

# The Moral Foundation of Democracy

John H. Hallowell



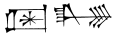
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Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 P 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hallowell, John H. (John Hamilton), 1913–

The moral foundation of democracy / John H. Hallowell.

p. cm.

“With some minor revisions, this book consists of six lectures  
which were given at the University of Chicago in the spring of . . .  
under the auspices of the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation for the  
study of American Institutions.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-86597-669-6 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Democracy. I. Title.

JC423 .H315 2007

321.8—dc22

2006023222

LIBERTY FUND, INC.

8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300

Indianapolis, Indiana 46250-1684

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## Foreword

A moral approach to the subject of democracy may not seem unusual to most people, but to many political scientists it will appear naïve or novel or unrealistically antique. The political scientist who emphasizes the *science* in his profession or who thinks of his subject as “morally neutral” will find Professor Hallowell’s treatment challenging. The resurgence, however, of the realists, the traditionalists, the Aristotelians, or the neo-scholastics—whatever name they choose to be known by—brings to the fore the ancient conviction that morals, in the sense of the choice of the right means (characterized by the virtue of prudence) to rationally determined objective ends, lie at the very foundation of politics.

Professor Hallowell’s contributions in this field have been outstanding, and the present work, based upon his Walgreen Foundation lectures, is offered for the better understanding of his school of thought.

Jerome G. Kerwin, *Chairman*  
*Charles R. Walgreen Foundation for*  
*the Study of American Institutions*

## Acknowledgments

With some minor revisions, this book consists of six lectures which were given at the University of Chicago in the spring of 1952 under the auspices of the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation for the Study of American Institutions. And I should like to take this opportunity to thank the Foundation and especially its chairman, Professor Jerome G. Kerwin, for the encouragement it has given me in extending this invitation.

My colleagues at Duke have been most helpful in their criticism, and I want especially to thank Professors Robert R. Wilson, R. Taylor Cole, and Waldo Beach for the careful reading which they gave my manuscript. Miss Mary Evelyn Blagg has given me much helpful assistance in preparing the lectures for publication.

The following publications have kindly given me permission to use material which had been previously published: *Ethics*, *Theology Today*, and *Commonweal*.

John H. Hallowell

*Durham, North Carolina*

*October 25, 1953*

The  
Moral  
Foundation  
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Democracy

# I

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## Democracy—Fact or Fiction?

“Who is this new god called Universal Suffrage?” Pareto asked at the beginning of this century. And he answered: “He is no more exactly definable, no less shrouded in mystery, no less beyond the pale of reality, than the hosts of other divinities; nor are there fewer or less patent contradictions in his theology than in theirs. Worshipers of Universal Suffrage are not led by their god. It is they who lead him—and by the nose, determining the forms in which he must manifest himself. Oftentimes proclaiming the sanctity of ‘majority rule,’ they resist ‘majority rule’ by obstructionist tactics, even though they form but small minorities, and burning incense to the Goddess Reason, they in no wise disdain, in certain cases, alliances with Chicanery, Fraud, and Corruption.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever the form of government, by whatever name it is called, it is always, according to the Italian sociologist, rule by some elite, a minority that rules either by deception or by violence. And many intellectuals today would agree with that judgment. Any view which regards democracy as having roots in objective reality is discarded as hopelessly naive, a form of self-deception from which the student of politics should seek emancipation.

Pareto’s pronouncement on the delusive character of political philosophy in general and of democratic political theory in particular is all the more impressive because it is proclaimed to be a *scientific* judgment. For it was Pareto’s claim that his *Trattato di sociologia generale* (1915–16) was simply a scientific description of social reality and,

1. Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (4 vols.; New York, 1935), Vol. IV, par. 2183. Quotations used with the permission of Harcourt, Brace and Co.

as a consequence, that it was free from all metaphysical speculation, moral evaluations, and a priori principles. Explaining human motivation in terms of six principal types of “residues” which are conceived as being something more complex than what had earlier been called “instincts,” Pareto, like many contemporary intellectuals, is impressed with the essential irrationality of human behavior. All political philosophies, systems of ethics, theologies, and metaphysical theories, according to Pareto, are simply verbal manifestations of dominant residues. All can be subsumed under the one classification “derivation.”<sup>2</sup> A derivation, he argued, is not accepted because it is true or rejected because it is false but is accepted if it corresponds to our residues and rejected if it does not. Only the scientific method, what Pareto calls the “logico-experimental” method, yields truth; only scientific theories are rational. Theories of progress, democracy, justice, nationalism, internationalism, or socialism are all nonlogical derivations. A belief in “natural rights,” in “justice,” or in “law” is a kind of superstition or prejudice. None of them is a scientific concept, and hence none of them is rationally derived, rationally defensible, true or false. But, in any case, derivations are not very important in determining social change, for it is not by ideas that men are motivated, but by their residues. Says Pareto:

