Lessons in DEMOCRACY

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PREFACE

When I began to write Lessons in Democracy, my objective was to prepare a beginner's guide, which someone with only limited formal education would be able to understand. As I assembled the material, though, I came to realize that such an explanation would not be useful. Even worse, it could be misleading. Democracy is a difficult subject. There are many ways in which the system can go wrong, as the wide-ranging problems experienced by the different national democracies around the world illustrate. We can either accept this, and then try to understand democracy, in all of its complexity, or we can deceive ourselves that it is a simple system and then watch it fail.

The converse of this is that democracy has prerequisites for its participants. The system is government by the people, but for it to function properly the people must be well educated.

This work is what might more accurately be called a basic guide. It covers all the elements and issues of the democratic system. And, it provides a thorough grounding in the fundamental ideas and principles on which democracy is based, and over which, at present, there is widespread confusion.

Principles of Democracy

1. WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is well recognized to mean “government by and for the people.” The real question, then, is what does this mean? How do the people govern themselves?

There are two basic models of democracy: representative and direct. Under representative democracy, which is the version in use in different countries around the world, the people participate in a series of elections. Through such elections, they select a small group of leaders. It is these leaders that actually have the job of running the government.

Under direct democracy, the people make the choices of government. In other words, they vote directly on all important governmental issues, rather than elect leaders to decide them. Direct democracy has not yet been implemented on a large scale, for many reasons, including the difficulty of administering such a system and also organizing the transition to it from the current representative model.

The preference for representative democracy in turn raises the question, is this all there is to it? Does the role of the people end once they have made their electoral choices?

The answer to this is: No. Democracy is a complicated system of social organization. It has a variety of principles, responsibilities and institutions. The most important principles of democracy are human equality and personal freedom. But, there are many others as well. For the second, both the people and the leaders have their own respective responsibilities, and for the people these extend well beyond the vote. Lastly, democracy also has many different institutions, beginning with what are known as checks and balances, and the rule of law.

An implicit but rarely considered responsibility that the people bear is that they must understand democracy: all of its different aspects. Otherwise it is impossible that it will function and is actually an unachievable goal.

At the moment, though, most of the people of the world have little or no understanding of the democratic system. Even in countries where it is long established, comprehension is limited and in many ways flawed.

This is the starting point for why the democracies that are in place today experience wide-ranging and serious problems.

The reason for the lack of understanding is simple: as just mentioned, democracy is complex. The system has many individual elements, and to achieve a proper understanding of it you must isolate these elements and then

logically link them together.

By completing this series of lessons, you will learn about all of the different elements of democracy, and through doing so reach a level of knowledge such that you are prepared to participate in a democratic society.

One aspect of the prevailing ignorance is that democracy has become the subject of fierce controversy. Within countries and also from nation to nation there is great dispute about what it is supposed to be.

A basic issue in the controversy is whether democracy is an absolute or a relative system, with the latter view implying that it, meaning representative democracy, can have multiple, fundamentally different forms. Proponents of this position distinguish such things as the democracy of one political party versus another, Asian versus Western, Russian democracy under Vladimir Putin, Venezuelan under Hugo Chavez, etc.

In fact, democracy is an absolute, because it is based on a core set of principles. Any system that does not satisfy or embed these principles is necessarily not democratic.

On the other hand, democracy does have legitimate and differing forms: parliamentary, where the head of the government is appointed by popularly elected legislators; and presidential, where he or she is also elected. Furthermore, the democratic system must be adapted to such things as a nation's history, population and ethnic diversity, as well as its geography and prevalence of natural resources.

This is where the controversy develops, in discriminating between democratic principles, which must be fulfilled, and other characteristics that may reasonably vary. For example, politicians such as Putin and Chavez say that national attributes justify the denial of certain principles, including the protection of civil liberties and the freedom of the press, and through this the creation of an authoritarian system, which they then attempt to brand as democracy.

As this suggests, the alternative to democracy is an "authoritarian" society, where a small group of people has authority, or power, and then uses it to tell everyone else what to do. This is government by and for such a small group, rather than on behalf of everyone. Authoritarian rule, which is also known as dictatorship, can take many different forms. There are military dictatorships, or rule by army generals, in such countries as North Korea and Burma. Many Islamic societies are religious dictatorships, or rule by religious leaders, which is known as theocracy. There are also economic dictatorships, including such things as colonialism, where one country controls another, for economic gain; and feudalism, where a small group of individuals in a society controls most of the economy and everyone else is subservient to them in one way or another. Some authoritarian countries, such as China, even incorporate more than one form.

A related source of confusion with democracy is whether it is limited to a political role. Government regulates or at least oversees all of society. From this perspective, then, democracy, as a means to organize government, is

more properly a social system rather than just political.

Societies have many different subsystems. There are political systems, both democratic and authoritarian, to run the government. There are also economic systems, including such things as capitalism and communism, to organize the production of goods and services. Other subsystems include communications, or the Internet, telephones, and the media; educational systems, starting with schools; and also spiritual systems, the most well-recognized of which are the major organized religions. Importantly, if any one of these is able to dominate, it can be termed an overall social system as well.

Currently, there is widespread and aggressive competition between the different subsystems. The most extreme example of this is with democracy and capitalism. Democracy is considered to be a political system and capitalism economic, but both aspire to overall social control. (For democracy, this is more properly social guidance.) The underlying issue here is that the two systems are not compatible. Capitalism also has its own sets of principles, responsibilities and institutions, and in many cases they conflict with democracy. This competition and conflict will also be examined throughout the lessons.

Similarly, and which the lessons too will explore, the principles, responsibilities and institutions of a society that is dominated by a particular religion are also frequently incompatible with democracy.

In conclusion, as human societies around the world are becoming integrated, through the process known as globalization, these types of disputes are becoming more and more pronounced. The world is now seeing a resurgence of authoritarianism and dictatorship, and the associated rejection of democracy. It is hoped that this series of lessons will help clarify things, and also demonstrate that democracy is by far the preferred choice.

2. EQUALITY, AND FREEDOM

Human society has changed dramatically over the millennia, and probably the single most significant event to-date in this process has been the development of written language. This enabled widespread education, which in turn revealed that our social goal should be equality, and also that this can be best achieved through the political system of democracy.

Humans are, in a sense, interchangeable. One aspect of this – at least initially, as infants – is that there are no limits to our prospects and the opportunities that we may pursue. Through education, anyone can fulfill – can learn to fulfill – virtually any social role. Therefore, any system that sets aside privileged roles for a select few is unfair, and unacceptable.

This includes authority. Given equality, there is no basis for anyone automatically being given a position whereby they can exert power and control over others. Because of this, democracy, in which individuals retain their independence and decide the important questions regarding their personal lives, is the only rational political system.

Human equality begins at birth. We all start life the same, with no prejudices or biases, only the desire to live.

This equality then continues throughout our lives. Regarding the most important aspects of life, what one has to deal with day-to-day and, furthermore, how to understand and deal with life's conclusion, with death, there is no difference between us in our ability to observe and understand. Anyone, just through being alive, can grasp the deepest issues surrounding our existence, and take advantage of its greatest opportunities.

What this implies is that equality begins with value. While there may be wide differences between us in the lives that we lead – one person is a farmer and another a Prime Minister – there is no difference in value. No individual has a greater value than any other.

This extends to groups of people as well, in other words, cultures. There is no basis for judging one culture to be superior to another. Two different cultures may be completely dissimilar, but it is impossible to say that one is better than the other.

This is the case even when a particular culture has a characteristic or subgroup that is justly reviled, for example, the actions of the Nazis in Hitler's Germany. Cultures are long-term phenomena, and at some stage many if not most are misled. One can criticize, and seek to change, such a divergent culture, but this does not justify a personal feeling of superiority, particularly since the day may come when your own culture is similarly misled.

Equality is not only a social goal: it is the foundation principle of democracy. It rejects any system that is characterized by the rule of the many by the few. Democracy has other principles as well, although most people

do not have a clear idea of what these are. However, if such principles are not in place, recognized and followed, the democratic system will fail.

The implication that government must be democratic in turn demands universal suffrage: that every person of a specified age is entitled to vote. In early democracies, including the United States after its foundation, only property holders were allowed to vote.

Setting a standard like this is undemocratic. Similar situations include barring women the right to vote, or limiting it to the members of a particular racial or ethnic group or the followers of a specific religion.

Equality further implies that society, not only government, should not engage in discrimination. If we are equal, our personal characteristics are irrelevant, and this includes our behavior, provided that we do not harm others.

Next, we are not only born equal: we are also born free. Moreover, the principle of equality implies that we should have equal freedom, to lives our lives as we choose and to go anywhere and to do anything that we want.

That's the situation in principle but the reality is far different. Our freedom is restricted in many different ways. There are wide variations from society to society in the idea of personal freedom, in what an individual is entitled to do.

A common restriction is on one's ability to believe, to have faith, or not to have faith, in a particular religion. For instance, if you are born to Muslim parents in Saudi Arabia and many other Islamic countries, you too must become a Muslim. You have no say in this whatsoever, and if you refuse you will be imprisoned if not killed. Conversely, in China it is forbidden to be a Christian, unless you practice in a state-approved church.

A further complexity is that there is a tradeoff between freedom and equality: they are regularly in conflict. We therefore need to decide, which is our overall goal?

"*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…"*

This issue is clearly resolved in the United States *Declaration of Independence*, which is probably the most significant historical statement of the democratic ideal. The American declaration of freedom begins with a declaration of equality. Equality comes first.

Pure freedom is otherwise known as natural law, or the domination of the strong over the weak. In such a society might is right, and if you have the might you can do literally anything that you want. With sufficient power, you can be a dictator and turn everyone else into slaves.

Natural law obviously is unacceptable, but there are other situations that are more difficult to evaluate. A basic

freedom is the freedom of merit, the freedom to work hard and to excel. Merit is a principle in its own right, and it is also a key check on nepotism, on parents transferring their status and authority to their children. One's social position should be based on ability and effort, not privilege.

A problem here, though, is that merit is frequently used in the service of inequality. People work hard not only as a means to personal development, but as a tool of competition: to achieve an advantage over others, even – so they believe – to be better and to have more value.

If our goal is equality, it is clear that we have to give up a few freedoms, although fortunately these are very few, and largely unethical, such as the freedom to kill. On the other hand, if we focus on freedom, including the freedom to compete, win and conquer, which traditionally has been the case, we will be unable to achieve equality.

We need to value equality more than freedom, but the latter does, of course, remain a goal. We seek freedom of action, but only when it is not unethical or when it does not conflict with equality.

3. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Democracy is based on more than a set of principles. It also has three fundamental but often overlooked premises.

The first of these is that the basic rule of life is that actions have consequences. Few things in life are certain, but one thing that we can infer is this. Anything you do – everything anyone does – has consequences.

Secondly, we all have free will. We are free to choose among the many choices that are available in life. Indeed, without free will there would be no such thing as personal freedom.

Thirdly, if actions have consequences, and we are free to choose, this implies that we must choose well. We are responsible, personally responsible, for all of our consequences, both as individuals and through the different groups to which we belong.

There are many different types of consequences, including both intended and unintended. In addition, any single action may have innumerable consequences, even categories or levels of consequences, and of both types.

There are also consequences that are not only unintended; they are unseen. We do not even recognize that they have occurred. An increasingly common, and horrifying, example of this type of consequence is extinction: the death of the last individual of a species of life.

Consequences can be limited or they can be severe. They can be felt immediately or take a long time to become manifest. And, they can be positive or negative, or in complex cases both. For instance, consider the wide-ranging consequences of technology. Revolutionary improvements in health care and food production enabled great increases in population, but this also led to massive social pressures, civil conflict, habitat destruction and species extinction.

The fact that consequences are effectively eternal – time never stops – is the basis for the *Precautionary Principle*, which says that we should look before we leap, or think before we act. However, many people often choose purposeful ignorance. Rather than try to understand the complexity of their consequences, and prevent them where they might be bad, they choose to deny that they exist at all. This typically means that the offending behavior continues unabated and that the consequences become even more severe. A current example of this is the denial and inaction, in particular by the United States, regarding global warming.

