

# Robert N. Bellah

## *Ethical politics: reality or illusion?*

It would be well, before reflecting on whether the idea of ethical politics is a reality or an illusion, to consider briefly the meaning of ethical politics, or to put it bluntly, whether many Americans see any relation between ethics and politics.<sup>1</sup> As we found out in our research for *Habits of the Heart*, most Americans think they know what they mean by politics (and by politicians), and it is not nice. Politics is the way some people get what they want by using undue influence, questionable tactics, even thinly veiled forms of bribery. If this widespread understanding of politics is correct, then the answer to the question my title asks is clear from the start: politics

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is not ethical. Indeed, almost by definition, in the minds of many Americans, politics is unethical.

Yet we claim to be a free, democratic, and self-governing society. For most people all those terms are positive. Indeed, we tend to divide the world between democratic societies, which are good, and undemocratic ones, which are bad. But how do we exercise our freedom, how do we govern ourselves in a democratic society, except through politics? And if democracy is good, how can the political practices that make it work be inherently corrupt?

One might say, it is not that democratic politics are inherently bad; it is just that ours at the moment are bad and we need to reform them. Fair enough. Most institutions, families, marriages, and individuals could use some reform. But will just putting stricter rules on lobbyists make our politics ethical, or are there deeper issues that we need to think about, issues concerning both ethics and politics?

When I was asked to write this essay, I was examining ancient Greece, the

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a revision of a talk first delivered as the Henry Bugbee Lecture in Philosophy in the President's Lecture Series at the University of Montana, April 3, 2006.

birthplace of democracy, and of the very terms 'politics' and 'ethics.' Our democracy, a representative democracy, is very different from ancient democracy, a direct democracy in which all citizens, or most of them, actively participated in their own governance. Nevertheless, Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, found something that he considered similar to ancient direct democracy in the New England town meeting. And we can still see direct democracy at work in many civic associations and in many religious congregations.

Tocqueville argued that without this network of voluntary associations, civil society would not be possible. These forms of association, and the practices that they require, help to create the "habits of the heart" – the kinds of individuals and the way they treat each other – necessary for democracy. Some may think that all one needs to have a democracy are elections, but the current situation in the Middle East is teaching us that elections are not sufficient. In fact, without democratic habits of the heart, free elections may simply reproduce the tyrannical institutions that are to be found not just in the government but throughout the society.

The experience of direct democracy (if not at the national level, then at the level of the many associations and groups that make up society) is crucial for an effective democracy, because democracy is a form of self-government, in contrast to monarchy or tyranny, which are forms of government by one person, or to aristocracy or oligarchy, which are forms of government by a small group of people. Direct democracy, in whatever context, gives us the experience of self-government. Ideally, it should create a sense of what we call community, what the Greeks called *koinonia*, the civic friendship that creates trust between members

and makes it easier for them to accept differences of opinion and compromises when opinions are divided.

A long tradition of democratic theory also holds that only citizens who can govern *themselves* can effectively participate in governing others. If, as Aristotle argued, politics in the true sense involves governing and being governed in turn, we must know how to put the common good before our own. But does that not run up against the very nature of individuals, which compels them to put their own interests first? And does that not contradict the teaching of Adam Smith that if we all pursue our self-interest, things will work out for the best?

But if we read not only *The Wealth of Nations* but also his equally important book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, we will find Smith saying that no good government can exist on the basis of self-interest alone. His notion of the invisible spectator, whom we must always keep in mind if we are to be truly ethical persons (his version of what Immanuel Kant later called the categorical imperative) requires that we put the common interest above our own. Smith believed that the pursuit of self-interest was a proper principle in the economy, but not in politics. Indeed, without a framework of ethical politics, a purely self-interested economy would quickly lose the trust that even economic transactions require. (Later, I will raise questions as to whether we understand self-interest in the deepest sense.)

What I have been suggesting is that if we really want a democratic society, ethical politics is not an option – it is a requirement. Political philosophers all the way back to Plato believed that different forms of political regime are linked to different types of person, traits of character, and principles of behavior. One influential version of that idea was that

of the Baron de Montesquieu, who lived in France in the early eighteenth century, and whose book, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was influential among the founders of the American republic.