Theologians, metaphysicists, philosophers, theorists of politics, law, and ethics, do not ordinarily accept the order indicated. They are inclined to assign first place to derivations. What we call residues are in their eyes axioms or dogmas, and the purpose is just the conclusion of a logical reasoning. But since they are not as a rule in any agreement on the derivation, they argue about it till they are

2. According to Pareto: “Concrete theories in social connections are made up of residues and derivations. The residues are manifestations of sentiments. The derivations comprise logical reasonings, unsound reasonings, and manifestations of sentiments used for purposes of derivation: they are manifestations of the human being’s hunger for thinking. If that hunger were satisfied by logico-experimental [i.e., empirical-scientific] reasonings only, there would be no derivations; instead of them we should get logico-experimental theories. But the human hunger for thinking is satisfied in any number of ways; by pseudo-experimental reasonings, by words that stir the sentiments, by fatuous, inconclusive ‘talk.’ So derivations come into being” (*ibid.*, Vol. III, par. 1401).



blue in the face and think that they can change social conditions by proving a derivation fallacious. That is all an illusion on their part. They fail to realize that their haggings never reach the majority of men, who could not make head nor tail to them anyhow, and who in fact disregard them save as articles of faith to which assent is deference to certain residues.<sup>3</sup>

All philosophical discourse, political debate, attempts at ethical evaluation, are forms of “haggling,” a futile exercise of the vocal chords or a mere scribbling of the pen. For it is not by reason that the destiny of men is determined but by deception, fraud, and force. Government, whatever the name applied to it for propaganda purposes, is always rule by the few in their own interest. Indeed, Pareto tells us, “the art of government lies in finding ways to take advantage of . . . sentiments, not in wasting one’s energies in futile efforts to destroy them. . . . The person who is able to free himself from the blind dominion of his own sentiments is capable of utilizing the sentiments of other people for his own ends.”<sup>4</sup>

And all this is proclaimed as a new insight into government, an insight made possible by the development of that new science of society called “sociology.” But as a matter of fact, Thrasymachus anticipated it in the fourth century B.C., and Machiavelli expressed somewhat similar sentiments with respect to the art of government in the sixteenth. What Pareto has done is simply to restate the ancient Sophistic argument under the guise of scientific research. As Professor Melvin Rader has pointed out:

The advantage of Pareto’s book is that it not only suggests ruthless tactics, but offers a clever defense against the pangs of conscience. It enlists the prestige of science in support of the will-to-power. As an apostle of the “logico-experimental method,” Pareto bedecks his pages with algebraic signs and graphs, most of which are employed to excellent purpose. He “proves” his view that values are purely sentimental by marshaling a large amount of “inductive evidence.” He thus appears to be a resolute defender of science, intent

3. *Ibid.*, Vol. III, par. 1415.

4. *Ibid.*, Vol. III, par. 1843.

upon keeping “theory” uncontaminated by “practice” and “sentiment.”

Since he adopts the role of a scientific purist, the casual reader is apt to misunderstand the import of his argument. His treatise in effect is an attack upon the life of reason, and this is true despite his apparent attachment to strict scientific method. As a matter of fact, he so unduly restricts the field of science that a great portion of existence is turned over to violence and passion.<sup>5</sup>

## I

But Pareto is by no means alone in seeking to dress his cynicism up in the garments of “scientific objectivity.” What Pareto called “derivations,” Marx described as “ideologies,” Sorel called “myths,” and Freud labeled “rationalizations.” There are important differences between these terms, and they are not to be equated, but Pareto, Marx, Sorel, and Freud are all agreed that men are motivated more by irrational considerations than by rational ones. But that they should concede that men do, in fact, feel some necessity for explaining their behavior in rational terms, for justifying themselves, says a great deal more about the rationality and ethical sensibilities of human nature than they intend to concede. For why should men feel any necessity at all for “rationalizing” their behavior, for providing “good” reasons for “real” ones, if, in fact, they are *essentially* irrational and controlled by forces, sentiments, or drives over which they have no rational control? How is it *possible* for them to do so?

And why is the social scientist exempt from the irrational forces that determine the thought and conduct of other individuals? On what grounds? If he is not exempt, of what value is his “science”? On what grounds, for example, is Pareto’s theory exempted from the designation which he applies to other people’s theories? Is not his social theory but another example of a derivation?

No, he would probably reply, because his is a scientific theory and other people’s theories are not. But Marx claimed that his theory was a scientific one, and so did Freud. The concept of the class struggle is, for

5. *No Compromise: The Conflict between Two Worlds* (New York, 1939), p. 50. Quoted with the permission of the Macmillan Company.

Marx, a scientific concept just as the conception of libido is a scientific concept for Freud. Since both Marx and Freud explain things quite differently from each other and Pareto's theory differs from each of theirs, which science shall we listen to? What standard shall we use to choose between them? It cannot be the standard of scientific method, since each claims to have employed that method in reaching his conclusions. Which theory is a "derivation," and which is not? Which is an "ideology," and which is not? Which is "rationalization," and which is not?