As this suggests, inaction also has consequences.

For the second premise, free will, there is no use talking about personal freedom if it does not exist. Free will is actually the most important thing in life. Through will we can choose, and through taking care in our choices we can change things for the better. We have this power.

You have the ability to make your own decisions, about what to do and also what not to do, without regard to any influences and concerning every single, non-genetic aspect of your identity. Will can guide all of your decisions, from the smallest, such as what to do right now, to the greatest, such as what course to follow in your life to become the person you want to be.

One problem, though, is that there is also false free will. This occurs when you think you are acting of your own volition but are in fact following the wishes of someone else. An example of this is advertising, where people believe they are shopping independently but are actually fulfilling imprinted behavioral patterns that have been conveyed to them by advertisements.

In addition, there is such a thing as collective will, which is the coming together of individual wills to achieve a common goal. Collective will, though, can also be false, when we follow negative social influences and form mobs rather than ordered and disciplined groups.

Will is further the source of merit. It enables you to apply yourself to difficult and challenging tasks. This in turn requires commitment, and in many cases courage, in other words, to do what you want to do, not what you are told to do, and also more generally to confront the unknown. For example, the courage of free will is the basis for rebellion against a dictatorship. In a dictatorship your free will has been stolen from you; you have to fight to get it back.

We also use our courage to fight addictions, which reveals yet another principle, the principle of "no." When fighting an addition, saying a firm and resounding "*No!, I won't do it ever again, not even one more time*," is actually easier than allowing yourself a few lapses.

Another example of this principle, where it is not applied, is that diplomats and political leaders in general almost never take a strong stand against, and actively seek to end, the atrocities that are committed by the dictatorships of the world.

Lastly, free will is essential for democracy, since democracy assumes the existence of an electorate that is able to make informed choices, and which is also free to do so.

For the third premise, everything you do affects the world, and yourself, and *you are responsible for this*. You are not a victim. You can't say it wasn't your fault. You are self-conscious, you have self-knowledge (admittedly it is imperfect), and because of this you know what you are doing. You are responsible.

It is important to distinguish between true personal responsibility, the responsibility that you bear regarding the choices that you make as an individual, and group responsibilities, where you are told that you must fulfill a certain social role. Such societal demands always harbor the potential for dictatorship, and you should only accept them after careful consideration and only then if you agree with them. Relinquishing personal freedom to a group

demand should always be done with the greatest of care.

Related to this, the existence of personal responsibility also reveals that all of the different types of problems that we experience, and which we blame on social institutions, including governments, religions, schools, corporations and the media, begin with us and our personal failings as humans. Since individual humans are selfish, and compete rather than cooperate, human institutions do so as well. You cannot fix the second without altering the behavior of the first. We get the government, and all the other social institutions as well, that we deserve.

4. UNCERTAINTY, AND VALUE

The challenge of life, of being personally responsible, is that the world is complex and necessarily uncertain. We cannot be sure if our actions will have their intended consequences.

Everything that we do involves chance, and risk. There is no way around this. We have to try different things, and see what works. In the process we will make mistakes, and there will be a cost.

Indeed, the main way we learn is by making mistakes, and suffering the consequences. It is the proverbial story of the child who touches a hot stove. “Hot” lacks meaning, until it is experienced.

What this illustrates is that while life may grant us personal freedom, it is not in fact free. Life demands that we make judgments and decisions, including to resolve conflicting desires and obligations, and in the context of chance and uncertainty.

The issue of uncertainty has profound implications for democracy. Democratic systems require periodic changes in government officials, to preserve flexibility and vitality. These changes, which occur via elections, give new people a chance, and inject new ideas.

The problem in many democracies is that the desire for certainty makes current incumbents almost impossible to unseat. They may be bad, even corrupt, but voters choose them again anyway from the fear that the next could be even worse (which fear is reinforced in the incumbents’ political advertising).

This is one of the reasons why democratic systems have term limits, a set number of years for which any incumbent may hold office. It is arguable that term limits should apply to all elected officials, and even appointed positions as well.

A related issue is that voters demand certainty, and politicians promise it. Politicians say that their approaches to various social problems will work, and that the ideas of their opponents are doomed to fail. But these claims are deceptive and misleading. There are no guarantees that anything will work.

The rate of change today is the greatest in human history, and it is accelerating. Problems are growing in scale, and in some cases have spiraled completely out of control. For instance, there is real uncertainty about global warming (not if it exists, but how bad it is going to get). It is impossible to predict how much the earth is going to heat. All of the glacial ice on the planet may well melt, with unimaginable consequences.

Now more than ever we must embrace change. We require completely new approaches, and leaders willing to take a chance and try them. Instead, we are mired with elected officials who avoid innovation, and an electorate that does not hold them to account.

Uncertainty also has a second major implication for democracy and government, on its relationship with organized religion. Religions actually reject the above contention. They say, at least regarding what they consider to be the most important issues in life (what is its purpose and what happens when we die), that there is no uncertainty. However, these claims are based on faith, in revelations and miracles. There is no proof.

People are entitled to believe what they want. Because of this, there is such a thing as religious freedom, which democracy must protect. But this does not grant a religion the right to impose its beliefs. In government, when this occurs, when a country is controlled by a particular religion, this is known as theocracy.

Theocracy demands that you believe in miracles: in the specific miracles on which the dominant religion is based. For example, Islamic theocracies require that citizens believe in the miracles experienced by the Prophet Mohammed. Moreover, present Islamic leaders believe that they have "divine authority," because they can link their ancestry to the Prophet's family. Mohammed reportedly talked to God (or was exposed to His will through the angel Gabriel), and through this received such authority, which was then, Muslims believe, transferred to his descendents.

Divine authority is illegitimate. Muslims are free to practice their faith, but they do not have a right to force it on anyone else, starting with the people who live in their own societies. In other words, government must be democratic, and it must be "secular." But secular does not imply that a state is godless, only that the members of the society are free to believe what they want about the spiritual questions of life.

In consideration of the principles of democracy, the people under a theocracy are equal, but only in the sense that they all must submit. Personal freedom is severely constrained. For responsibilities also, one must not choose, only follow.

We are faced with a conundrum. Life is uncertain, but we have to make choices. This leads to the question: on what basis should we choose? How should we express our free will?

The answer to this begins with the idea of value. We can survey our world and reach conclusions about what is important, and what we should value.

Over the last 3.5 billion years all manner of life forms and natural habitats have evolved on our planet. Similarly, in the period of time since *Homo sapiens* evolved as a separate species, an extraordinary array of distinct human cultures has been established. This diversity represents what is truly unique and beautiful about the Earth. It constitutes the real value of our world.

Every time a species dies out, every time a natural habitat is cut down, every time a traditional human culture is "assimilated" by the modern world, part of this value is irrevocably lost.

This perception of value can also be used to evaluate any actions that humans consider, as individuals and through groups. If such actions preserve environmental and cultural diversity, and establish the conditions in which they can continue to thrive, then they are acceptable. But, if the actions reduce the diversity and the potential for future development, even if only through indirect consequences, then they are not.

This is not to say that there is nothing of value in the modern world. There has been an explosion of knowledge in recent decades, which is of course valuable, both in and of itself and also through its practical consequences (in particular through saving lives). But this does not mean that all modern developments have similar value. Many such developments have resulted not from an unambiguous quest for new understanding, or to improve the world, but as an outcome of the corporate quest to make money. The last often involves profound negative consequences, including direct assaults on environmental and cultural diversity, and also to our underlying principle of equality.

5. ETHICS

If we are free to choose, and we bear the responsibility to choose well, this implies that we need a basis on which to make decisions, day-to-day as we live our lives, above and beyond the general idea to respect, preserve and cultivate diversity. This basis is known as ethics. Viewed simply, ethics are behavioral screens. They are a set of principles to guide our behavior in all possible situations.

The starting point with ethics is to evaluate your consequences, *before* you act. You should always ask yourself, will your behavior harm other people in some way, or the environment, or even your culture or nation? Your first concern should not always be to satisfy yourself (although there are personal ethics as well, such as to make the most of your life). In this way ethics function as a check on, as a defense against, our innate human selfishness.

What this also illustrates is that a fundamental ethic is to not cause injury.

Political leaders regularly fail to follow this principle, and instead implement policies that lead to the injury and/or the loss of countless lives.

Ethics are grounded in reason, on our ability to survey our world, and to understand it and solve problems. This is distinct from the religious foundation of the traditional rules that we used to govern our behavior, where we were told what to do according to the Ten Commandments, or Islamic Sharia, or some other form of religious truth.

The problem with this, as discussed in the last lesson, is that such truth – the dictates of God – requires faith. In addition, religious truth is the province of religious leaders, who maintain the right to interpret it as they see fit, which is inherently undemocratic.

We are not children. We do not need to be told everything. We can figure things out – what is right and what is wrong – by ourselves.

We also have a need for ethics. There have to be tradeoffs and compromises between people. We cannot get everything that we want. We therefore need guidelines that tell us how to act when we are confronted with such tradeoffs, and more generally in all social situations.

Life without ethics is known as natural law. As mentioned earlier, this is the idea that the strong are free to dominate the weak; that “Might is Right.” Under natural law if you have power you are free to pursue your personal selfishness without restraint.

From this perspective, the basic ethic of life is to reject natural law. This can be restated as the idea that power does not infer or imply right.

In looking around the world it is easy to see that this ethic is not the norm. In country after country, and in many different ways, the powerful are free to do whatever they want. This is the most important underlying obstacle to democracy, that there are accumulations of power and that they are dedicated to maintaining their privilege.

The challenge of ethics is that it is not easy to do the right thing. Indeed, it is not always clear what's right. You have to figure it out. And, even when it is clear, it's often difficult to do.

There are a number of specific behavioral guides, beginning with the idea of respect. If we are equal, we are all deserving of respect, including of our cultures. This in turn is the source of the ethic not to cause injury; in other words, you would not willingly harm that which you respect.

Related to this, we should not tolerate wrongs when we see them. If other people are committing injury, we have an obligation to intervene. (This is the earlier mentioned principle of "No.")

Another basic ethic is to be reliable. You should do what you say, and finish what you start. If you say that you will do something, barring only the most extreme and unexpected circumstances, you should get it done. In a democracy, the many politicians who make but then fail to keep election campaign promises illustrate how frequently this ethic is not followed.

From this we also can see that another core ethic is honesty, to stay true to your word.

Lastly, the ethic of respect leads to such behavior as patience, tolerance, and non-discrimination.

We learn ethics from our parents, both from what they say but more importantly from how they act. We take their behavior as a clue, to what is acceptable, and then copy it.

Throughout our lives, though, we are exposed to ethics from many other sources, including ideas that conflict with this upbringing. The main sources of these alternative ethics are social institutions. A basic problem that we face is that many institutions still follow, and preach, natural law.

This results in ethical confusion. With so many different, and competing, and conflicting values out there, it is difficult to know what, and whom, to believe. Real ethics are not that difficult to grasp, but they are continually undermined by social influences.

This can be seen more clearly using the associated idea of ends and means.

Most people would agree that we want to achieve an ethical society, where everyone is equal. On this basis, then, we can eliminate the Nazi ideal, which was intended to guarantee one group a superior position. Now, given that we are able to agree on the end, we must then decide on the means by which we will try to bring it about. And

these means must also be ethical, in and of themselves.

How you do something is as important as the fact that you got it done: more important, actually. If you set a goal, if it is not possible to achieve it using ethical means, you must change your goal.

Viewed this way we can see that the means are the end. (Using an earlier framework, the means are our actions, and the end their consequences.) It is the process, not the conclusion, that's important. Equality is not a goal, in the sense of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, or something to be achieved in the far distant future. It is a process, a sustained condition, that we must meet every day, and beginning right now.

This axiom, that the end does not justify the means, is another basic ethical rule. However, in modern society it is often not followed. Social institutions regularly pursue ends, which they persuade us are ethical, using unethical means.

For example, institutions in general act as if they have the right to lie to us, and they base this right solely on the justification that to do so is in their best interests. There is no consideration of the means. It is only the end, their end, which counts.

In this case, both the ends and the means are unethical. Institutions exist to serve us. We do not live to serve them.

