

The Basis of Society

What is Yours?

By

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September 27, 2020

This is the final in a summer series of sermons on some of philosophy's perennial problems—ethics, reality, truth, meaning, reason, and, today, society. Before discussing the latter, I want to first say a little more about philosophy's significance for us today and why I believe it's been important to undertake this series. For I believe the application of philosophy in our everyday lives must be foundational to any healthy and prosperous society. I'm not referring here to what certain philosophers have argued should be the basis of a good society, each of which must be considered upon its own merits. What I mean is that a society in which its citizens are not free and willing to consider and reconsider all of these perennial problems of our lives will deteriorate in a state of Endarkenment in which questioning the authorities is forbidden and meaningful progress becomes impossible.

When speaking of philosophy, I mean classical philosophy which emerged among the ancient Greeks 2,600 years ago, beginning with Thales of Miletus, who is considered the first known person who sought to understand and explain existence in natural rather than supernatural or mythical terms. In my interpretation of its history, this initial drive, which was a giant mental leap forward for humanity, has continuously yoayed in and out of influence during differing periods of Enlightenment and Endarkenment. Enlightenment principles include individual freedom and expression, open mindedness, reason, science and objectivity, respect and care for others, equality and democracy, and the humanistic ethic—the belief that human welfare and flourishing is of primary importance and that we all share in a common humanity. Endarkenment thinking, such as today's postmodernism, disdains these principles in favor of authoritarianism, hierarchy and class, groupthink, relativism, emotionalism, and identity ethics in which some are considered more or less human and, therefore, more or less worthy than others.

Prior to Thales, human history had been one long period of Endarkenment. People believed the world and everything in it was made by gods or nature spirits and explained how things work through mythology, like thunder and lightning explained as the clashing of weapons by warring deities, or the Sun as Apollo's fiery chariot, or the Earth as a flat table resting upon a turtle's back. So it was a big deal when Thales came along and suggested the fundamental element in all things is water. He wasn't exactly right but hydrogen, a key element in water, is the Universe's first and most abundant element, so it was a pretty good hypothesis. Those who followed in his footsteps came up with other ideas about what the *arche*, the fundamental element common in all things might be. In doing so, the first philosophers, later called *phusikoi*, "the physicists," by Aristotle, developed early versions of atomic, evolutionary, and heliocentric theories, and discovered musical octaves, irrational numbers,

meteorology, medical breakthroughs, and scientific experimentation. It was truly a great awakening.

This period of Enlightenment lasted a millennium before a new age of Endarkenment, that history actually calls the Dark Ages, arose with the emergence of the Holy Roman Empire in the 4th century CE. Under its authoritarian regime any kind of expression at all that didn't reflect orthodox Christian beliefs was suppressed. It's estimated that "Christian zealots" destroyed "as much as ninety percent of the literature of antiquity."¹ In 529 CE, Roman Emperor Justinian abolished the nearly thousand-year-old Platonic Academy because of its "pagan" teachings. Humanities professor A.C. Grayling says, "intellectual activity fell under the authority of the Church, and as time went by it became increasingly risky to diverge from doctrinal orthodoxy. Doing so could and too often did attract the severest of sanctions: the death penalty."² At the time everything—language, ideas, literature, art, music, science, philosophy—had to be expressed in strict orthodox religious terms.

Things didn't begin to loosen up until the Renaissance, which began in the 14th century, partly as the result of the Church losing some of its reach after the start of the Reformation. *Renaissance* means "rebirth" and "rediscovery," and that which was rediscovered were the Presocratic principles of freedom, curiosity, learning, science, and open debate that began with Thales in 7th century BCE. Until the Renaissance, the most prominent philosophers, from Augustine to Aquinas, were also Catholic priests. But the reawakening of enlightened philosophy immediately gave birth to thinkers like Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304 – 74) the "Father of Humanism," and to other great humanists who emphasized the importance of studying all the works humanity, *studia humanitatis*, including what was left of the decimated writings, poetry, history, grammar, and ethics of Antiquity. Renaissance humanism also rejected the notion of a fallen and depraved humanity in favor of innate human goodness and the dignity of all persons. A belief in democracy, that people should have a voice in how they are governed, was also renewed. Then came the rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza, and the Empiricism of John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume, along with the social philosophies arguing for individual freedom, including free speech and thought.

Such thinking continued right up until the 17th century, from which the line can hardly be distinguished between then and the period now known in history as the Age of Enlightenment, which simply refers to the widespread flourishing of those Renaissance principles, values, freedoms, and ideas that emerged after a near millennium of darkness. This is the Age that inspired the highest aspirations of the founders of our nation. They nor anyone since have been able to remain wholly faithful to these grandest of ideals, and we have often seen renewed pulls toward the wholesale abandonment of them, especially as manifested in the unequal treatment of nonwhites, women, and the poor and working class regardless of their gender or race. And there have been continuous tendencies toward endarkenment ever since the Enlightenment: in Communist Russia, Maoist China, Nazi

Germany, and McCarthyist U.S. But the Enlightenment principles and aspirations have, so far, kept the darkness at bay and from overtaking most the world as had during the Dark Ages.