"We may in fact state it as a rule," C. S. Lewis has pointed out, "that *no thought is valid if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes.*" And it is a rule we apply every day of our lives. If a sober man tells us that his house is full of snakes, we may go with him to look for them; but if we know that he frequently suffers from delirium tremens, we pay no attention to him and dismiss his statement as a delusion. In our ordinary dealings with men we discount any beliefs that we even suspect have an irrational cause.

The same writer continues:

Now it would clearly be preposterous to apply this rule to each particular thought as we come to it and yet not to apply it to all thoughts taken collectively, that is, to human reason as a whole. Each particular thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes. Obviously, then, the whole process of human thought, what we call Reason, is equally valueless if it is the result of irrational causes. Hence every theory of the universe which makes the human mind a result of irrational causes is inadmissible, for it would be a proof that there are no such things as proofs. Which is nonsense.

But Naturalism, as commonly held, is precisely a theory of this sort. The mind, like every other particular thing or event, is supposed to be simply the product of the Total System. It is supposed to be that and nothing more, to have no power whatever of "going on of its own accord." And the Total System is not supposed to be rational. All thoughts whatever are therefore the results of irrational causes, and nothing more than that. The finest piece of scientific reasoning is caused in just the same irrational way as the thoughts a man has because a bit of bone is pressing on his brain. If we con-

tinue to apply our Rule, both are equally valueless. And if we stop applying our Rule we are no better off. For then the Naturalist will have to admit that thoughts produced by lunacy or alcohol or by the mere wish to disbelieve in Naturalism are just as valid as his own thoughts. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. The Naturalist cannot condemn other people's thoughts because they have irrational causes and continue to believe his own which have (if Naturalism is true) equally irrational causes.<sup>6</sup>

The intellectual who, like Pareto, denies the essential rationality of man and of the universe he inhabits involves himself in a contradiction from which he cannot rescue himself. But, wholly aside from the philosophical difficulties, what are the practical consequences? We may subscribe to that revolt against reason which expresses itself in terms of the overwhelming importance of economic factors in the determination of human behavior, or we may prefer the revolt against reason which ascribes overwhelming importance to the libido or the dominant residues; but we have opened the door for assertions that truth is simply a manifestation of nationalistic, racial, or class interests. If the art of government consists, as Pareto says it does, in finding ways to use other people's sentiments for one's own ends, then the totalitarian dictatorships of modern times would appear to represent the art of government at its best and most efficient. And if that is true, it is but a futile gesture to oppose them, and we had best now succumb to the inevitable. If justice, natural law, and natural rights refer to no objective reality, if democracy is but a word, then these words can be used

6. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York, 1947), p. 28. "By trusting to argument at all," Lewis points out, "you have assumed the point at issue. All arguments about the validity of thought make a tacit, and illegitimate, exception in favour of the bit of thought you are doing at that moment. . . . Thus the Freudian proves that all thoughts are merely due to complexes except the thoughts which constitute this proof itself. The Marxist proves that all thoughts result from class conditioning—except the thought he is thinking while he says this. It is therefore always impossible to begin with any other data whatever and from them to find out whether thought is valid. You must do exactly the opposite—must begin by admitting the self-evidence of logical thought and then believe all other things only in so far as they agree with that" (*ibid.*, p. 30). Copyrighted 1947 by the Macmillan Company and used with the Macmillan Company's permission.

in any fashion anyone wants to use them, and there is no way in which we can challenge his right to do so. If a Hitler or a Stalin claims that his system of government represents the purest democracy the world has ever known, that it is the perfect embodiment of justice, there is no way in which we can prove him wrong. We can say, of course, that we do not like what men like Stalin and Hitler do, but we cannot prove them wrong in doing what they do, nor can we defend by reason our preference for a different system.

## II

The view that democracy is a fiction, at best a useful symbol, has found expression not only in the writings of Europeans like Pareto but in the writings of many Americans. And it has found, among others, explicit expression in the writings of Thurman Arnold, particularly in his *Symbols of Government* (1935) and *The Folklore of Capitalism* (1937).

The basic cause of our political confusion in America, he says, arises from a naive faith in the existence of the “thinking man.” The “thinking man” of the popular mythology is the man who is able to discern right principles and to prefer them to false ones. The “thinking man” is the man who is able both to discriminate and to act upon the basis of sound reason.

No competent psychologist, Arnold says, believes in the thinking man. He knows that such a man does not exist. But the trouble is that there are still too many people in the United States who do not take the psychologist’s pronouncements on the nature of man seriously. They still insist that appeals in politics should be rational. They insist upon arguing the relative merits of communism, fascism, capitalism, and democracy. They are still naive enough, Arnold says, to believe that something important and meaningful can emerge from that kind of argument. This illusion is fostered by educational institutions and by professors who have a professional interest in maintaining it. The trouble with “respectable people” generally is that they have faith in principles rather than in organizations. They are so intent upon principles, Arnold declares, that they do not even know how organizations really work.

Arnold points out that “in advertising the ‘thinking man’ has gone so completely that a modern advertising agency would be amazed at