Institutions also do their best to keep information about themselves secret, information to which we, the general public, should have access. However, at the same time, we are told that we must always be open, and truthful, with them.

There are innumerable examples of institutions promoting fallacious ends and means arguments, more every day. It is up to you to evaluate your own particular society and what the leaders say they must do, because it is supposedly good for you.

6. POWER

Democracy, more than anything, is a system designed to balance power, to ensure that no one accumulates too much.

This in turn is a difficult task, because power is a complex phenomenon. This complexity must be grasped if our efforts to manage it are to succeed.

By way of a definition, power encompasses the various means by which we get other people to do and to think what we want. As such, it is a tool of control, and it is disturbing that this definition is essentially the same as dictatorship. Of course, power can be used for the good, but this application is the exception, not the norm. In the real world, power is generally used to accomplish unethical ends.

The problems with power begin with the fact that to want it is natural. If you can increase your power, it improves your and your family's prospects. However, it has no natural limit. Once people begin to accumulate power, their tendency is to want more and more.

This is seen most readily with government. Government has a clear set of responsibilities, and within reasonable boundaries it should limit its activities to these. But its natural inclination, meaning of our political leaders, is to be involved in – to have power over – everything.

There are different types of power, and it has different sources and uses. There is military power (by force); political (including through force and also other mechanisms, beginning with policy); legal (through the decisions of courts); economic (the buying of power); and also psychological (its acquisition via mental manipulation).

In addition, power varies in scale. Absolute power enables you to kill, and also, via psychological manipulation, to get people to commit suicide. (With the conditioning of Islamic extremism, individuals are persuaded to do both, to become "martyrs" and kill other people in the process of committing suicide.)

This type of manipulation undermines an individual's free will to such an extent that it counters the instinct to survive, and also the ethic not to cause harm.

Another form of absolute power is to turn people into slaves. If we look around the world, we can see that many people, in a wide variety of circumstances, wield this power. There are still many different types of slavery, and also forms of human sacrifice.

Power is addictive. Once you get some, you never want to give it up. The basic reason for this is also psychological. Power changes your self-image. People with power learn to think of themselves as "important," as VIPs. It becomes the central component of their identity. If they lose their power, they have to give this up.

One consequence of this is that such individuals, in their desire not to lose power, often become inflexible and intolerant.

A related reason why people do not relinquish power is that they may lose the proceeds of its associated financial corruption, which over a long period of rule could be quite substantial. More generally, power corrupts because it confuses the issue of purpose. Leaders act not only in the service of the public, but in their own self-interest, and this confusion undermines their decision-making.

A final aspect of power is that it is nothing if not used, or at least that is what most of the holders of power believe. If you have it, you have to let everyone else know that you do, and the best way to do this effectively, or so these people believe, is through the application of force.

There is a balance of power in society, between individuals and social institutions. For the public, since everyone is equal, we have, or we should have, equal power. In a democracy this power is channeled to the institution of government through the vote, but it is also manifested through dissent, and in rare cases, where elected leaders renounce democracy and become dictators, even open revolt.

Other institutions have power as well. Religions, corporations and the media all represent concentrations of power. The problems that they cause reflect different ways in which they abuse their power.

But, we do retain the final say. We can vote in new officials, leave a religion, and refuse to buy corporate and media products.

The balance of power in society also depends on two additional principles. The *inheritance principle for political power* says that political positions should not be passed from father to son. Dynastical monarchies are no longer acceptable, although a few remain from the world of political dictatorship such as the passing of power in North Korea from the “Great Leader” Kim to his son Kim Jong-il.

The second principle, though, the *inheritance principle for economic power*, is not enforced. This principle says that the children of individuals with great wealth should not be able to inherit the bulk of their parents’ estates. Society has not yet demonstrated the will to impose this prohibition, and this effectively nullifies the first principle as well. Economic power can be used to buy political power. It is an inherently corrupting force. And political power in turn is used to obtain economic. For society to function well, both principles must be followed. Both political and economic power must be restricted, and they need to be completely separated as well.

7. RIGHTS

Power does not infer or imply right. Life does. The fact that we are alive grants us certain rights, beginning with the right to life itself.

Also, equality and freedom are not only principles: they are rights as well. We have the right to be equal, and also free, including not to be subjected to discrimination.

We have many other rights as well, and these are expounded in such things as the United States *Bill of Rights*, which is the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, and the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*.

These rights are also known as civil liberties, in other words, personal freedoms, both things that we should be free to do, and other things that we should be free of, which should not be done to us.

The freedoms listed in the Bill of Rights and later constitutional amendments include:

- Freedom of speech, and assembly, and the related freedoms of the press and of dissent.
- Freedom of religion, including to join or leave any religion, or not to have religious belief at all.
- Freedom to bear arms, which implies a more general right to self-defense.
- Freedom against unreasonable search and seizure, which implies a right to privacy.
- Freedom from unfair criminal prosecution, including the right to due process of law, to a speedy and public trial by jury, and to not be subjected to cruel and inhuman punishment.
- The right to vote.
- Freedom from slavery.

Such rights, in the United States and many other countries, are codified into law. Also, they are guaranteed to everyone, through the associated right of equal protection under the law, and the related idea that no one should be above the law. (The latter dates to the Magna Carta, which restricted the rights of the English king.)

These rights are further known as individual rights. They are translated into practical every day freedoms through the legal code – what is against the law and what is not; through contracts that people sign; and even through social norms and conventions.

It is important to note, though, that not only individuals have rights. Institutions do so as well. The Bill of Rights lists freedom of the press, which guarantees the right of freedom from repression for the media. (One can also argue that rights include corresponding obligations, for example, for the media to be truthful.)

The Constitution also describes what the government may do, and not do. The government has many rights, and restrictions. In addition, the U.S., like most countries, has multiple governments, both federal and state, and it

describes their respective rights as well.

Businesses – corporations – also have rights, but not only through being subject to the law and via the contracts that they sign. In the U.S., as a result of a Supreme Court decision, corporations are legal "persons." They are considered the same as people and are guaranteed many of the same individual rights. Such treatment for corporations is now the norm around the world.

The existence of both individual rights and institutional causes great confusion. In areas where there is a conflict, which should prevail? A basic principle of democracy is not only that individual power is supreme, individual rights are as well. But in the modern world institutions have gained so much power that individual rights are often trampled.

In addition to individual rights and institutional, there is the question of the rights of life: of other species and even of nature as a whole. While it may seem incongruous for a species that is a predator to worry about the rights of others, that is what is beginning to occur.

One foundation for this is the realization that we have a flawed perspective of reality. We see ourselves as separate from the natural world when in a very important way we are not. The earth is an ecology. Everything is interconnected and interdependent. What this suggests is that life has rights if only to protect ours. For instance, corporations view nature as a resource, only to be exploited. But if we allow companies this freedom, nature will be destroyed – it is being destroyed – to such an extent that our own lives are threatened.

We must conform to the characteristics of our planetary ecology, including its opportunities and constraints. Individual and social prosperity are inextricably linked to the earth's health.

However, the rights of other forms of life lie deeper than this, than their connection to what we need. If life grants rights, this necessarily applies to everything that is alive. And, if we are all part of the same thing, then everything deserves the same level of respect, and protection.

In addition, there is the philosophical question of purpose. No one knows the purpose of life, or even if it has one. But we certainly live on the basis that it does, and in the broadest sense this means a lot more than our personal goal to stay alive.

Life exists to evolve, to establish a better, more balanced relationship with its environment, and perhaps in pursuit of higher goals as well. This ability, to evolve, is a fundamental right. Therefore, we, as the dominant species on earth, do not have the right to deny it for everything else.

The idea that all life has rights has many ethical consequences. It implies that we should reduce the impact of our species on nature to the greatest extent possible, through controlling our population, consumption and use of

technology. Further, we should work to restore natural habitats, and the populations of other species, so that their own evolution is viable. And, we have no right to tamper with the evolution of other species directly, through manipulating their genetic code.

Democracy is predicated on a basic set of rights. These rights must be extended to everyone: to every living thing.

A concluding remark, though, which will put all of the forgoing in a different light, is that in life, in a very important sense, there is no such thing as a right. Rights exist only insofar as they are earned. A right without this is the same as a consequence without an associated action. Indeed, not having rights, rights that you are supposed to have, makes you in some way a victim.

In concept, the rights to equality, and freedom, to food and water, appear so obvious that they can almost be taken for granted. But in practice, it is a different story. A right that is not won, and defended, is nothing. If it does not exist now, it never will, and if it does exist, it could easily, perhaps inevitably, be taken away.

A more accurate formulation of rights is that they are goals, or needs. To the extent that we can only survive if our needs are met and our goals are fulfilled, so it is with rights. We can only survive if we have them.

Do children have rights? Only if adults fight to win them, and defend them. Does the environment, and do other species, have rights? Again, only if we win and defend them.

Rights are not entitlements. They are goals and needs. Nothing in nature is free. Life entails no such gift, other than its creation.

Roles and Responsibilities

8. THE PEOPLE IN A DEMOCRACY

Why do we have democracy? Said another way, for whom does it exist?

The answer to this is the people, the general public. It is the presence of inalienable human rights, and the fact that power lies with the people, which infers that society must be democratic. However, this is not a one-way street. For democracy to succeed, and serve the people, the people in turn must fulfill a number of obligations.

This distinction, that democracy serves us but we must also serve it, is easier to understand through considering dictatorship. The people in a dictatorship are subjects, not participants. They do not make decisions for themselves; instead, they are told what to do. The misrule and repression of dictatorship generally compels the people to concentrate on survival. Interestingly, it is common to use group or communal survival strategies. While it is in a sense forced, by circumstance, they cooperate together. This is the basic obligation that the people in a democracy bear: they must be willing to cooperate.

In such societies the people establish democratic systems within the overall dictatorship. This further illustrates that democracy is both a natural response to the challenge of life, and also that it works.

The people in turn have a particular nature, what is known as “human nature.” Human society can only be as good as the people from which it derives. Democracy is also a response to human nature. It is not based on a false, an unrealistically positive, appraisal of it. Instead, it is a system that is designed to function with people as we really are.

Humans are regularly unethical. Democracy incorporates many systems, beginning with the legal system, to account for this.

Another aspect of human nature is that we are independent. We do not like to be told what to do. What this implies is that our participation in society must be voluntary. Democracy is based on such voluntary action, and it is also the only social system that enables the popular voice, that lets us decide what we want to do.

A final aspect of our nature is that we have the ability of reason. Democracy is based on reason, not emotion. It assumes that we have the ability to discriminate among the different choices with which we are faced, and also the vigor to do it. Democracy implies that we have the will to want to understand the world, and that we will work at this until we do.

The ability to make informed decisions requires education, to understand what is at stake; and experience, to put

the choices that are available in a larger context. It is extremely significant that for the first time in human history formal education is being extended to all the world's children. Similarly, international travel, which is the means to truly wide experience, is now available to everyone. We finally have the prerequisites in place to enter what might be termed the "Democratic Age."

Democracy further requires self-discipline, in particular that people will not respond with violence if they lose a vote or otherwise do not get their way. It requires that voters who have been defeated on a particular issue or for a specific candidate control their emotions and wait through the intervening years until a new election is held and they get another chance.

An important problem for democracy is that many social influences seek to undermine our reason and self-discipline. For example, institutions commonly treat us as subjects. To religions, we are believers, and to corporations, employees and consumers. Such institutions attempt to control us, including through manipulating us using appeals to our emotions.

The personal decision making process begins when we are children, and as children we generally accept what we are told, by our parents. We therefore do not discriminate, and we also become the recipients of whatever social beliefs our parents have been conditioned to have. It is only later, as we mature and become adults, that we learn to think on our own. Only then do we develop the power to reject social influences, including those that we inherited as children.

This, however, is not an easy task. The influences of our childhood are imprinted in our brains, and certain social influences and beliefs are so strong that they are effectively uncriticizable. For instance, Muslims cannot challenge their faith. To do so makes them *apostates*. Likewise, in the United States, the President, military and police are (or at least were) considered to be above criticism. Anyone who opposes their abuses of power is branded as *unpatriotic*.