But today a new threat of Endarkenment is at our heels that comes with the same level of self-righteousness, punitive authoritarianism, and disdain for dissenting viewpoints as the Medieval Church. What began forty years ago in our Universities, once an oasis of Enlightenment principles with a humanities and Liberal Arts emphasis, has resulted in levels of extremism, self-righteousness, and ideological intolerance never experienced as widespread in Western society as it is today. This combined with the unregulated power of social media to enact instantaneous mob justice against those a majority or, more usually, a vocal minority disagree with, is chilling, to say the least. Especially when digital attacks get people disinvited from speaking, fired from their jobs, and blacklisted from ever working again, with no more shame than the kneejerk accusations of being a “red” during the era Joseph McCarthy evoked, or responding in earnest to children crying “witch” in Salem during the very Age of Enlightenment itself.

Today they cry racist, homophobe, transphobe, ableist against the innocent while scrutinizing what they say in the most uncharitable and unforgiving and irrational of ways, all in the name of this new cult of linguistic puritanism. And just as in the last period of Endarkenment, when everything had to be expressed through orthodox Christian dogma, today more and more of us are being pressured with threats to our livelihoods and reputations to uphold the new insanity or face the consequences. We are hearing of an increasing number of college science professors who are being fired for merely doing their job, talking about the reality of biological sex. Just this month, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced new rules requiring quotas based on race, sexuality, disability, and gender identity of the actors and storylines of any picture in order for it to qualify for an Oscar. There was also recent news of two corporations, *Trader Joe's* and *Red bull*, that pushed back against social media attacks against the companies for misappropriating the names of some of their products or not being as outspoken against social and political issues as some think they should be. Even the New York Times, once a trusted protector of journalistic freedom, has also been in the news recently after public outcry against a conservative politician led them to fire their editor, along with the resignation of the paper's Opinion columnist, Bari Weiss, who claims she was under constant ridicule and attack because of her conservative views. She said in her letter of resignation, “Showing up for work as a centrist at an American newspaper should not require bravery.” And we routinely hear of book deals being canceled before they are ever published because of unfounded social media outrage, like that expressed against young adult fiction writer, Amélie Wen Zhao, a Chinese immigrant to the U.S., whose book, *Blood Heir* was canceled due to unfounded charges of racism and cultural appropriation.

Education, art, business, journalism, and publishing are all increasingly under pressure to express only one social and political viewpoint or else face the consequences of being

blacklisted, banned, boycotted, or otherwise punished, just as it was so during the Dark Ages. As in that period of Endarkenment, this new viewpoint also claims the moral high ground. Who back then would have dared argue with those who claimed to know the will of God and have the authority to interpret his Word? Today, innocent people, most of whom have stood on the side of justice and equality their entire lives, are being accused of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and the like, who are the least deserving of such slurs, just to silence their dissent. And who among us, in this age of instant condemnation on social media, would dare risk such accusations. Better to just keep quiet until this dark storm passes. But when? And how?

That's a long intro to what must now be a brief discussion of the perennial problem a hand, the basis of society. Yet such a prelude has been necessary for us to truly grasp the gravity of the question, and of its special pertinence to this moment in history, even if it is a perennial problem. What is to be the basis of our society? Is it going to be an new Age of Endarkenment in which we must all live in fear of saying the wrong thing, and learn to survive by keeping quiet and hoping nobody notices us, of going along just to get along, or of signaling our own virtue at the expense of other's lives and livelihoods? Or will we courageously fight for the Enlightenment principles that represent our nation's and humanity's highest aspirations, and that for hundreds of years have been at the core of our own venerable liberal religion?

If you think about it, it's an audacious question to begin with. How many in human history have been born into a society in which they would have been free enough to even think to ask such a bold question—what kind of society do we want to create—as if any of them had a choice. In most places, throughout most of history, people simply accepted the position or caste to which they were born, with no thought of any possibility of ever becoming more. Ruler were rulers by divine decree and peasants were likewise destined to be peasants. Yet today, at least in Western society, the notion that ordinary people should be free and share in the authority of their government is taken for granted, a system that has spread from only 10 countries prior to World War II, to 97 of 167 countries with populations over half a million. That's 58 percent.³

Democracy comes from the Greek words *demos*, meaning “common people,” and *kratos*, translated as “rule,” “strength,” or “power.” It's the power of ordinary people to have a strong voice in how they are ruled or governed. The idea of democracy was first put into practice in Athens in 508 BCE and, like all democracies, was far from perfect. It provided equal rights to all of its citizens, but excluded slaves, foreigners, and women from citizenship. Following the Enlightenment, the modern philosophers who influenced the American Founders also promoted the democratic ideal, though it stemmed from Renaissance humanism's belief in the “dignity of man” (by which they meant “humanity”), along with the Aristotelian ideas that the State should be ruled by a large Middle class and that laws are more likely to be followed by those who have a voice in making them.