Montesquieu wrote about three types of government: despotism, monarchy, and democracy. The principle of despotism is fear: one must always worry about the arbitrary action of the despot. The principle of monarchy is honor: Monarchy is characterized by significant intermediate institutions led by nobles who compete with each other. Motivated by ambition, nobles are jealous of their honor. The principle of democracy, however, is virtue: Those who rule must consider themselves under the same laws as those they rule. Thus they must put the common good above their own.

Would Montesquieu consider the United States today to be a democracy or a monarchy? One early-twentieth-century philosopher, George Santayana, had this to say: "If a noble and civilized democracy is to subsist, the common citizen must be something of a saint and something of a hero. We see, therefore, how justly flattering and profound, and at the same time how ominous, was Montesquieu's saying that the principle of democracy is virtue." How ominous indeed. Most of the founders of our republic thought it unlikely to survive any great period of time. John Adams thought it would last about fifty years. We think they were wrong, but if we examine closely what a democracy really is, we might not be so sure.

Winston Churchill is widely believed to have said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." That statement is usually interpreted somehow as a ringing endorsement of democracy, which is a convenient way of avoiding what its initial

clause might mean: democracy is the worst form of government. We could imagine Plato agreeing with the first clause, but also with the second, for he hated tyranny (or despotism) and had only the most fanciful idea of monarchy – that philosophers should be kings, an idea he had no hope would ever be put in practice. Indeed, after the excesses of the Thirty Tyrants in late-fifth-century Athens, Plato came to think of the extreme democracy that had preceded it as a golden age. Still, Plato was a great critic of democracy.

Fifth-century Athens was perhaps the only example of true – that is, direct – democracy that history has ever seen, at least in a city of any size. We must remember, though, that Athens, while the largest Greek city in its day, had a population in the fifth century of not much more than two hundred thousand. And Athenian citizenship was limited: women could not vote and slaves were not even citizens. Also, resident aliens not only could not vote, they could not be naturalized: only if their father was an Athenian could they become citizens.

Even with these restrictions, the fact that every citizen, regardless of wealth, had the same rights and could hold any office is unparalleled in history. Most Greek cities, though they included most citizens in the assembly, reserved the important offices for the aristocrats or the wealthy. Athens in the early fifth century removed this restriction, placed all power in the hands of the democratic assembly, and chose its officials by lot or by election.

Because of the great achievements of the Greeks (particularly cultural, culminating in fifth-century Athens in art, literature, and thought), we are tempted to forget that the Greeks were always warriors, and that Greek citizens were warrior-citizens, called very frequently to

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fight for their cities. The infantry, composed of moderately wealthy farmers, had been the backbone of democracy everywhere it had appeared in Greece. But after the great naval battle at Salamis in 480 BC, when the Athenian navy defeated the much larger Persian fleet, the navy became the main military force of Athens, the basis of the empire that Athens proceeded to build – first as a defensive alliance against Persia, then as territory to be exploited for the gain and glory of Athens.

The need for oarsmen in the Greek ships gave a new status and income to the Athenian lower class, those without property, from whom the oarsmen were drawn. Since they were the basis of Athenian military supremacy, they had to be fully included in the assembly, the source of all power in the Athenian state. That these oarsmen loved their country there is little doubt; that they had an interest in the extension and maintenance of the Athenian empire is also without doubt. It was the empire that undermined Athenian virtue, gave rise to demagogic politicians, involved brutal oppression of many conquered cities, and finally led to complete political and military disaster. To top it off, it was the atmosphere of anxiety and fear following political and military disaster that led to the democratic murder of the one man for whom Plato had the greatest respect in the world, Socrates. No wonder Plato was a critic of democracy.

He was not alone. It will probably be a surprising assertion to many readers, but the central icon of American history, Abraham Lincoln, was, in one sense, a critic of democracy. Recall the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, when Lincoln and Douglas were running against each other for the office of senator in Illinois. The crux of the debates had to do with whether slavery should be extended to

the territories. Douglas argued that the decision should be left to the citizens of the territories, most immediately Kansas. Lincoln argued for a federal prohibition of the extension of slavery because slavery is inherently wrong and should not be left to the majority in the territories to decide. Majority rule may be better than any other form of government, but majority rule cannot decide the issue of good and evil. Let us not forget that Douglas, not Lincoln, won the senatorial election.