These cases illustrate the subtle distinctions that we must grasp. A religion that disseminates an honest approach to spirituality is above reproach, but one that spreads hate must be stopped. Militaries that defend a society, and when called upon fight just and ethical wars, should be applauded, but armies that engage in wars of aggression and barbaric combat practices must be opposed. Similarly, police who fight crime and risk their lives in the process are heroes, but officers who repress social dissidents are criminals themselves.

For democracy to function well, nothing is above criticism. Otherwise, we have lost our right to freedom of expression, and taken the first step towards truly becoming the subjects of dictatorship.

The challenge of confronting social influences is now greater than ever before. The modern media of television and film are so powerful that their effects constitute nothing less than brainwashing.

In the face of social influences, reason can be ephemeral. It does not always prevail. For example, it is disturbing that the people who are best at influencing us, such as to vote for them, are regularly not the most skilled educators: those individuals who can explain the intricacies of complex issues. Rather, they are the people who are most adept at rhetoric and behavioral manipulation. In almost all cases involving large groups, the latter tend to be more persuasive, and attract more followers, than the former.

Democracy imposes an obligation for the people to reject such influences and instead choose the well-reasoned course. At the present time, though, we regularly fail in this requirement.

The people also exhibit other shortcomings, depending on the nature of the democracy to which they belong. For instance, it is common in new democracies for individuals to sell their votes. It goes without saying that the system cannot function properly in these circumstances. Alternatively, in mature democracies the public is often apathetic, and does not even bother to vote. Or, in response to social influences, the people, and their respective political parties, become polarized over specific issues and lose the ability to cooperate.

Democracy sets a high standard for its participants. And, at the present time, and in most societies, significant portions of the population appear unable to meet it. This does not mean that we should abandon the system as a failed experiment and instead revert to other, traditional forms of social organization (based on natural law rather than human rights). Rather, it just means that we still have a lot of work to do.

When democracy fails, the people become disordered mobs, including such things as ultra-nationalists and religious fanatics. This is unacceptable. We must learn to work together, and to leave our differences behind. To do this, everyone must confront, and defeat, the influences that encourage such mobs.

What this also illustrates is that personal responsibility does not end with the vote. The people must continually evaluate elected officials, and express their views on important issues. They must hold the officials accountable, and for individuals who abuse their power, demand relief up to and including dismissal, impeachment, and criminal prosecution.

9. DISSENT AND REBELLION

In a democracy, the power of the people is transferred to the state. But, this power can be withdrawn, if individual rights are not protected.

In addition, in modern society, in one way or another, all social institutions function as government. (They govern the behavior of individuals.) Dissent therefore applies to every such institution.

The need for dissent derives from personal responsibility. If society's leaders fail, we must confront them. We must force them to change, or remove them from power.

More broadly, dissent is linked to the idea that democracy is a forum of competing ideas. But, for this forum to function properly, and enable the selection of the best ideas, the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and association must be protected.

Dissent is essential in democracy. Social leaders must not only accept that it is required, they should actively and publicly encourage it. Leaders who do not do this, who only *tolerate* dissent, who view it as a necessary evil, do not really understand democracy.

Of course, government does have an innate tendency to quell dissent, which is not that difficult to understand. Dissent amounts to criticism, and no one likes to be criticized.

Any time a society has rebels the government should question why this is the case, rather than reflexively seek to eliminate them. It must not become defensive and engage in the repression of dissidents. We do not need to be protected from our social critics; instead, they are the forces that maintain vitality and prevent stagnation.

It is worth recalling that the best response to criticism is to acknowledge the complaint, and then take some time to think about it. Immediate reactions are almost always emotional, and generally do nothing to improve the situation.

Dissent manifests itself in different forms, from protest, to civil disobedience, to open revolution. The level of dissent in turn reflects the underlying motivation: the specific grievance that the people hold. Is it merely disagreement, over government policy, or are groups in the society subject to discrimination and repression?

For example, civil disobedience occurs when people take a stand against an unjust law, or the unjust application of a law. In such cases they feel compelled to challenge the law, and many people often get arrested as a result. Indeed, to accomplish change people *have* to get arrested; the law is too rigid to allow it otherwise. The perfect illustration of this was the civil rights movement in the United States. This clearly demonstrated that in an inflexible and intolerant society, nothing would change if change were not demanded, with this sacrifice.

Dissent in an organized sense is activism. The world has seen a huge increase in the number of activists and their related organizations, and this is an extremely positive development. More and more people are shaking off their complacency and instead working to improve things, including by holding society's leaders to account.

The starting point of activism is ethics, since it is not a positive development if it does not rise above the ethics of those it seeks to change. In other words, the means of activism must be as ethically supportable as its ends.

The prerequisite for activism is that you must know your cause; specifically, what problem is your concern, why it is your concern, and how it needs to be addressed. In addition, your focus should be on costs, on who incurs, and who pays, social and environmental costs. Through such an emphasis, activists prioritize, by confronting those problems that represent the greatest costs, both present and potential (for instance, from global warming).

Dissent, when organized as activism, can create great pressure for change. This in turn commonly leads to a reaction from society, which itself can take many different forms.

Social institutions, particularly governments and corporations, but with the clear allegiance and connivance of the media, do their best to ridicule and demonize activists. For the first, activists are portrayed as the lunatic fringe, as radicals. But in response to this, we should consider how the definition of "radical" has changed. Thirty years ago supporting the earth – defending the environment – was considered radical. Now, it is accepted not only as normal, but necessary. The radicals of thirty years ago were actually visionaries.

In addition, activists are ignored. They are censored out of the public consciousness. But, if they succeed in getting their voices heard, against all institutional attempts to smother them, they are demonized. The public is told that activists are terrorists.

The reason for such extreme profiling is that it is used to justify police repression of dissent. As writer Andrew Rowell has noted, activists can be considered enemies of the state, rather than just protestors. They can be spied on, infiltrated, provoked to commit illegal acts, and suppressed with violence. In the worst cases, activists are arrested, on false charges, and even killed.

The people have a right to protest. It is unacceptable to limit this in any way, other than for truly criminal acts. For example, in some countries officials try to restrict demonstrations to "free speech" zones, as if freedom of expression were not a right but a government-granted privilege.

Dissent and activism incorporate the idea of reform, that social institutions, with proper motivation, can be convinced to change themselves. While this may hold in a democracy, it is insufficient in a dictatorship. To accomplish change in a dictatorship, to democracy, rebellion is required.

In concept, rebellion is simple. It means you will not do what you are told to do. In practice, though, it is *always*

difficult. Rebels in conflict situations risk their lives, and their families, for their beliefs. Real rebellion requires that you take chances, and expose yourself to danger.

An additional factor that complicates things is that rebellion can also be false, or misdirected. In conflict situations false rebellion is rebellion meant only to achieve power, but which is presented as a fight for social justice. With victory, the rebels renounce their stated aims and instead become the next group of dictators. As for misdirected rebellion, this occurs when rebels undermine their ethical foundation by engaging in terrorism or by colluding with criminals. For instance, many of the individuals who fought colonial powers around the world, particularly in the decades following World War II, were false rebels. When their nations achieved independence they consolidated their power, often by using force against their former allies, and then established autocracies.

More than two billion people on the planet are the subjects of political dictatorship, and they are all being controlled with extreme measures up to and including violence. In some of these countries pacifism and non-violence will work, they will be effective against the violence and dictatorship, but in others they will not. In such cases the people must fight force with force, in other words, with armed revolution.

However, it is essential to recognize that violence is only justifiable in self-defense, and against clear and immediate threats. Many rebels do in fact become terrorists, when they ignore this prohibition. In such places as Israel and Palestine, society has degraded to such an extent that everyone on the opposing side, even anyone who just happens to be visiting the opposing side, is considered the enemy and an acceptable target. This extends to the elderly, children, and even tourists. There is no such thing as a non-combatant. In such places people, perhaps without even realizing it, come to accept the idea of collective guilt and collective punishment, which is perhaps as unethical as it is possible for humans to be.

This also illustrates that if you are trapped in a situation where you must rebel, it is essential to keep emotion out of it. Your rebellion may be driven by hate, or rage, over what has happened to you, over what people have done to you, but when you do rebel you should suppress these emotions. Guiding your rebellion with reason will make it much more likely to succeed, and much less likely to be misdirected.

10. LEADERS

Personal responsibility implies that we should not be dependent on leaders. We should be able to lead ourselves: to devise a system of government where all voices are equally weighted and where there is no concentration of power and hence no possibility of abuse.

The practical reality of human society, though, is that for historical and other reasons we do have a leadership-based structure. This structure dates to our earliest forms of social organization, and it inevitably leads to a wide variety of abuse.

The development of social institutions fueled role-specialization and the need for leaders. Initially, those people best equipped to satisfy the demands of the job filled these positions. Military groups were led by the best warriors; governments, economic institutions and religions by those people best suited intellectually – who could design more complex social systems and/or solve the problems they created, who had the inclination to be good at trading, and who were imaginative enough to create good stories about the origins and mysteries of life.

In other words, in our earliest social groupings positions of leadership were allocated on the basis of merit. People chose to follow those individuals who through their skills and knowledge demonstrated that they were the most able.

This type of leadership is a reflection of the social objective to promote excellence. We believe it is appropriate to reward people who excel, with positions of trust and authority.

Unfortunately, the merit-based system didn't last long. Role specialization quickly led to nepotism, and it is still with us today.

The reason for this is that leadership is inherently corrupting. In a dictatorship, leaders obviously govern only for themselves and their cronies, but this happens in democracies as well. In a democracy the leaders are supposed to serve the public, not their personal interests and agendas. Many leaders though find the temptation irresistible to use their power for personal gain, including to help their children.

Leaders also promote the interests of their former business enterprises and occupations. For example, in the United States both George Bush and Dick Cheney were oilmen before obtaining office, and their governance has clearly been preferential to the energy industry. (This helps explain why environmental issues are minimized or ignored; many elected officials come from the extractive industries.) Similarly, officials can be corrupted by promises of lucrative employment following their terms.

Society also has a tendency to rely on leaders because of its structural foundation in competition. Leaders are responsible for social decision-making, and individuals who exhibit great skill at this can help one group prevail

over another. This is clearly apparent in the competition of war, where strong leadership regularly provides an advantage, in some cases even sufficient to overcome inferiority in one's number of troops and weapons. The benefits of leadership are also obvious in economic competition, as companies with strong leaders succeed and those without fail.

What this illustrates is that a social dependence on leaders has many pitfalls, the first of which is simply poor leadership. For instance, many countries regularly repeat the same types of mistakes. The reason this happens is that while the countries may be the same, the officials are different. New officials fall into the same types of traps as their predecessors. This reflects the fact that we only learn from the mistakes that we personally make.

Leaders commonly suffer from egotism. They do tend to be our "best and brightest," but this is no guarantee that they will do a great job. What happens when you have a high level of intelligence is that you realize you can understand things better than other people. Because of this, you tend to want to dominate, to see that things are done the right way – your way. But in this process it is easy to forget your own fallibility: that you can, and do, make mistakes. Eight or nine times out of ten you might be right, but not the others. But you tend to push things through as if you were right, all the time. Also, you forget that other people are not so dumb and uneducated after all, and that they can solve problems, too. And, if it is a situation in which they are personally involved, they have a right to be included in the decision-making process.

Through such arrogance, it is easy for leaders to forget that they are servants to democracy, and also to author horrific social blunders.

A related flaw with leadership occurs when individuals surround themselves with unquestioning and sycophantic staffs. This isolates them from alternative viewpoints and conflicting evidence. But good decision-making – formulating the best policy – requires consideration of all information available.

Leadership is not an academic exercise. Because of its consequences, it inevitably involves great pressure. Leaders have to be able to handle this pressure well. If they don't, they tend to abuse their subordinates. Ironically, though, society accepts such abusive leaders, if they are able to get the job done. (This is another ends and means example.)

The greatest temptation with political leadership is financial corruption. Individuals take advantage of their authority to enrich their families, and this wealth in turn is used by their descendents to perpetuate the family's political power. Similarly, individuals fund their election campaigns with the donations of special interests, and then govern for the benefit of those interests rather than on behalf of the general public.