By the 16th century, Francis Bacon, foreshadowing American Pragmatism, was extolling the “practical knowledge acquired in crafts and trades, in the experience of builders, butchers, carpenters, farmers and sailors—of people ... who have practical knowledge of how things work and what can be done with them.”⁴ Although Thomas Hobbes was a bit more authoritarian in his promotion of a sovereign power, he too believed such power must embody the will of the people. In exchange for power, the Sovereign must provide security in a Hobbesian society, along with equality, liberty, a vote, and the right to overthrow any sovereign that fails to do so. A few years later Baruch Spinoza, my fellow heretic, considered the entire function of government as the duty to free people *from* fear and free them *to* fully flourish as individuals. “The true purpose of the state,” he said, “is in fact freedom” and that “Everyone is by absolute natural right the master of his own thoughts, and utter failure will attend any attempt in a commonwealth to force men to speak only as prescribed...”⁵ And on and on we go, from John Locke’s rejection of the Divine Right of Kings, to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* that warned, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,”⁶ the most prominent philosophers of the modern age have commended the democratic principles first instituted in Athens 2,600 years ago.

But not taking for granted what we already believe is precisely what this series of sermons is all about. If democracy is the basis of the kind of society we want, then we need to question its worth in order to decide anew whether it remains the best form of government to help establish the kind of society we hope for. Plato thought a lot about this 2,500 years ago, which he expressed in his *Republic*. In it he argues that *Aristocracy* is the best kind of government, and Democracy is among the worst, only slightly better than the *Tyranny* it will eventually lead to. For Plato, aristocrats were not born, but made, through education and training, and selected to lead for their intelligence and selfless goodwill. The next best form of government, he thought, is *Epistocracy* (from the Greek word for “knowing”), led by experts trained in all manner of practical matters. Next would be a *Timocracy*, led by those who have little wealth or desire for wealth, but whose lives have been enriched by seeking honor in service to their society. But he feared this would eventually lead to *Oligarchy* regardless, a system of the rich governing the poor, as the timocrats begin accumulating and enjoying wealth while in power.

Here’s the kicker: Plato argued that Oligarchy will eventually descend into an even worse form of government—*Democracy*. This is so, he argued, because “Insatiable avarice is the ruling passion of an oligarchy,”⁷ and will eventually causes the ordinary people the oligarchs exploit to rebel and establish self-rule. But Plato didn’t think ordinary people were intelligent enough to govern and that there would be too much discord and variance amongst them to live peacefully. “Observe, too,” he said:

how grandly Democracy sets her foot upon all our fine theories of education,—how little she cares for the training of her statesmen! The only qualification which she demands is the profession of patriotism. Such is democracy;—a pleasing, lawless, various sort of government, distributing equality to equals and unequals alike.⁸

When this occurs, the *demos*, the angry disenfranchised common voters, will select an unfit populist to govern and society will further descend into the worst of all possible kinds of government according to Plato—*Tyranny*. Sound familiar?

In addition to Plato's criticism that Democracy leads to a chaotic then tyrannic system of governance led by those who are intellectually and ethically unfit to govern, the American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama has more recently argued that Democracy has driven our society apart by descending into identity politics, in which splintered identities care only about the interests of the individuals within their own group. "The broadening and universalization of dignity," he says, "turns the private quest for self into a political project."⁹

If these criticisms of Democracy are fair, and today they seem to be, what choices are we left with? Surely not the kind Plato advocated for in which all children are raised by the State to be properly educated and morally trained, then the best among them selected to be our Philosopher-Kings. Winston Churchill once said, "democracy is the worst form of Government except for all the rest."¹⁰ We may never get things perfectly right under Democracy, but I agree with Churchill, all things considered, it's the best we've got.

I also think these criticisms can be avoided if we modify Plato's suggestion. Instead of educating a few, we should establish a well-educated citizenry with an education that includes ethics and civics. Instead of being driven apart by foolish pundits on Faux News and BSNBC, or having AI algorithms showing us only more of what we want to see, lets create a citizenry that learns *how* to think, not merely *what* to think, by returning to the humanities rediscovered during the Enlightenment, and its principles of knowledge based on reason and science, liberty and equality for all, toleration of others, and our common humanity. I think Plato has been proven to be correct, that a Democracy run by ninnyes eventually fails, but throughout history we have seen these Enlightenment principles deliver us anew from the shadows of Endarkenment. And this, more than any other, is the question before us today, what kind of society do we want, one that dwells in cold and miserable shadows, or one that is bathed in brilliance and warmth?

¹ A.C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 243., p. 3.

² Ibid., p. 131.

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/06/despite-concerns-about-global-democracy-nearly-six-in-ten-countries-are-now-democratic/>

⁴ Grayling, *ibid.*, p. 199.

⁵ Ibid., p. 217.

⁶ Stumpf, Samuel Enoch, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, NY, 1983, p. 285.

⁷ Plato. *The Republic* (p. 1). Kindle Edition.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fukuyama, Francis, *Identity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2018, p. 37.

¹⁰ Rosling, Hans, *Factfulness*, Flatiron Books, New York, NY, 2018, p. 291.