

## Phil 2, April 7, 2010

### A paradox about democracy:

Laws, policies, etc. are democratic if they:

- (1) reflect what “a majority of the population decides” (although defining this is difficult) and
- (2) are enacted because of this.

Now, imagine a machine that takes us from individual votes to a majority decision (i.e., that the difficulties about defining this have been overcome).

*Initial question:* “What is the authority of the choice expressed by the machine? [W]hy should someone who has fed his choice into the machine and then is confronted by the machine with a choice non-identical with his own, feel any obligation to accept it?”

*Wollheim’s focus:* Is it *even consistent* to think: “I vote for A, but B ought to be enacted” when A and B are incompatible?

*How should we understand individual votes?*

1. Wants?
  - Then there is no inconsistency. Even when A and B are incompatible, a person can want A, but think that B ought to be the case. (E.g., I can *want* the Grammy, but believe that Beyonce *really ought* to get it.)
2. Judgments about what ought to be the case?
  - Actual political votes seem more like judgments about what ought to be the case than wants.
  - And here there *does* seem to be an inconsistency. “How can the citizen accept the machine’s choice which involves his thinking that B ought to be enacted when, as we already know, he is of the opinion, of the declared opinion, that A ought to be enacted?” Thinking “I vote for A, but B ought to be enacted” is like thinking “A ought to be enacted, but B ought to be enacted.”

### Possible solutions:

1. Each individual’s vote is provisional and hypothetical. “I vote for A” means: “A ought to be enacted, if enough other people agree on A.”

*Objections:*

- i. A hypothetical choice usually implies *uncertainty* about whether the condition is met. In this case, the condition is that other people agree. But we often vote *knowing* that other people do not agree.
- ii. In many cases, we believe that whether A ought to be the case *does not depend* on what other people believe. (E.g., I believe people ought to have access to health care whether or not others think they ought to have it.)
- iii. Why should we care whether people believe that A ought to be the case under some condition C? After all, there are all sorts of conditions, besides that other people agree. So why care about *this* condition in particular?

- iv. Presumably, on this account, “I vote for A,” means not simply “A ought to be enacted if enough people agree on A...” but also “...and B ought to be enacted if enough people agree on B.” This is because the voter is willing to accept B if enough people agree with B. But then in what sense is the voter really voting *for A* (or for *anything* in particular)?

2. The individual believes that there are *tactical, pragmatic, or prudential* reasons to support B given that the machine has decided on it, although he still believes that *A ought to be done*. (E.g., I might have reason to give the mugger my money, even though I believe that I ought to have it.)

*Objections:*

- i. “[I]f our support for B were purely tactical or prudential, we should surely be content if the B government were somehow outwitted and they found themselves, contrary to their own inclinations but with the continued support of their electors, putting through policy A. Yet I think that it is fairly clear that if this happens in reality, we should be displeased and would think that something undesirable had occurred.”
- ii. Valuing democracy is not simply a matter of accepting the machine’s decision, but also of accepting it *for certain reasons*. An aspiring tyrant might accept the machine’s decisions in order to seize power, but he would not value democracy. Someone values democracy only if he accepts the machine’s decisions because he believes that whatever the machine decides *ought to be enacted*—not simply for tactical, pragmatic, or prudential reasons.

3. Distinguish between “direct” and “oblique” principles:

- *Direct* principles refer to the morality of actions, policies, motives, etc., described in terms of some common property that they have: “*Murder* is wrong.” “*Birth control* is permissible.”
- *Oblique* principles refer to the morality of actions, policies, motives, etc., described not in terms of some common property, instead in terms of some individual’s, or institution’s decision. “*What is commanded by the sovereign* ought to be done.” “*What is willed by the people* is right.”

*Wollheim’s solution:* “A ought to be enacted” is, or is derived from, a *direct* principle (e.g., “Health care is a human right.”), whereas “B ought to be enacted” is, or is derived from, an *oblique* principle (i.e. “What the machine decides ought to be enacted”).

*Objections:*

1. Aren’t the two claims still inconsistent? Why should the *meaning* of the claims vary with the *reasons* thought to support them?
2. Even if the claims are consistent, don’t they still entail incompatible *commitments*: to implement A and to implement B?
  - *Reply:* Asserting “A ought to be the case” commits one only to (say) trying to persuade others to implement it. By contrast, asserting “B ought to be the case” commits one “only to not resisting its implementation or perhaps to resisting any attempt to resist its implementation.” These two commitments are compatible.