The scale of financial corruption that now exists around the world is incredible. Ordinary people are arrested for shoplifting, while officials who have stolen millions and even hundreds of millions of dollars walk free. The basic types of corruption include "policy corruption," where officials pass laws that benefit their private interests (such

as by reducing taxes on businesses in which they are investors); and corruption in government contracts, where bids are rigged and bribes paid.

Nepotism and corruption have combined to create a privileged, leadership class. This is a common failing in democracies around the world: only individuals with great wealth, and in many cases whose parents have also been politicians, have a chance to win office.

An even more severe problem with leadership occurs with individuals who work to undermine democracy. Some elected officials attempt to transform themselves into dictators by ignoring the public's wishes, and their own campaign promises, and by working to destroy the society's democratic institutions so that they, or their political parties, cannot be removed from power.

These cases also illustrate a deeper issue with leaders: only individuals who aspire to such absolute power tend to be selected. Some people are born leaders, in the sense that they are the most able. But other individuals strive for the top and will do anything to get there. Leadership in modern society is subject to natural law, and traits such as ruthlessness are at least as important as capability.

The deepest problem of all is that we fail to distinguish between leaders and teachers. Real leaders don't in fact tell people what to do. Instead, they help educate the public, to make better decisions on their own. And through doing this they organize consensus, on what is best for everyone.

This is the only type of leadership that enables the participative decision-making of real democracy, and through which it is possible to escape from competition and natural law.

Institutions of Democracy

11. SOCIAL CHECKS AND BALANCES

The abuse of power in society can be so severe, and detrimental – it leads to such things as slavery and genocide – that it must be effectively counteracted. To accomplish this, we use a system of checks and balances. We have checks, to limit the size of any one source or concentration of power, and balances between all such sources. However, because there are so many possibilities for abuse, the system that has evolved is now quite complicated. But, even given this complexity (or perhaps because of it), it still leaves much to be desired. The problems the world is now experiencing are testament to the fact that our checks and balances on power have in many important ways failed.

There are a number of different ways to look at this. For example, if you think of society as a combination of individuals and institutions, we need checks on both. For ordinary people, this is relatively simple. The legal system, in particular criminal law, functions as a deterrent against and the means of resolution for abuses of personal power. In addition, social norms help balance other types of inappropriate behavior, such as popular disapproval of expressions of bigotry, and of conspicuous consumption.

The situation with institutions is much more challenging. There are different types of institutions, all of which pose unique problems, and also the question of the institutions' leaders. Our overall objective is to ensure that the institutions focus on satisfying our needs, and that they avoid pursuing goals which diverge from this, in particular the desire of their leaders for extreme wealth and power.

Another way to look at checks and balances is to recognize that they begin with ethics. We should avoid injuring others, and accept responsibility when we do. This is our basic protection from natural law. Ethics in turn are disseminated through education, in particular the good manners that we are taught (or that we should be taught) within our families. They are further formally embodied in the legal system.

Our ethics are the basis for the values of our society, including equality and freedom, and also the other ideals that underlie democracy: that we should cooperate together and limit our personal selfishness. From this perspective, then, the objective of checks and balances is to confront all such threats to these values. For instance, for equality, society must have mechanisms to protect the members of its different distinct groups from any and all types of discrimination.

More directly, checks and balances confront the different institutional concentrations of power, including the specific risks of abuse to which they are subject. This in turn leads to prioritization. The greater the power, the more serious the resulting abuse, hence the more important the associated checks.

Of course, in this discussion we are implicitly referring to democratic societies. In non-democratic societies, there are no such checks. In addition, in representative democracies leaders are selected, at least in part, on the basis of merit. It is important to recognize, though, that while we may place our trust in such leaders, because of their prior accomplishments, that trust is not a check.

This also explains why we cannot rely on self-regulation: that the institutions will control themselves. As example after example illustrate, self-regulation regularly fails. The basic reason for this is that the institutions do not perceive their wrongs as clearly as we do, or even as wrongs. Also, their leaders cannot be trusted.

We therefore must have an independent and verifiable system, in addition to the procedures in place within the institutions themselves, through which they attempt to control their own behavior.

As a final introductory comment, our system of checks and balances must be proactive, not only reactive. New threats continually evolve, and we must be prepared for this. New threats require new checks.

When considering institutions, we can begin with their leaders. This actually raises a much deeper issue, which undermines the basic idea that a system of checks and balances is even possible. Social checks begin with values, but they are administered by tangible organizations. And these organizations are institutions themselves, so our system of checks and balances is really a system of institutions controlling other institutions. But all of these institutions rely on leaders, who as a result of their positions enjoy wealth, power and privilege. They therefore have a vested interest that is inherently undemocratic: to protect their privilege.

Said another way, democracy's checks, which are designed to limit privilege and power, are implemented by people who are themselves privileged and powerful. It is therefore questionable how aggressively they will pursue their responsibilities. The checks may be good, but the people who implement them are not. They are corrupt, and as a result the system fails.

Related to this is the fact that it is difficult to hold leaders accountable, even the worst. First, they, with their allies in the media, do everything possible to argue that they are not in fact that bad. And secondly, if failure is undeniable, they find a subordinate on whom to pin the blame. It is a rare individual who accepts full responsibility for the consequences of his or her leadership.

There are means, additional checks on leaders, to prevent these problems, but it is debatable if there is a single nation on earth where they actually work. For example, one such check is the combination of term lengths and limits. Elected officials serve terms of a justifiable length, relative to the responsibilities of their positions, and they are allowed only a limited number of terms, normally two. Further, they are only awarded a second term if the voters judge them successful at the first.

Following this, there are the threats of dismissal and impeachment, and also legal checks against attempts to

subvert democracy, as well as corruption, nepotism and perjury. All of these are quite intimidating, and one might expect that they would work. But the fact that leaders regularly get away with murder, and that corruption in government now occurs on an unimaginable scale, is proof that they don't.

The reason for this is that the leaders' underlying privilege, afforded by their wealth, is still protected. Until this is attacked, by implementing a system of wealth restrictions (including the inheritance principle for economic power), these other checks will be unable to function well.

This is the only way to address what is really the fundamental problem: leader psychology. Almost all leaders, no matter what they say publicly, in private reject equality. They think they are better than other people. They base this on the fact that they have more power. Of course, because of term limits this condition is only temporary (for political leaders). More deeply they believe they are better because they have greater wealth, and, at least in the present day, this wealth endures.

The final category of checks concerns the relationships between society's different types of institutions, and also their internal structures. For the latter, the separation of power inherent in the three-branch structure of a democratic government is reviewed in the next lesson, on the Rule of Law. Between institutions, we have already considered the separation of church and state, in the discussion of theocracy. All such institutional sets require tangible separation, including between: commerce (or corporations) and state; commerce and church; and the media and both commerce and state. Additional checks are required for educational institutions, to prevent improper influence by the government, religions and corporations. Lastly, there are other checks within the government on its institutions of force: the military and the police.

A final point regarding institutions is that they are now in the process of adapting to globalization, including through developing new patterns of international collusion. International threats require international checks. But, the systems that are now in place are not up to the task.

The ultimate check in society is the people. The general public acts as a check in many different ways, through the vote; by expressing displeasure through established communication channels (including the Internet); by being whistleblowers; by engaging in activism including through participating in protests and boycotts; and lastly, when all else fails, through rebellion.

12. THE RULE OF LAW

The objective of the rule of law is to establish a formal judicial framework to replace natural law. Natural law is based on the right of might: on power. The rule of law is based on human rights: on reason and ethics. Natural law is arbitrary and capricious: it reflects the fleeting whims of the mighty. The rule of law is clear, and predictable. Natural law benefits the privileged few. The rule of law is fair and impartial: it applies equally to everyone. In summary, natural law is unjust. The rule of law enables a well-functioning system of justice.

The creation of the rule of law is perhaps our supreme achievement as humans. It is an evolutionary event. It redefines us as a species that will not stand by and ignore the suffering of others, both of other people and also of other species.

The rule of law is also essential to preserve freedom. The basic limit on personal freedom in a society is what the law forbids. In the worst societies, in dictatorships, the law forbids all independent action. But even in less repressive societies, what is against the law, and how this is enforced, is often unclear. This creates an uncertainty about what we can and cannot do, which in and of itself limits our freedom.

The rule of law is the direct responsibility of government. Further, it is a pillar of democracy. If the legal system, including regulation of other social institutions, does not function properly, the society will fail. To accomplish this, the government must be free of corruption, and also flexible and adaptable, to confront new threats as they arise.

Democratic governments generally have a two or three-branch structure, to create; apply; and interpret and enforce the legal system. For the first, in parliamentary democracies, this includes a popularly elected legislature (Parliament), from which the Cabinet and a Prime Minister are drawn, and the courts. While the executive, the PM and Cabinet, are in a sense separate from Parliament, they are also dependent on it as they may be removed from office, through a vote of no confidence.

For the second, presidential democracy, this includes a popularly elected legislature; a popularly elected executive (the President), who appoints a cabinet and who can only be removed from office, during his or her term, by impeachment; and the courts.

The United States is an example of the three-branch structure. The Congress drafts new laws (legislation). These are then subject to approval by the President. In addition, as the Executive, the President directs the government's various departments and agencies to implement the new laws. If there are subsequently disputes about the precise meanings of the laws, or how they are being implemented, this is resolved by the courts, through judicial interpretation.

There are different types of laws. Many countries have a basic document, on which the entire legal system is

founded, called the constitution or charter. This constitution generally includes enabling law, which establishes the institutions of government (the different branches) and also governs their interrelationships, as well as provisions to protect human rights. As such, it both defines, and limits, government power.

The constitution and other legislation also establish other forms of law. While there are wide variations from country-to-country, a basic distinction is between public and private. Public law governs the relationships between individuals, both real people and institutional entities such as corporations, and the state. It includes constitutional law, as well as administrative law and criminal law. Administrative law covers the behavior of government agencies, and also civil procedure, which allows parties, both individuals and institutions, to seek legal remedies over different types of disputes (in other words, through "civil actions": lawsuits). Criminal law in turn expressly forbids certain types of behavior, using the threat of severe punishment. It also covers the rights of individuals who are so accused.

Private law defines the relationships between individuals (again extending to institutional entities), including such things as contracts, property law, corporate and commercial law, and other types of disputes (which are known as torts). In addition, all of the above constitute domestic law, and there is international law as well, to govern the international relations between nations and also other types of parties.

As suggested, for criminal law and also certain types of civil actions the legal system has a variety of enforcement and punishment mechanisms. These include the police and government regulators, to apprehend parties who break the law; courts, to confirm and sentence their guilt; and both fines and prisons, as the means of punishment.

As writer Robert Hinkley has observed, one assumption of the legal system is that laws can be passed to restrict unethical behavior before the damage from the behavior becomes too great. While historically this might have been true, it no longer holds. The behavior of corporations, coupled with government's general unwillingness to regulate them, has created challenges that the legal system at present appears unable to meet.

Conversely, a basic principle is to have as few laws as possible. The reason for this is that a surfeit of laws enables abuse. For example, the legal systems of many countries are so complicated that they have laws that both overlap and conflict. This gives the police and the courts discretion over which laws to enforce and on whom. The wealthy are able to use bribes to receive favorable interpretations, while the poor are subjected to harsh, uncompromising treatment.

Such abuse occurs both in developing countries, where a common joke is that the jails have back doors, for people who are able to pay to be released, and developed. For the latter, one example of abuse is the explosion of suburban sprawl. Property developers in effect bribe local township officials to grant them zoning variances to permit large construction projects, even though a majority of the current residents oppose the projects. The developers promise new tax revenues, a portion of which then flows to the officials in the form of higher compensation.

In modern society, corruption is the greatest threat. This is because when government is corrupted, there is no rule of law. Equal protection is denied, and the wishes of the majority are ignored.

Another core element of the rule of law is the protection of individual rights, including the rights of criminal defendants.

