

Chapter 5

Democracy presupposes rationality

The second presupposition of democracy is *rationality*. Community, the first presupposition, concerns the relations between persons; rationality concerns the nature of the persons thus related. Democracy is inconceivable without both. The community is the essential context of the democratic process; within that context the members must be supposed to have at least the fundamental capacities that general participation in common affairs requires. These fundamental capacities are summed up in the concept of rationality.

What rationality involves, precisely, is not easy to specify. In general we may accept the criteria classically laid down. A rational man possesses, at the minimum, two faculties: (1) the faculty of forming a plan or grasping a rule for judgment or action, and (2) the faculty of using that rule, by applying it to particular cases, or following the plan of action. Because the rules and plans that must function in a democracy are interpersonal, we may add to these a third, (3) the faculty of intellectual communication, of reasoning with one another.

To treat rationality in terms of faculties may seem old-fashioned. The terminology is indeed old, and can be replaced. What is essential are not the words, but the facts—the members of a democracy must be able to do certain kinds of things. They must be able to formulate principles (in some contexts called “rules,” in others “laws”) for their common governance. They must be able to apply these general principles in action, to decide what does and what does not accord with the rule. And if rules or laws are to govern the community, the members of that community must be able to communicate effectively, to understand one another’s reasons and purposes, and to codify at least some of their collective judgments. If rationality be understood as the capacity to do these things, democracy presupposes that its members are rational; if they are not rational, self-government through participation is out of the question.

Democracy does not presuppose, however, that its members employ these capacities constantly, or even most of the time. Rational faculties must, of course, be developed and used if the democracy is to operate successfully. The degree of development required will vary with

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context; the bearing of that development on the practice of democracy will be examined more fully in discussing the intellectual conditions of democracy [Chapter 11]. That development, however, *presupposes* a community membership at least possessing the basic faculties of reason.

Some hold that democracy is a utopian and unrealizable ideal in that, requiring rational members, it presupposes what never can be. This criticism has two variants, each resting upon different false premises. The first variant overstates the requirements; the second variant understates the facts. On the former account it is suggested that democracy cannot work unless reason rules universally in human life, as it surely does not. On the latter account it is suggested that democracy cannot work because, although its demands for rationality are moderate, humans are so thoroughly irrational and stupid as not to be able to fulfill them. Both accounts are refuted by the practical success of democratic governments in many contexts. Democracy is a human institution, having requirements that render it not always successful, but essentially operable by human beings as they are.

There is an important truth in one aspect of the second variant of this criticism. *If* it were a practical impossibility for men to formulate rules jointly and abide by them; *if* it were impossible (or nearly so) for men to reason with and understand one another, *then* it could be argued that democracy is utopian because its practice presupposes what never is the case. The antecedent of this hypothetical proposition is false, but the hypothetical as a whole is true. Democracy does presuppose fundamental rational capacity; the absence of the latter in a community would entail the absence of the former.

That democracy presupposes the inherent goodness of men is another claim about it that is both common and mistaken. Of course it is true that the wide presence of certain moral virtues among the members of a community is likely to render its democratic government more successful in practice—but that can probably be said with equal truth of every governmental form. That men are inherently good, or inherently bad, is doubtful in any case; but there is no more reason to believe that democracy presupposes the one than the other. In principle democracy is entirely feasible even among a community of selfish or evil men. Indeed, part of its value lies in the fact that it enables men in whom goodness and badness are well mixed to live decently with one another.

I conclude that the presuppositions of democracy are very com-

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monly realized in fact. *Communities*, large and small, are among the most ubiquitous features of human existence, and play a vital role in the life of every civilized man. *Rationality* is the universal (or almost universal) capacity of human beings, and has even been viewed, in some philosophical traditions, as the distinctly human characteristic, differentiating man from all lower animals. I certainly do not suggest that the presuppositions of democracy are realized everywhere, or in any single place at all times. When and where they are realized, moreover, I would insist that by themselves they provide no assurance whatever that democratic government will work smoothly, or that it is the best of the available alternatives. That its presuppositions are frequently realized, however, is beyond reasonable doubt.

It remains to account for the fact that, even where its presuppositions are realized, democracy may not develop, or may develop and then fail, or may continue meeting with only limited success. For such an explanation one must go beyond what democracy presupposes, inquiring carefully into the conditions of its operational success. Before this inquiry (the substance of Part Four) the account of democracy must be deepened, clarified, and made more concrete by explaining the relations between democracy itself and certain instrumental principles with which it is closely and rightly associated. This explanation will be the object of Part Three.