

Democracy and Goodness

Citizens, political leaders, and scholars invoke the term “democracy” to describe present-day states without grasping its roots or prospects in theory or practice. This book clarifies the political discourse about democracy by identifying how its primary focus is human activity, not consent. It points out how democracy is neither self-legitimizing nor self-justifying and so requires critical, ethical discourse to address its ongoing problems, such as inequality and exclusion. Wallach pinpoints how democracy has historically depended on notions of goodness to ratify its power. The book analyses pivotal concepts of democratic ethics such as “virtue,” “representation,” “civil rightness,” “legitimacy,” and “human rights,” and looks at them as practical versions of goodness that have adapted democracy to new constellations of power in history. Wallach notes how democratic ethics should never be reduced to power or moral ideals. Historical understanding needs to come first to highlight the potentials and prospects of democratic citizenship.

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Democracy and Goodness

A Historicist Political Theory

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*To
Sophia (b. 1993) and David (b. 1995)
the best of my future*

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Preface

The seeds of this book were sown decades ago, in my puzzlement about the extent to which many searing practical and conceptual issues were conspicuously absent in the work of much political theory about democracy, and my dismay about the skewed, ignorant, and unproductive debates in American politics that keep citizens and leaders (intentionally or not) misunderstanding one another. Since then, the seeds have just developed; they still pertain to much contemporary political theory and the grim politics of the present.

In the academy, political theorists, political philosophers, and political scientists talk past each other; they attend mostly to self-contained discourses of ethics, epistemology or power, and fail to diagnose the political crises that warrant their aid – attending more to the meaning of autonomy or rights or the vileness of their systemic foes than the actions taken by citizens and their putative agents. In the political world, politicians and journalists continue to use obsolete and misleading labels of left, center, and right, liberalism, conservatism, and radicalism – vestigial political terms forged in the wake of the French Revolution – to divide the complex amalgam of political discourse into manageable categories and terrains for their own interests. Although the political misunderstandings that have resulted surely aren't principally responsible for current political movements toward civil wars, greater social and economic inequality, suicidal ecological politics, technological innovation that degrades humanistic education – not to mention the other abuses of power – they haven't helped much either. Those self-placed on a moral high ground embrace principles and values without attending to their practical use or the knowledge that informs them; progressive critics of political life often minimize the ethical and emotional motivations of political actors, excusing male and female workers of the world for not promoting more extensive social democracy in the societies where they live.

In this context, the need to understand how the dynamic interaction of ethics and power drives political life becomes secondary to the professional and personal interests of true believers in one creed or another,

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one constellation of power or another. As a result, we pay insufficient attention to how the sparks ignited by the ethics–power dynamic drive political life. This particularly has been the case since many academics sought shelter after the political brutalities of the 1960s and 1970s. The tide has turned somewhat recently as the costs of silence have become more difficult to bear. Academics now seriously wonder how a world of such wealth and knowledge has come to such a pass, and they should if they take democracy seriously. More practical democrats or Democrats no longer ignore the large swaths of voters who support shameless politicians promoting arguably anti-democratic political programs. One cannot fail to notice the millions of dollars and work of powerful organizations designed to make voters do their bidding, and yet to disregard the act of voting mocks the freedom and equality that inhabit democracy’s heart.

This book addresses the dynamic of ethics and power – rather than “morality” or “political reality” – because inattention to this irreducible dynamic has infected our understanding and practice of democracy. Democracy is never perfect; democracy is always *in media res*; democracies always exhibit conflict – as do all political orders. As a result, democracies need ethical justification for the way in which they would make democracy more powerful and effective – if, in fact, that is what citizens want. I hold not only that this is what democratic citizens fundamentally want but also that it comprises the path toward better lives for the vast majority of human beings.

To make this interpretation of democracy an intelligible, desirable direction for the future, we need to understand much better than we do the backgrounds of power and ethics in history that carve the paths democracies have taken. We need a historicist understanding of democratic ethics to sustain democracy as a good and workable political order now and for the years ahead. This kind of understanding is not the kind of discourse that one readily finds in narrower studies of politics or public discourse that attract popular attention in the news and popular or professional journals and books, which focus on the immorality or ignorance of elites and the general populace. Recognizing and interpreting the dynamic of ethics and power in political action is the work in which political theorists ought to engage on behalf of the reading public and our political worlds. This kind of pursuit has animated the best political theories. I want this work to be worthy of that tradition.

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I hereby publicly thank persons who steered me away from misleading paths, corrected my faulty claims, and encouraged me to plug ahead. While this book is still not what it might be, it has assumed the form I am best able to craft so as to fulfill the imagined design of my endeavor. In addition to the inspirational students I taught at Hunter College and The Graduate Center of The City University of New York while composing this book, I want to single out for thanks two long-time mentors, one assistant, and a number of friends and colleagues without whom this book would not have come to fruition. During the book's gestational period, I was encouraged by Sheldon Wolin. As it began to take shape I had the good fortune of receiving unsparing criticisms, constructive advice, and friendly support from Raymond Geuss, whose careful thinking about my work has made me a better political theorist. Caroline Sigler worked as an editorial assistant for me in the later stages of manuscript-editing, helping me hone the book to its right size, shape, and focus.

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