The basic right of a defendant is to be presumed innocent. The government must prove that you are guilty. Without such a burden of proof, law again becomes arbitrary and capricious. Following this, defendants have *habeas corpus* rights. These include the right to challenge the legality of one's detention, to examine all government evidence, and to bar coerced evidence (testimony that the government obtained using police abuse and torture). Other defendant rights include:

- Not to be subject to unreasonable searches and seizures
- Warrants for arrest can only be issued on demonstration of probable cause
- You cannot be compelled to incriminate yourself
- The right to legal counsel
- The right to confront witnesses against you
- The right to a speedy and public trial, and in the district where the crime is presumed to have been committed
- And, that excessive bail shall not be charged

(When grouped together, these rights are known as "due process.")

In addition, individuals have the right of appeal if found guilty, and shall not be subjected to excessive fines or cruel and unusual punishment. In cases where property is confiscated, reasonable compensation shall be given. And, individuals cannot be charged with "potential" crimes, not yet committed, nor charged under new laws for prior behavior. (The latter are known as *ex post facto* laws, although they do have a specific form in which they are considered acceptable: provisions granting amnesty.) Related to this, individuals cannot be charged for the same crime after previously having been judged innocent. (This is called double jeopardy.)

Another challenge to the rule of law occurs when governments seek exceptions to these conditions. For instance, in the United States, habeas corpus rights can be suspended if the country is invaded or experiencing rebellion. Any such exceptions are extremely debatable, and they underscore the difficulty of creating a rule of law that is fair and just.

A final issue here concerns the question: law for whom? The legal system pertains to entities that have "legal rights," or "standing" (the right to initiate a lawsuit). At present, this only covers people, and institutions. But another development with the law is that the rights of other forms of life, and environmental standing, are now being considered.

13. THE CONSTITUTION

There are important variations in branch structures and legislative and judicial procedures from country to country. One basic distinction is whether or not a nation has a constitution, or governing legal document. Many countries have one, but a few (notably the United Kingdom) do not. Instead, they have a body of law – common law – that has been built up over decades if not centuries, and which covers both the structure of the government and all possible legal issues.

This lesson will focus on the use of a constitution. It further describes the United States system, which, for its recognized shortcomings, is still considered one of the strongest examples of checks and balances in existence today.

The constitution is "*the supreme law of the land*." It asserts national sovereignty, and establishes the government.

This is a grave responsibility, and to fulfill it the document must be well designed. Otherwise, it will not serve as an effective defense against attempts to undermine democracy.

It is difficult to get this right, which is illustrated by the fact that many countries have redrafted their constitutions again and again. This reflects the interrelationship that exists between the constitution and a nation's state of political development. If a nation is democratically primitive, through having long-standing and still accepted traditions of authoritarian rule, even a strong constitution will fail, for example, if the government is overthrown in a military coup. Or, if the constitution is weak, the government in power may be able to interpret it in a way that perpetuates its rule.

The constitution defines the branch structure of the government, and this structure embodies an additional set of checks and balances. The United States Constitution, in its first three articles, establishes the three branches of American government. It is notable that the first article covers Congress, the second the President, and the third the Supreme Court. Among other reasons, this reflects the framer's belief that as the branch most representative of the people, Congress should take precedence.

The Constitution separates government power, to limit the power of any one branch and, counter-intuitively, to provide each branch with sufficient power to offset the other two should they attempt to collude. (It is a very fine balance.) Moreover, the branches have overlapping or in some cases shared responsibility.

In the United States, Congress drafts the laws, but the President has the power to veto them. Congress in turn can override such a veto. Congress also has the power to declare war, but the President, as Commander in Chief of the armed forces, has the responsibility for its conduct. (This reflects another check common in democracy, having the military command under the direct authority of a political and popularly elected official, rather than the most senior generals.)

Congress also has the ability to impeach the President, with the House of Representatives bringing the charge and the Senate trying the case.

Congress further has the power to establish tribunals below the level of Supreme Court, but the President appoints the most senior justices, including for the Court. Congress, specifically, the Senate, can in turn reject the President's judicial nominees.

The Supreme Court, through the power of "judicial review," can reject new laws, and government actions, if it judges them to contravene the basic legal framework set by the Constitution. However, while Supreme Court justices are almost impossible to remove (their appointments are contingent only on "good behavior"), Congress does have an additional check here, since it can amend the Constitution.

A further check in the United States is that the executive and legislative branches may not share personnel (for instance, a congressperson serving as a presidential advisor). This is an additional guarantee that branch power remains separate.

This distinguishes the U.S. system from parliamentary democracy, where the legislators are involved in day-to-day government. In this type of democracy, the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers are also MPs.

The United States Congress is composed of two "houses": the Senate, with two senators per state, or a total of one hundred; and the House of Representatives, with four hundred and thirty five representatives. It is a "bicameral" legislature, as opposed to unicameral, which has only one house.

For the House of Representatives, states are divided into districts, of approximately equal population, each one of which elects a representative. Such districts are periodically revised, based on new census, and an important issue is the need to deny political efforts to redraw the district boundaries, to favor specific candidates.

The bicameral structure for Congress enables equality between the states, through the Senate, and overall equal representation for the general public, through the House.

The Constitution also delineates the day-to-day powers of the three branches. Congress, among other things, authorizes the issuance of currency; levies taxes, although it must also budget and account for their expenditure; regulates commerce; establishes the mail system; and raises the nation's army, including drafting all laws necessary to carry out these powers.

In addition to being Commander in Chief, the President is head of the different Cabinet departments. He or she is further responsible for foreign policy, including through appointing ambassadors to other nations (who must also be approved by the Senate). The President, as the recognized leader of the nation, also has a significant impact on the legislative agenda, indirectly through making public statements and directly through the efforts of

Congressional allies.

One problem in a presidential democracy is that even though Congress writes the laws, this does not guarantee that the President will implement them. For example, many presidents, having been elected with campaign funding provided by corporate interests, refuse to aggressively enforce business regulations.

This problem is compounded by the fact that it is difficult to draft laws that are not open to interpretation, or which do not have loopholes.

Congress has an additional responsibility, known as oversight. It not only drafts laws, it oversees the government's operation. Congress has the power to force executive branch personnel to testify, if it believes legislative intent is not being followed or if the country is in some way being misled. It also has a related investigative department, known as the Government Accountability Office.

The third branch, the Supreme Court, is subordinate to the other two. The Constitution defines Court jurisdiction, but other than this its powers are not explicit. Indeed, it was an initial ruling by the Court itself that gave it the power of judicial review: final say over constitutional interpretation. (Those countries without a charter do not have judicial review.)

The Court is also subordinate because the justices are not elected, and hence they have no accountability to the public. They also have no tangible power. The court is considered to have the "power to persuade," versus the government's "power to act."

An implied restriction is that the Court has only a limited role in the nation's foreign affairs, since its jurisdiction is largely domestic.

Court judgments, though, where it has jurisdiction, are definitive. There is no right of appeal. Supreme Court precedent can only be overturned by a later decision from the Court itself (this is a form of self-regulation), or via amendment to the Constitution by Congress.

The Court is intended to be independent and legal, not beholden and political. (Justice is supposed to be "blind.") It is meant to provide unbiased analyses of legislation and legal disputes, not interpret them such that government policy is established. The justices therefore should not act to further a political or partisan agenda.

A basic principle for the Court is "judicial restraint." This is the idea that the justices should strictly follow the actual text of the Constitution, to ensure that they do not undermine the legislative authority of Congress.

The opposite of judicial restraint is "judicial activism." This occurs when justices read new interpretations into constitutional clauses.

The competition between judicial restraint and judicial activism illustrates a crucial point. The Constitution is a living document. It is not written in stone. People who argue that it must be interpreted exactly as it is written, in an 18th century context, are akin to the people who demand literal interpretations of the Bible and the Koran. They are constitutional fundamentalists.

The drafters of the U. S. Constitution understood that they could not prepare a document that explicitly encompassed everything the future was to bring. Their intention was to create a charter that could successfully adapt to and address such changing conditions. Their hope was that subsequent generations of jurists would embrace this spirit.

In summary, the peoples of the different countries of the world must decide carefully which structure, checks, and procedures for electing and appointing officials will serve them best. Their goal is a well functioning government, which respects and preserves individual rights.

14. FEDERALISM

The simplest democratic structure is a unitary state with a unicameral legislature. This means the country has only a central government. There is no underlying system of states or provinces, and there is only one legislative house. The nation is divided into districts of approximately equal population, the residents of which elect representatives to this single popular assembly.

This type of structure is perfectly suited to govern any society. However, most nations, for a variety of reasons, have states or provinces in addition to the central government. A two-house legislature is also the norm. They further generally have local government as well, for such things as counties, townships and cities.

The reasons behind these complex systems include history, such as the expansion of the United States first colony by colony and then state by state, and also overall size and if there are distinct population subgroups or geographic regions.

A nation is said to have a federal system if it has a central government that unifies its disparate states. The key question for this system is the respective rights and obligations of the central (or federal) government versus the states.

This is also a very fine balance. Too much centralization of power, and there is a risk of dictatorship. Too little, and the nation may split and fail: it could be torn apart by dissenting states. (The center also needs strength to adequately represent the country in international affairs.)

There are wide variations around the world in federal structures, based on differences in this balance of power. The U.S. has a strong center. Other nations, though, are more loosely organized confederations of strong or even autonomous states.

The structure of the society also reflects the degree to which the people identify with the nation versus their state. If there is strong state identity, the federal union tends to be correspondingly weak. But, for any federal structure to function properly, the center must have enough power to counter patterns of discrimination or domination between the different states.

The benefits of a federal structure include that there is strength in such unity, and also that the expenses for certain services, such as a military for defense, can be shared. Weak federations may gain from accepting reduced state power, and a diminution of state identity, to create a strong center and national identity.

There are costs as well, though. The more distinct groups a federal society formally empowers, the more possibilities for conflict there are between such groups. Further, while multiple levels of government provide additional checks and balances, they also enable multiple levels of control, and possibilities for abuse, and lead to

greatly increased overall expenses.

Other characteristics of a federal structure include that different states can experiment with alternative approaches to government. They are a means to innovation. However, if there are too many states, the system can become cumbersome.

A related issue in a society that has many states is the development of inconsistencies between them, particularly over the question of individual rights, with some states doing a good job protecting such rights and others being abusive. A primary responsibility of the central government is to ensure that individual rights are consistently protected, nation-wide.

Federal governments usually have exclusive responsibility for the military; foreign affairs; and to issue a currency, including regulating its most important economic consequences. The federal government and the state governments typically share responsibility for, or have the shared right to participate in, other basic services and aspects of government, including drafting legislation; holding elections; raising taxes; forming police forces; regulating commerce; and developing natural resources, including limiting the negative environmental consequences thereof.

A general principle in democracy is that the people most affected by a particular government decision should have the final say over it. This tends to decentralize decision-making, and thus is a natural check on the power of the central government. It also reflects the fact that local officials will be better placed to evaluate local projects. The center only becomes involved to regularize the conditions in the different states, including by ensuring that the nation's resource wealth is shared, and environmental protections observed.

A common problem is that resource wealth is not shared equitably. Natural resources are extracted from distinct regions, but the people of the regions, due to corruption in the federal government, receive less than their fair share. Such treatment in a number of cases has been a contributing factor in local rebellions, for example, in northeast India and the delta region of Nigeria.

Some nations present severe challenges to the federal structure. If there are deep divisions, between different ethnic, religious or regional groups, no matter the benefits, they may not be suitable for federal government. The structure can be adapted, but in general this demands great compromise. The objective is to provide the states autonomy on local issues, but to have shared responsibility on common concerns. For the latter to be achieved, though, special provisions may be required. If one group constitutes a dominant majority, such that it is able to abuse the rights of others, the society may need disproportionate minority representation (beyond one person one vote), and/or a minority veto.

As political scientist Arend Lijphart has noted, achieving a working federation in sharply divided societies is also easier if there is underlying loyalty to the nation, and if the distinct groups are relatively equal in population and

territory.

Ultimately, federal structures are not justifiable for some societies. Separatist desires in response to corruption and discrimination are legitimate. As both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union illustrated, it may be better to end federations that consistently experience difficulties, and instead allow the different states to form independent nations.

