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This essay was written very early in Dewey's career. At the time he was actively studying and writing about Hegelian Idealism. It was written as a critique of Sir Henry Maine's criticism of democracy in his *Popular Government* (1885).<sup>[2]</sup> According to Robert Westbrook, Maine contended that

...democracy was an unstable and destructive form of government, which inevitably produced "monstrous and morbid forms of monarchy and aristocracy."<sup>[3]</sup>

Maine based his definition of democracy on a theory of *atomistic individualism* that supposed that men in their natural state were nonsocial, individual units that required some external, artificial means, a social contract...to constitute them as a political society manifesting a common will.<sup>[4]</sup>

You may be more familiar to such a view if you think of the social theory of Thomas Hobbes. Dewey, on the other hand, held that society is an *organism*—though "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy" is twenty-one years in the future! At this point, the "organic" conception has an "idealistic" rooting, yet the essay is emblematic of Dewey's deep and abiding commitment to democracy and rejection of Plato's views. As Westbrook notes, this idealistic conception conceived of society

...as a "moral organism," a self-conscious unity held together by the ethical consciousness each individual had of his freedom and obligations as part of the community, [it] was but one of several competing notions of the social organism.<sup>[5]</sup>

As Westbrook notes,

for Dewey, the demonstration that democracy as a form of government was the most effective means of organizing consensus and preserving stability was not enough, for to evaluate it simply in those *instrumental* terms, as Maine did, was to miss the more fundamental significance of democracy as an *end*, as an *ethical ideal*.<sup>[6]</sup>

According to Dewey, then, democracy is a **social**, and therefore, a **moral** conception; but one which is far superior to aristocracy—especially that of the sort championed by Plato in his famous *Republic*! While both the democratic and Platonic ideals specify moral ideals:

60 according to Plato (and the aristocratic idea everywhere), the multitude is incapable of forming such an ideal and of attempting to reach it....It is to the one wise man, or to the few, that Plato looks for redemption. Once found these are to be given absolute control, and are to see to it that each individual is placed in such a position in the state that he may make perfect harmony with the others, and at the same time perform that for which he is best fitted, and thus realize the goal of life—"Justice," in Plato's word.

Dewey contends that history shows that the aristocratic rulers "...cease to remain wise and good. "They become ignorant of the needs and requirements of the many; [and] they leave the many outside the pale with no real share in the commonwealth" [60]. More importantly, however, he holds that:

61-62 were it granted that the rule of the aristoi would lead to the highest external development of society and the individual, there would still be a fatal objection. Humanity cannot be content with a good which is procured from without, however high and otherwise complete that good. The aristocratic idea implies that the mass of men are to be inserted by wisdom, or if necessary, thrust by force, into their proper positions in the social organism. It is true, indeed that when an individual has found that place in society for which he is best fitted and is exercising the function proper to that place, he has obtained his completest development, but it is also true (and this is the truth omitted by aristocracy, emphasized by democracy) that he must find this place and assume this work in the main for himself....Aristocracy and democracy both imply that the actual state of society exists for the sake of realizing an end which is ethical, but aristocracy implies that this is to be done primarily by means of special institutions or organizations within society, while democracy holds that the ideal is already at work in every personality, and must be trusted to care for itself. There is an individualism in democracy which there is not in aristocracy; but it is an ethical, not a numerical individualism; it is an individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative to and for the ethical ideal, not an individualism of lawlessness. In one word, democracy means that *personality* is the first and final reality.

Here, of course, is the germ of the idea behind this course! Westbrook elaborates upon this saying: "for the democrat [meaning an individual committed to democracy--not to an adherent of a particular political party], the realization of the ethical ideal must be entrusted to the self-conscious, freely willed actions of every individual in a society. A good that an individual did not self-consciously recognize and pursue for himself was not a good; men could not be forced to be free."<sup>[7]</sup>

As we see in his discussion on p. 62, Dewey contends that personality develops from individuals. He also holds that "the democratic ideal includes *liberty*, because democracy without initiation from within, without an ideal chosen from within and freely followed from within, is nothing." Similarly, his democratic ideal includes *equality* and *fraternity*, and these are also understood as moral conceptions. His thoughts here are not as developed as they need to be however; and one reason is that he is concerned to emphasize at this point that

63 ...democracy is an ideal of the future, not a starting point. In this respect, society is still a sound aristocrat. And the reflex influence of this upon our civil and political organization is such that we are only imperfectly democratic. For their sakes, therefore, as well as for that of industrial relations, a democracy of wealth is a necessity.

Dewey is especially concerned to also reject Plato's aristocratic classism and while also taking pains to distinguish what he means from what the communists mean by such talk—just as he rejects the fixed and unchanging ideal that Plato offers rather than the individual free development of personality, so he rejects a Marxian conception of external constraints upon such development claiming that "industrial relations" must be subordinate to "human relations" [63-65]:

65 we admit...that ethical rules are to be *applied* to...[the] industrial sphere, but we think of it as an external application. That the economic and industrial life is *in itself* ethical...that it is to be made contributory to the realization of personality through the formation of a higher and more complete *unity* among men, this is what we do *not* recognize; but such is the meaning of the statement that democracy must become industrial.

What he intends here is to emphasize that democracy is a social and moral concept which must involve the free development of each individual's personality in a context of a social context which emphasizes liberty and fraternity.

These themes become clearer as we watch him develop his pragmatic characterization and defense of democracy.

(end)

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I greatly appreciate comments and corrections--typos and infelicities are all too common and the curse of "auto-correct" plagues me!

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- [1] John Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy;” first published as, *University of Michigan Philosophical Papers* No. 1, Second series (Ann Arbor: Andrews & Co., 1888). It is reprinted in *John Dewey: Early Works* v. 1 and in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 59-65. The page references here refer to this reprint and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.
- [2] Henry Maine, *Popular Government* [1885] (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976).
- [3] Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1991), p. 38.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 39. Emphasis added to the passage,
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 40 [footnote].
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 42. *Cf.*, pp. 38-42, 49, and 77.