Michael Mann in his book *The Dark Side of Democracy* has detailed the crimes that democratic nations have committed, especially in situations of war or ethnic conflict.<sup>2</sup> I myself am old enough to remember the evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast and their relocation in concentration camps after Pearl Harbor. Although it was done by executive order, not by popular vote, there was no public outcry. Moreover, at the height of the McCarthy period in the 1950s, an experiment took place where pollsters read to people an unidentified text of what was in fact the Bill of Rights. A majority of the sample said they disagreed with it, and many said it sounded like Communist propaganda. One comes back to Santayana's remark that the idea that the principle of a democracy is virtue is profound, but also ominous. What happens in a democracy when virtue fails? And since virtue is fragile and vice hardy, should we be surprised when virtue fails?

Several examples of democratic failure that I have already mentioned – slavery, the treatment of Japanese Americans in World War II, and one could add the eth-

2 Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

nic cleansing of Native Americans – have to do with the question of inclusion and exclusion. Tocqueville warned against the tyranny of the majority: the democratic majority often feels little or no obligation to minorities and badly mistreats them.

But today we face another huge problem: in the age of globalization there is no world democracy. Democracies exist only within nations, and democratic nations on the whole feel little in the way of ethical obligations to outsiders. It is often said that globalization means the end of the age of the nation-state, but in any absolute sense that is clearly untrue. It is particularly untrue with respect to democracy: there is no democracy beyond the nation-state. The United Nations, weak and ineffective though it is, is better than nothing – but a global democracy it is not. What are the consequences of the fact that democracy is limited to nation-states?

In a sense, our problem is Athens's problem writ large: how could the Athenians grant citizenship to natives of their colonial cities, many of them hundreds of miles away, when they could never attend the Athenian assembly (even if the Athenians had wanted them to, which they did not)? The Athenian assembly instead acquiesced to extraordinary brutality against rebellious cities in their empire, in the name, by the way, of national security.

G. E. R. Lloyd, the British classicist, in a chapter of his 2004 book, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections*, entitled "A Critique of Democracy," points out the basic contradictions between democracy within nations and justice in the world:

In the current political situation that every democracy faces, there is no advantage for any statesman in being an internationalist and often considerable disadvantages. I

remarked on how lobbying creates imbalances in the debate on national issues. But the consequences on international ones are far more severe. Who, in the nation-state, is there to represent global or international interest? Nobody gets elected to do just that, and if you do take an internationalist stand, you may be lucky if you are not made to pay for it by losing support from those on whom you *do* depend to get elected, who put you there to look after their interests, not those of anyone else.<sup>3</sup>

Lloyd focuses on the two great issues that can only be addressed globally, but that national democracies seem incapable of dealing with, largely because of their mistaken notion that looking out for themselves alone is their primary task: the issue of global warming and environmental degradation; and the issue of global inequality, the enormous contrast between rich and poor nations, with all the consequences that go with that. "It is clearly intolerable," he writes, "for a tiny proportion of the world's population to live in the greatest luxury while many of the rest have no hope of escape from grinding poverty."<sup>4</sup> He sums up our situation, one so dangerous that even the self-interest of the privileged, one would think, would lead them to action: "The main dangers in the present geopolitical situation are clear, the threat to the environment worldwide, the ways in which increasing inequality fuels the fires of future resentment, the frailty of the geopolitical order." As a citizen of the United Kingdom, he points out that in much of the world, the United States is seen as the

3 G. E. R. Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 182.

4 *Ibid.*, 184.

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problem, not the solution, because it has become “a law unto itself,” believing that “if the rest of the world does not accept U.S. policies, too bad for the rest of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, while Lloyd’s diagnosis of the “weaknesses of democracy at both the national and the international level is utterly bleak, and the prognosis is almost equally so,”<sup>6</sup> he does not completely despair. There is always the possibility of reform, and despair can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If the problem of Athenian democracy was corruption at home and imperial arrogance abroad, is there perhaps a parallel, even at an enormously greater scale, in our own situation? Let me begin by taking a closer look at our own national democracy, particularly the degree to which we have lost the very ethos that makes democracy possible. That is, let me begin with the question of virtue. Socrates was speaking not only to his fellow Athenians, but to all of us, when he said our first concern should be with the virtue of our own souls. In a democracy we govern and are governed in turn. And in the most powerful democracy in the world, we to a significant extent govern the world. Every time we vote, however problematic our electoral system is, we are exerting that power to govern. Are we worthy of it?