The constitution of a nation defines the respective rights of the central government and the states. And just as it describes the procedures by which government officials may be removed, so too should it consider the possibility both of the addition of new states and also the dissolution of the union.

The constitution further defines the relationship between government rights, both federal and state, and individual. In the U.S., the Fourteenth Amendment requires conformity among state law regarding individual rights. (This is an element of the aforementioned equal protection.)

15. ELECTIONS

Representative democracy is based on elections; therefore, they must be free and fair. Further, while there are many elements involved in administering such elections, there is also one overriding concern. The government itself conducts elections for government officials. This means current officials may try to manipulate them to ensure that they (or their political parties) remain in power. All possibilities for such manipulation need to be blocked, through additional checks and balances.

For example, in the United States, federal employees are prohibited from participating in election campaigns.

Elections manifest the will of the citizenry, and citizens in turn are individuals who have political rights. They can vote, run for office, hold non-elected positions, and also receive protection and other services from the state, and lodge grievances against it.

Citizenship represents a form of equality: the right of equal participation in the society's political system. Elections provide a formal means of political participation, in contrast to more unstructured conduits such as dissent and rebellion.

Many governments have traditionally placed restrictions on citizenship as a means to deny the vote and the ability to hold office to certain groups, and thereby forestall challenges from such groups to their power. Restrictions based on religion and ethnicity are still commonplace around the world. Also, under the principle of ostracism, people who have been convicted of a serious crime are typically denied voting rights. In addition, there is usually a minimum voting age.

Of course, just having the right to vote does not guarantee that one will vote well. Democracy makes great demands on its participants, on its voters. For a democracy to be effective, to function at its optimal level, it requires that voters have the following characteristics:

- A well developed general education, to be able to grasp the basic complexities of life, and the need in social organizations for fairness, justice and ethics.
- Effective defenses against social influences.
- Education about the purposes, organization and functioning of government.
- Education about currently important governmental issues.
- And a well-developed sense of personal identity and responsibility, and the exercise of discipline and free will through participating in the vote.

It is obvious that in any given society a significant portion of the population will not be able to meet this standard. This raises the question, what should we do about them? We cannot take away their right to vote, and in any case a rational and fair means of measuring whether or not one meets the standard could never be devised. The only

solution is to work to educate the electorate, with the goal of improving both their interest and performance with time.

Elections are held for political office. On specific issues of pressing concern, the citizenry may also participate in votes called referendums. These take place together with or separate from the normal elections.

Associated with the actual office is its term. Normal terms are four or five years. Shorter lengths in general are best, since it is quite difficult to remove office holders during their terms. If an official exhibits poor leadership, which is so common now, there needs to be a check against being stuck with him or her for an extended period.

In a presidential democracy, the election for the executive and other officials is held at the conclusion of their terms. In many parliamentary democracies, though, the Prime Minister has the power to set an earlier election date. This has the potential to be undemocratic, as it can confer an advantage to the PM or his or her party. (Parliamentary democracies also allow for votes of confidence, which provide a mechanism to remove officials during their terms. Early elections are called following government defeats on confidence votes.)

Candidates for office generally must have a number of required characteristics, related to age, residency, and years as a citizen. Other than this, there are no set qualifications. Some countries, though, do impose additional requirements, for instance, for a university education. This serves to limit candidacy in these countries only to members of the upper class, which is also inherently undemocratic. Candidacy in a democracy should be based on merit; therefore, anyone should be able to run for office.

In a democracy, one's choice for office holder is private, and this must be protected at the polls, including through voting booth design and placement. In addition, the electorate must be free of intimidation: if necessary polling places must have armed guards and international monitors.

For the vote itself, it is essential to obtain an accurate result. This requires procedures to guard against voter fraud, including both improper registration and fraudulent representation at the polls. Voter rolls must be confirmed, and standards adopted for voter identification. Also, since intimidation can be achieved using complex systems which certain people, such as the elderly and less educated, may find difficult to understand, voting procedures should be as simple and as clear as possible.

The basic assumptions in a representative democracy are not only that the electorate can and will make informed choices, and that everyone entitled to vote is given the opportunity, but also that their choices will be properly registered and counted. You must be able to count the vote. Elections, including those using new electronic voting machines, require auditing and paper documentation, to guard against both tampering and machine and human error. In addition, there must be provisions for both recounting and re-voting in situations where an election is subject to serious dispute.

Re-votes are a variation of what are known as by-elections, or elections held outside of or in addition to the normal timetable. These may occur in an unplanned fashion and sporadically, when incumbents die or otherwise leave office, or more formally following normal elections to replace winners who have been disqualified due to electoral malfeasance.

A final question with elections – other issues that relate to political parties will be considered in the next lesson – is if voting should be obligatory? In some countries the citizens must vote, and if they fail to do so they lose this right for subsequent elections.

This is also an example of an ends and means argument. Nations do want as high a turnout as possible, since it enables a better record of the public's desires, which in turn increases the legitimacy of the elected officials. But obligatory voting is a form of dictatorship, of telling the people what they must do. Voting is a privilege, but even a privilege should be voluntary.

16. POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are a means for people who share similar concerns to organize together and ensure that the concerns are addressed. They play important roles both in elections and in the process of government itself.

Also, they may be narrowly defined, covering one specific issue, or have a broad platform. Interestingly, political parties regularly change their positions, to refine their appeal to the people, and also to track, or instigate, developments in popular perspectives on which issues are most important. But, even given these vacillations, the parties generally are stable. They are substantial organizations that take a lot of resources to establish. Great effort is directed at their perpetuation.

In elections, parties nominate individuals for office, as through national conventions, and support their campaigns. Their goal is to organize large-scale backing for the candidates. One implication of this, though, is that someone who wants to run for office must join an established party, since in few countries is the option of starting a new party viable.

All democratic nations have political parties, but with one basic distinction. There are systems with two or three parties (for instance, the U.S. and U.K.), and others with more, sometimes much more. Which structure is used depends on the nature of the election districts. Small districts, from which one person is elected (in the U.S. – representatives, in the U.K. – MPs), have been shown to inevitably evolve into a two or three party system. This is because having broader parties enables wider support, more votes, and hence a higher probability of victory. Once such a system is established, it also becomes very difficult to begin a new party.

Countries where districts are larger and which have a number of representatives have multiple party systems, and also what is known as proportional voting. All such countries, and also the U.K., are parliamentary democracies with Prime Ministers. Under proportional voting the parties are allocated seats in the legislature, and also ministerial positions in the cabinet, based on the percentage of votes that they receive. For example, if a party gains thirty percent of the votes for a district it receives thirty percent of its seats.

This system prevents a single party from winning all the seats in a district, if it receives a relatively small percentage of the vote, yet which is the still the highest among the many parties competing.

The reason countries with proportional voting end up with many parties is that even a small party may receive enough votes to win a single seat. Some countries set minimum vote thresholds that the parties must meet, to ensure that they do not end up with dozens of parties and through this a fractured government.

Parties then fill the seats they have won from Party Lists of candidates, of which there are many variations in use around the world. In “closed list” systems people effectively vote for the parties, since the parties allocate the seats they have won starting with the names at the top of their lists. In “open list” systems, the specific individuals who

receive the most votes win the party's seats. In addition, the party that gains the greatest number of seats can choose the Prime Minister, although if it does not receive a majority it generally has to organize a coalition with other parties.

While the Prime Minister is the head of government, many parliamentary democracies also have a President, or head of state, although this position is frequently ceremonial. Head of State is held by a constitutional monarch, appointed by the government, or subject to a popular election as well. In countries where the position is elected, it generally has substantive responsibilities, and there is a second, runoff election. The top two vote recipients from the first election then compete in the runoff, with the individual receiving the majority winning the office.

In the government itself, according to the Irish philosopher and MP Edmund Burke, the role of the parties is to "*give consistent and strong administration when in power, and provide principled criticism when in opposition.*" What commonly develops in two-party systems, though, is that the opposition rarely exhibits a willingness to work with the party in power, to serve the interests of the nation. Instead, it concentrates its efforts solely on undermining the current government and forcing it from power, at which point the two parties change sides. Similarly, in parliamentary democracies with multiple parties, any one party can rarely garner enough votes to govern on its own. The leading party's efforts to form a coalition can easily fall hostage to small, splinter parties, which have only a few seats in the government but which nonetheless are able to affect the balance of power.

Political parties manage the legislative process and set the government's agenda. This may also include to block, for political reasons, consideration of important issues. In such cases, the parties focus on positioning and jockeying for power, rather than governing the nation.

As this discussion illustrates, political parties fulfill a number of essential functions, but they also incur many negative consequences. The most important of these is that they split the society into different factions. Many parties are designed to appeal to distinct social groups, and through doing this they reinforce the differences that exist between people, not our similarities. As a result, they have come to constitute the principal political barrier in a democracy to the desire of the people to unify and cooperate together.

Moreover, parties have the consequence that they tend to standardize the electorate. People are complex, with wide ranging opinions on different social and political issues. In addition, these opinions may range in strength from noncommittal through to being the foundation of our lives, and for which we would willingly die. Party membership though associates us with a platform of specific dogma. We want political parties to represent our concerns, not define us in a way such that we become simplistic caricatures.

A common occurrence is that political parties are more strident and intolerant than the people that they represent.

Political parties are also undemocratic. A few individuals, the party leaders, generally control the organizations. They further have a tendency to develop internal factions themselves, so rather than present a unified front they

become characterized by discord.

This is typically accompanied by a system of patronage. Particularly in countries where elections campaigns are supported by contributions, rather than government funding, parties whose candidates win office then dole out appointed positions to individuals who worked for the party or who made large donations. In jurisdictions where a specific party dominates, this type of system is known as a "political machine."

To perpetuate themselves and their power, political parties require loyalty. From their members, in addition to such gifts of patronage, this is reinforced through formal party registration procedures and the paying of dues. Party loyalty of elected officials is obtained through such things as the control of funding and other resources for election campaigns. This is enforced by a system of party discipline, which is run by the leading elected officials of the party in the government.

The negative outcomes of political parties are profound, particularly when a country is dominated by money politics. However, it is difficult to see how they can be eliminated, given that one of our fundamental rights is freedom of association. An alternative, though, is to impose limits, including on such things as party activities (in Japan, door-to-door canvassing is prohibited) and also campaign costs.

Challenges of Democracy

17. THE DILEMMAS OF DEMOCRACY

As Alexis de Tocqueville first observed, in his seminal work, *Democracy in America*, democracy is subject to a series of risks or challenges. These may also be referred to as dilemmas, or situations where every option for action has potential negative consequences. They include:

- The risk that democracy will become a tyranny of the majority.
- The problems that arise from centralization of power.
- The risks under democracy to personal freedom.
- The role of the military in a democracy.
- The contradictions that exist in a society that has political equality yet economic and social inequality.

Democracy is government by the people. Ideally, this means that everyone in a society works together to achieve its and their goals. In practical terms, though, because humans do not yet evidence such a cooperative spirit, democracy has come to be associated with majority rule. Any group or coalition of groups that can achieve an electoral majority can impose its will on everyone else.

This is the first dilemma. There must be checks on the freedom of action of any such majority. One of the reasons for this is that majority rule is often associated with discrimination. Groups that are in the minority are discriminated against by the majority, and in many different ways. Indeed, the will of the majority, even a majority equal to the entire population less one, becomes a tyranny if it is directed at forcing that one person to act in a way that deprives them of their rights or which causes them injury.

The checks against tyranny of the majority include bans on certain types of behavior, both government and social (for example, discrimination), and also the requirement for higher than majority votes to authorize particular types of actions.

A related issue is the question: which majority? On a subject over which there is a conflict, and that affects numerous levels of society, such as a local community, its region and the entire nation, whose voice should decide? For instance, suppose that the government wants to build a dam. The local community that would be affected by it (and also environmentalists) would almost certainly be opposed to it. But the region could desire it for the water it would provide, and the nation for the electricity that would be produced.

So, what course should be taken? We saw earlier that a principle of democracy is that those people who are most affected by a decision should have the final say. (In many cases this would be the smallest group.) Otherwise, such democracy is actually a form of dictatorship. In this example, then, unless the local community's interests are fully

satisfied and their concerns fully addressed, they should be able to veto the dam.

