of post-war populist politics by Judis (2016).