Although we are responsible for the virtue of our own souls, it will be extremely unlikely that many of us will be virtuous if we live in a vicious society. We need to be concerned, therefore, with the health of our society as well as the health of our souls. As I noted previously, Montesquieu held that the prin-

5 Ibid., 185.

6 Ibid., 184.

ciple of a monarchy is not virtue but honor. He also uses the word ambition, which makes more sense to us today. Ambition can replace virtue in a monarchy because the people have ceased to be self-governing; they accept the machinery of government, the “springs and wheels,” as Montesquieu puts it, that have been set up by others, and only attempt to increase their own power and riches within the limits of rules set by those above them. To some extent this is inevitable in a representative democracy, which cannot engage the full responsibility of its citizens, but if Tocqueville was right, some degree of direct democracy at the local level is necessary to keep alive the virtue without which democratic freedom cannot survive.

Unfortunately, we have good evidence, most comprehensively summed up by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*,<sup>7</sup> but confirmed by Robert Wuthnow’s book *Loose Connections*<sup>8</sup> and many other studies, that the societies, groups, and associations that have provided the experience of direct democracy to Americans are all in more or less precipitate decline and have been so for thirty years or more. Our connections have become looser not only to groups and associations but to jobs and even families. More and more we are forced to make it on our own, and ‘personal responsibility’ has become a kind of mantra that we should not expect help from anyone else because we have to make it all alone.

This is just the social situation in which ambition replaces virtue and

7 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

8 Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America’s Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

monarchy replaces democracy. But we still have elections – how can we be a monarchy? Tocqueville had an answer to that. He called it “soft despotism,” in which the outer trappings of democracy survive but in fact people who have lost their freedom rise up every four years to elect their rulers and then sink back into the torpor of their slavery. Elective monarchy is not an unheard-of political form in human history. With the rise of the imperial presidency, maybe what we have is an elective empire. Montesquieu reminds us that monarchies can do great things, but at a price: “In monarchies,” he writes, “policy effects great things with as little virtue as possible.” Indeed, “in well-regulated monarchies, they are almost all good subjects and very few good men.”

My question is not a rhetorical one and certainly not a sentimental one, for the gravest consequences hang on it. Can a society that has become a kind of monarchical machine run by private ambition, effectively lacking in virtue and human goodness, be able to face the enormous ethical problems of the world today? So when in my title I ask whether an ethical politics is a reality or an illusion, I am not asking about bribery or deceit among our politicians, but about the state of our society that makes such bribery and deceit routine. My question is indeed a daunting one, a double one in fact: can we recover the dignity of politics as a calling for every citizen in a democracy, one requiring all the virtue we can muster, and then can we extend that democratic citizenship so that in some significant sense we can be citizens of the world, responsible for the future of our planet as well as of our own society? Not easy, you say. Surely not easy, but think of the consequences if we fail.

Recovering our capacity to govern ourselves and our world effectively will require reforms that are simultaneously social and ideological. Putnam speaks of declining social capital, a metaphor I am not fond of and which he told me privately he had chosen so as to seem to be doing ‘hard’ political science, by avoiding such a ‘soft’ term as community. Whatever the term, we need to reinvigorate or create anew the thousands of small direct democracies that give our citizens the experience of governing and being governed in turn.

Putnam reminds us that there are two kinds of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital creates groups that have internal solidarity. That, as such, is to the good. But if that solidarity stops at the boundaries of the given group, it can produce as many problems as it solves. We also need bridging social capital, the capacity to reach out to other groups to create larger solidarities. If we have groups with only bonding and not bridging social capital, we have what we most fear: a society that is nothing but a collection of special-interest groups, each seeking its own good with no regard for the common good. And, of course, this is the most challenging issue that faces us in the world as a whole: can we create bridging social capital that will cross national boundaries and create international solidarity? Indeed, we have such groups, relatively small and fragile, but exemplary of what we need at a much larger scale: Doctors Without Borders, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and a host of others.

