

Woodruff

Citizen Wisdom & Reasoning Without Knowledge

Democracy's Most Controversial Idea

- “it is a natural part of being human to know enough to help govern your community” (149)
- If democracy really is for the people, then the people must each possess the capacity to form and govern society

Government by Ignorance

- “Any government is government by ignorance.”
 - Because no one knows what the future will bring, governance is ignorant of the ultimate outcomes of its decisions
 - Because of this ignorance, governments need to be guided by good decision-making procedures
 - The Greeks called the ability to make decisions without knowledge euboulia, or good judgment

Good Judgment

- Good judgment involves
 - the ability to evaluate questionable arguments
 - openness to opposing opinions and views
 - willingness to listen to ordinary people (non-experts)

Citizen Wisdom

- Citizen wisdom is required to judge the experts and learn from experts
- “Citizen wisdom is what the citizens in a well-run democracy ought to have. It builds on common human abilities to perceive, reason, and judge, but it requires also healthy traditions and good education for all.” (154)

Experts and Democracy

- Experts are specialists in a restricted area
- First Democracy thought there were no experts in governance
 - Ancient democracy did not trust the experts
 - Rather, ancient democracy trusted the people

By The People—Need for Education

- In a democracy, the people are supposed to take part in the managing of public affairs
 - So, a democracy requires that its citizens are educated
- Citizen wisdom results from educating people broadly in numerous disciplines
 - It is not vocational training
 - It is closer to what we call today “liberal arts” education
 - This type of education provides a basis for understanding the shared human condition and just relations

Counter-arguments Against Citizen Wisdom

1. Ordinary citizens do not have time to engage in public affairs
2. Ordinary citizens are too easily swayed by others
3. Ordinary citizens should let experts decide
4. What ordinary citizens have in common is not wisdom

1. Ordinary Citizens Do Not Have Time to Engage in Public Affairs

- The ordinary citizen is too busy putting food on the table to have time or interest in the workings of the state
 - One might see a representative democracy as recognizing this limitation--a direct democracy simply takes too much time
 - Some decisions are too complex for the ordinary citizen to understand so there needs to be dedicated specialists

2. Ordinary Citizens Are Too Easily Swayed By Others

- Woodruff thinks this criticism is misplaced
 - The losing side, he thinks, always wants to claim the voters were duped or tricked into voting the way they did
 - Woodruff thinks that the citizens are not easily tricked and their wisdom is not easily swayed

3. Ordinary Citizens Should Let Experts Decide

- Plato thought the philosopher kings (the experts) should rule
 - To prevent corruption, the philosopher kings would not be allowed to own property
- But, leaders always have their own interests and should never be immune from scrutiny
 - It is best if the ordinary citizen is capable of judging the advice and performance of the experts

4. What Ordinary Citizens Have in Common Is Not Wisdom

- It is true that what ordinary citizens have in common is not actual wisdom
- Rather, what each possesses is the potential for wisdom
- The potential for wisdom is made actual in education

The Hope of Democracy

- “Education is the hope of democracy. And though democracies often fail in education it is imperative that we do not lose faith in the potential of the people to make good decisions when they are decently informed. Politicians who lose that faith tell lies to the people. Lies are fatal to democracy. When you lie to the people you take the decision out of their hands.” (162)

Reasoning Without Knowledge

- “adversary debate, followed by a vote, is a rational way of handling murky issues—better than tossing coins, better than asking the gods for help, and far better than letting the leaders pretend to have so much knowledge that we can let them make decisions on their own.” (175)

What’s Reasonable to Expect?

- Reasoning without knowledge is the attempt to sort out uncertainties
 - Given that some uncertainties are better than others, the attempt is to find the course of action that is best
 - Part of pursuing the best course of action is to determine what it is reasonable to expect (eikos)
 - “An expectation is reasonable...if it seems to fit general experience, and if no one has found a good reason for rejecting it.” (179)

Defeasibility of Reasonable Expectations

- Without knowledge and certainty, all reasonable expectations are defeasible
 - We simply might be wrong about the best course of action
- To pick which of the uncertainties is best, one needs open debate and discourse
 - If a minority opinion is quieted or not expressed, then the assembly has not heard all the options and there’s a chance that the minority view is the view that might have prevented taking a wrong path
 - Tyranny of the majority prevents good judgment in times of debate
- “Without knowledge, you must have good judgment, but without arguments on both sides, you have small hope of good judgment.”

The Attack on Rhetoric

- In ancient Athens, rhetoric was the practice of reasoning without knowledge
 - Teachers tried to teach the goal of *eikos* (reasonable expectations) in discourse, cultivating good judgment, and the ability to argue both sides of an issue
- According to Plato, rhetoric is the art of persuasion
 - Plato and other anti-democrats argued against rhetoric as a purely formal tool of persuasion

Arguments Against Rhetoric

1. Voice for the wealthy: fear was that only the wealthy would learn rhetoric thus exercising disproportional influence over decision-making processes. Problem with this attack is that lower-class men could also learn rhetoric and the style often taught was not popular in Athenian courts
2. Places images of truth in place of truth: Plato's concern that good speakers appeared to have knowledge they did not have and they do not employ truth in their speeches. While true in some cases, it is not that case that pretenders need rhetoric to pretend. Also, there's a difference between lying and reasoning without knowledge.
3. Speaking on both sides of an issue: when defending both sides of an issue, one side is more likely to be true than another. Defending a false side is deceptive. But, debate is about considering both sides without some preconceived ideas as to what is true or false.
4. Lying: rhetoric is thought to allow lies to win. But, in open debate, it is the judgment of the people that are to decide whose position is best. There is no presupposition that one position is true (best) and the other false (worst) until debate ensues.