Voluntary associations may be weaker now than they were through most of the twentieth century, but they are not absent in the United States. One of Putnam’s more hopeful findings is that through most of the twentieth century,

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up until about 1960 or 1970, our social capital was increasing. What went up for decades has now been in decline for decades, but such recent shifts show that we can change directions again and gain our sense of social citizenship rather than lose it even more. And the international organizations, or the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), some of which I have mentioned, seem to be growing.

We need not only a social transformation but also an ideological one. They entail each other. Here the challenge is daunting, and the relevant initiatives not yet very coherent. Through much of modern history some form of socialist ideology has countered the ideology of capitalism. While the free-market ideology espoused entrepreneurship as the solution to all our problems, socialism was concerned with the welfare of those whom entrepreneurship exploited or abandoned. The terrible excesses of Communist tyranny have given all kinds of socialism a bad name, although in much of the world outside the United States political parties with 'socialist' in their names continue to win elections. But even these parties have been co-opted in many cases by neoliberalism, a moderate form of American free-market fundamentalism, so that a robust alternative to the idea that the market will solve all problems has been hard to find of late.

Where so many have been trying, with no great success, to formulate a new vision that would offer a serious alternative to free-market fundamentalism, I will not even attempt such a task, important though it is. Rather, what I want to do in the rest of this essay is draw from my work on ancient Greece and ask some preliminary philosophical questions about the very basis of an ethical

politics that might help us deal with the enormous problems that we are largely ignoring at present.

So far, I have assumed a dichotomy that our culture takes for granted, namely, the contrast between self-interest and concern for the common good. The easiest solution to this contrast in our culture is the idea that if we all pursue our self-interest and are as selfish as possible, the result will be the common good, an idea I noted earlier Adam Smith did not endorse. The great corporate scandals of recent years have tarnished the slogan of the 1980s that 'greed is good', but the idea is alive and well; often the mantra of 'individual responsibility' is only another version of the same thing.

The idea of self-interest – so natural particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, where utilitarianism, usually in a fairly debased form, is the common ideological coin – has had its critics. Tocqueville proposed one answer that is appealing to many today: the idea of self-interest rightly understood. What Tocqueville is really pointing to is the difference between short-term and long-term self-interest. What seems desirable now may prove harmful to us in the long run. Unless we keep that long run in mind, self-interest will be self-defeating.

One example of this is the notion that reducing carbon-dioxide emissions would be bad for our economy – the reason we have not ratified the Kyoto Protocol. If we do not act to halt or slow global warming, we will be irreparably harming ourselves, or if not ourselves, then our children and grandchildren. Most people, however selfish, do care about their children and grandchildren. Thus, if self-interest leads us not to care about global warming, self-interest rightly understood will lead us to care. I

have no problem with this argument: to the degree it works I am all for it.

I want, however, with the help of Plato, to raise an even deeper question, one related to the idea that the principle of democracy is virtue. That is the question of the real meaning of self-interest, leaving aside short- or long-term issues. Is it ever in our self-interest to do something that will harm others? This is the central issue in Plato's early masterpiece, *Gorgias*, described by Charles Kahn, the great scholar of ancient philosophy, as the founding document of Western moral and political philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

Plato has Socrates face three successive interlocutors, each of whom believes that doing whatever one wants justifies ignoring moral restraints. The first two, *Gorgias* and *Polus*, Socrates disposes of fairly quickly. In the end, both are ashamed to admit that they justify immoral behavior in the name of self-interest. It is the third, Callicles, a rising young Athenian politician of Plato's own aristocratic class, who is the most dangerous. Callicles says he is not ashamed to say openly what everyone really believes, namely, that one should get what one wants at whatever cost as long as one can get away with it, that success and riches are all that count.

Socrates, who defends the idea of justice – that is, treating everyone justly and never harming anyone, even those who have harmed oneself – does not just denounce Callicles's idea; he tries to show Callicles that he himself does not really believe it, because he, like everyone else,

9 Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and The Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 125. Kahn actually says, "Plato may be said to have founded moral philosophy twice: once in the *Crito* and a second time in the *Gorgias*."

knows that one's real self-interest is doing the good, that behaving unjustly is a disease of the soul, and no one would consciously choose disease over health.

It is important to remember, because the teachings of Christianity put things somewhat differently (though I do not think that in the end they are antithetical to the teaching of Socrates/Plato in this regard), that Socrates is not telling Callicles to stop thinking of himself and start thinking of others. Socrates is telling Callicles to *really* start thinking of himself, to ask himself what kind of soul he wants to have. For to Plato our common contrast between egoism and altruism, a secularized version of Pietist Protestantism, is meaningless. A true concern for the good of the self would lead us to see that only a just self is good, and a just self treats all others justly.

In short, according to Plato, nothing is more injurious to the self than harming others, and no one who properly understood himself would do such a thing. Our true desire, our deepest need, is to have a good self, and a good self acts well to all others, even to not returning evil for evil, an idea that centuries of readers have seen as parallel to the teachings of another ancient figure who lived in a nearby country. Indeed, when Callicles gets really exasperated because Socrates is making him see that even he is ashamed of his own selfishness, he warns Socrates that going around talking as he does could end up getting him killed.

I am suggesting that an alternative ideology to the one that dominates our society today, an alternative that seems illusory to the realists of our time, but that is the only way to make ethical politics a reality, is a recovery of a true understanding of the self, one validated not only by Plato's moral philosophy, but also by most of the great religions

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and philosophies of mankind. We live in a society obsessed with the self: above all, most of us want to be rich, powerful, beautiful, and admired, or at least one of the above; and I certainly cannot claim to be an exception. But instead of saying we are too obsessed with the self, perhaps we should say we are not obsessed enough; we have not looked deeply enough into what we really want, which is the just self, capable of treating others justly in the context of a just society.

In *Gorgias* Plato seems to be concerned only with the individual self, but even there we find a concern for the larger society. Socrates admonishes Callicles not to become a kind of pirate, engaging in limitless evil in order to get what he wants at any price. Such a person, Socrates says, is friend to neither man nor god: “For he is unable to share in any community, and where there is no sharing there is no friendship. Callicles, wise men say that heaven and earth and men and gods are bound together by community and friendship, by orderliness and temperance and justice, and for this reason they call the universe *kosmos*, world-order, not disorder nor dissoluteness.”<sup>10</sup>

For Plato, the concern for society moves to a concern for the world as a whole, for the divine as well as the human. Plato’s most ambitious works, *The Republic* and *The Laws*, are designs for a good society, one in tune with the harmony of the cosmos, designs that are problematic to us to be sure, and not ones we would want literally to implement, though some scholars today believe they were intended to stimulate reform of democracy, not abolish it. But Plato was surely right that a good self and a good society entail each other, and in the age of globalization we must

<sup>10</sup> *Gorgias*, 507E–508A, trans. Kahn, *Plato and The Socratic Dialogue*, 143.

add, a good self and a good world entail each other.

However we might want to formulate a counterideology to the dominant one (could we say a really democratic one in contrast to our present monarchical one?), we could certainly start with Plato’s idea of justice as essential in the soul and in society, and with Montesquieu’s application of democratic virtue with the principles of equality and frugality. Frugality might seem an old-fashioned idea, an expression of purely private virtue. Yet frugality in today’s world is an ecological imperative. If the rest of the world, or even just China and India, were to share the number of automobiles per capita in the United States, we would quite literally be cooked. But can we ask the rest of the world to be frugal in the use of fossil fuel while we go on with our wasteful ways? Today, frugality is not an option, it is a necessity, and only shortsightedness makes us deny it.

Similarly, global equality, not in an absolute sense, but with significant reductions of present disparities, is equally necessary. While writing this essay I got a form letter from Jimmy Carter at the Carter Center. It began: “It is a challenge you and I dare not ignore. I am talking about the growing global chasm between the rich and the poor. To me, a truly rich person is someone who has a decent home and education, a chance for a job, reasonable access to health care, and the opportunity to live a secure life.”

He points out how far most of the world is from those minimal conditions for a decent life and how it is our obligation to do something about it. To me, Jimmy Carter is one of the few Americans who understands what it is to be a citizen in a democracy as Montesquieu understood it. So listening to Jimmy Carter and reading his recent book, *Our Endangered Values*, may be a good place

to start if we want to build an alternative ideology with some chance of getting us out of the mess we are in.<sup>11</sup> I am not saying Carter has all the answers – no one does. But he knows that looking at the self and looking at the world are two sides of the same thing. And that is perhaps the best place to start if we are to reform the corrupt democracy in which we live, and make our democracy a responsible citizen in a dangerously demoralized world.

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11 Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).