Similarly, this argument can be used to justify separatist movements. A region that wants to secede has a valid case if it is the subject of systematic discrimination within the nation.

In addition to tyranny of the majority, there are democratic systems where a minority may have disproportionate influence. Also as mentioned earlier, in parliamentary democracies small, fringe parties may exert great influence when opposing large parties compete to form coalitions. More generally, though, tyranny of the minority is a common condition in all democracies, both formative and mature, through the influence of class and wealth. The upper classes have always had power far beyond their actual numbers.

The second dilemma is the issue of centralization of power. This also relates to privilege – government by and for the wealthy – as well as the problems that have been observed with leaders. It further extends to social institutions. All of the difficulties that different institutions cause fall within this area of concern.

The general check on this dilemma is to keep the institutions as small as possible, and to decentralize power back to local communities. However, decentralization does raise an additional risk. Simply because a national government is democratic does not mean that all of the local levels of government will be so as well. Local governments are actually more subject to dictatorial forces: to the control of "strong men," warlords, and mafias. The question then becomes, how can we safeguard against such localized dictatorship?

The next challenge is preserving personal freedom. In new democracies, the people often are not free. They remain subject to traditional authoritarian systems. Further, they commonly have inadequate education relative to democracy's demands. This makes them particularly prone to manipulation through the use of emotional arguments.

The leaders in turn tend to come from the class, or may even be the descendants, of former rulers. As such, they remain exalted in privilege and think only of themselves. On the other hand, a different type of problem occurs if an established dictatorship has just been defeated militarily. In this case the individuals who are elected are often the revolutionary generals. But, the characteristics that enabled them to succeed in times of war are unsuited to democracy and times of peace.

In mature democracies, the people are generally not subject to institutionalized repression. Ironically, though, this freedom has a cost. They take what they have for granted. The leaders in turn make a big show during the elections of being populist and respecting public concerns, but once elected abuse their power when the opportunity presents itself.

The fourth problem, the role of the military, is discussed in more detail in the next lesson. A related issue is the support given by democratic countries to those that are still dictatorial, as this is often initiated through

military-to-military agreements including arms transfers.

The last problem is the contradiction, or hypocrisy, of a democratic society where the people have political equality yet there are great social and economic differences. As the arguments throughout this series of lessons demonstrate, under democracy equality is not meant to be a "partial" condition. This recalls the old contention of racists that African-Americans could be separate but equal.

Ending the privilege of wealth is democracy's greatest challenge. With the possible exception of the nations of Scandinavia, no one has effectively confronted privilege. But, if it is unchecked this has incontrovertible consequences. Society becomes depraved, and subsequently breaks down. There is dissent, then unrest, then anarchy and finally revolution.

An additional challenge with democracy, which underlies all of the above dilemmas, is the existence of competing non-democratic values. Human society has a legacy of non-democratic structures, and their associated values. Further, these values permeate society through being disseminated by the educational system and also the popular media.

One such structure is theocracy, or domination by a particular religion. Democracy and theocracy are as water and oil: they cannot coexist together. Secondly, there are the many different forms of institutionalized discrimination, including economic (the existence of rigid classes, castes, feudalistic patron/client systems, and still extant forms of slavery); on the basis of tribe, ethnicity or race; and by sex, including sexual preference. Thirdly, many nations are colonial overlays, and which grouped together antagonistic tribes. While democracy is a system that is designed to supplant tribalism, there are limits to its ability to accomplish this.

If a society is still dominated by such structures, it is not ready for democracy. Even if the democratic system is installed, it will not function well. But, in reviewing democracy as it is now practiced around the world, one can conclude that this is the situation that prevails. We have not successfully left our past behind.

Democracy must be tailored to a particular society, including such things as population, cultural mix, prevalence of resources, and state of development. The system is flexible, and it can accommodate wide-ranging differences in these factors. But, it is not omnipotent. For democracy to work well, non-democratic social structures, and also the traditions, values and belief systems on which they are based, must be overcome.

An interesting question is if you can install democracy at the same time that you end such traditions. This is unlikely. The second is the predicate of the first. Only after a society has won its freedom from all authoritarian traditions, is it truly ready to move forward with democracy.

18. THE MILITARY

The military in a democracy has a number of roles, the most important of which is defense against external threats. In addition, although in many countries this responsibility is now largely symbolic, it guarantees the peaceful transfer of power between competing electoral groups. It is only in the more formative democracies that the military must do such things as guard polling places, and assure that election victors can take office.

The military represents the greatest concentration of power in human society. As such, it must be carefully controlled. It is in recognition of the threat that the military poses, such as of a coup, that it is placed under the command of the top elected official. Other than to safeguard the vote, or in very rare cases to combat rebel groups (including rebellious states that are in violation of federal law) or to provide assistance in the event of natural catastrophes, soldiers are never used inside the country.

Ultimately, there is no definitive check on military power. The soldiers have the guns, and they can choose to use them, against the people, at any time. It is to balance this risk that nations limit their military to a central army (rather than multiple independent regional forces), and also, in the U.S., that the Constitution guarantees ordinary citizens the right to bear arms.

The power and responsibilities of the military give rise to a number of problem areas. These must be addressed carefully for it to fill its proper place in society.

When individuals or groups have assigned roles, there is a tendency to want to justify them: to project yourself as being important if not crucial to society's well being. Put bluntly, the military needs wars. Soldiers and weapons are expensive. They are a huge drag on national resources that could be used more productively to satisfy human needs (for instance, for education and health care). Commanders therefore have a vested interest to overstate prospective threats. For this reason, the government must have clear guidelines for when the military will be used: for when wars will be fought.

Traditionally, this has been limited to defense against actual attack, or when there is a clear and present danger that such an attack is imminent. In the United States, President Bush caused great controversy by redefining this doctrine to justify preemptive action against only prospective threats, or where the threat was unconfirmed.

Linked to this is the issue of funding. Historically, at least in aggressor societies, the military was the main source of government revenue, through the spoils of conquest including coerced taxes. In modern democracies, though, this has been replaced by taxes willingly paid. Still, military costs are so great that they must be subject to comprehensive accounting. Again in the U.S., one defense procurement scandal after another testifies to the difficulty of this task.

The problems with funding and accountability are exacerbated by the military's penchant for secrecy. Generals

makes broad use of the argument that since their work is for national defense, it should be *Top Secret*. The pervasive secrecy in the military makes independent appraisal of its threat analysis and strategies for conflict, and funding programs for troops and weapons systems, extremely difficult. However, a democratic society must be open. Secrecy is justifiable only in the most unusual of circumstances, mainly to protect lives that verifiably are at risk (e.g., of intelligence sources).

Strict limits on secrecy also guard against demonstrably unethical military (and government) behavior. For instance, secrecy is used to cover up atrocities, including the killing of non-combatants and the use of torture.

It is common in society to separate soldiers from the general public. The stated reason for this is to facilitate training and preparation for conflict. But, there is another explanation as well. The need for separation is also due to the extensive conditioning that soldiers must undergo. They must be made to lose their individuality, and any normal sense of ethics, to turn them into people willing to kill, and to kill on order, without questioning the order in any way or otherwise considering its consequences. As a member of the military you are taught to accept death, violent death, including causing it, as normal. You even win ribbons and medals for this.

This type of conditioning is acceptable if the soldiers are directed against real external threats. But any group so manipulated can be redirected, including against the people of the nation. This is a precise balance. Soldiers must be trained to kill, but they still must maintain identity and loyalty with the people, so they do not turn their guns on them.

The military has some of the characteristics of a religion, including members who are willing to die for their cause, and who use a disparaging term – civilians – for outsiders. This is the fundamental reason why military leadership of government is unacceptable: it is a variant on theocracy. Patriotism, to support one's nation, is of course valid if not laudatory, but no nation, or its leaders, is above criticism.

The historic function of the military comprised either conquest or self-defense. It needs to conclusively cast off the first and also take a final step, to confront the aggression of others.

The need for this change in role is now well recognized. Through participating in multinational forces such as under the auspices of the United Nations, democratic governments are beginning to demonstrate a willingness to become involved in disputes that do not directly affect their national welfare. This is a monumental change over past practice, and if it continues, and spreads to all regions, it will represent one of the most significant historical precedents ever established. The opportunity for any single nation to engage in the conquest of its weaker neighbors, or in massive repression, even extermination, of all or part of its own population, will vanish.

In conclusion, modern militaries have unprecedented weaponry and power. Their strength is so great that they dominate innumerable societies, the largest of which is China. Our goal is to create a worldwide Zone of Peace, but this will be impossible until all the nations that use force to rule over their people renounce such force and

instead become democratic.

19. THE POLICE

Organized police are only a recent development in human society. In addition, unlike the military, they are an armed force that is authorized to operate within the country.

Before the police were established, if someone committed an offense against you – or your family – you had to seek justice on your own. In other words, natural law prevailed. If your family was strong, you could obtain justice (and also cause injury to others with impunity). If not, it was denied.

Many traditional societies have tried to rectify this problem, without resorting to the use of police. For example, tribal societies have complex rules describing penalties for causing injury, and often councils of elders that serve as arbitrators. Such punishments tend to be harsh, though, following the principle of an eye for an eye. Also, even with a governing council punishment in many cases is not fair, as strong families are able to press for lenient treatment. The result is that tribal justice is at best a flawed system, and at worst it degenerates into a never-ending legacy of blood feuds.

The democratic system was designed to create a new approach to justice. It is based on the development of rational laws, which are then enforced by impartial police and courts.

This is how the system is meant to work, but as with tribal justice its application is often problematic. For instance, in many newly established democracies if a crime is perpetrated against you (or even if you just become aware of a crime), you cannot go to the police. The police will not arrest and imprison the criminal. Instead, they will find the perpetrator, and then extract a bribe and also quite possibly inform on you. This means there is a high probability that the criminal will come after you, and try to kill you. In this system you have no legal recourse, and there is no justice.

The basic reason the police fail is linked to the question of whom they serve. We assume that the police serve everyone, but this is regularly not the case.

When democracy was first established (in the modern age), the only people entitled to vote were the owners of property. The consequence of this is that laws were written and enforced primarily for their benefit. The police, in effect, were a security mechanism for this class.

The police in many societies are security guards for the wealthy, and also for the society's institutions. They do not enforce the laws; rather, they enforce the social order. Further, in the most restrictive societies – police states – such institutions are completely above criticism. Anyone who dissents is subject to arrest, imprisonment, and even execution.

Police are granted the greatest power of all: the license to kill members of their own society. This is arguably the

most profound relationship of trust that a society creates, and it exists for good reason. Police officers must enforce the law against the most unethical of people. They test their intelligence and exhibit great courage – to the point of risking their lives – to do so. One of our most fundamental ethics is: if you can do something to help, you should. Good police officers do help, and to the greatest extent possible.

In many societies, though, this granting of trust has been subverted. There is a very thin line between the police in democratic nations and those in such places as China and Burma. Because of this, and as with the military, the police must be carefully controlled. In addition, their common patterns of behavior reflect a number of specific problem areas.

Also as with the military, the police attempt to justify their role. Said another way, they need criminals. If there are not enough around, they have a tendency to create them.

Police regularly treat the public with intimidation. They act as if they are just waiting for an excuse to make an arrest, and that everyone is guilty, not innocent (thereby perverting this basic principle of justice). In addition, the police use intimidation as a means to provoke a response, which they can then label criminal. Furthermore, they are instruments of social discrimination, by focusing their intimidation on minority groups.

Through this behavior, the police are one of the most important cases of the risk of abuse of power. Many officers love their power, and believe the only way to prove that they have it is to use it. They engage in different types of abuse, including intimidation, physical abuse of suspects, selective application of the law, and false arrest.

It is because of these problems that the legal rights of defendants are so clearly defined and vigorously protected.

In addition to minorities, the other main targets of police abuse are nonconformists and dissidents. This reinforces the idea that they view their role as protecting the social order. Anyone who fails to conform, or who speaks out against society, is the enemy.

Police have no right to restrict non-violent dissent, and this includes surveillance of – spying on – political groups and social and environmental activists. When the police repress dissent, they are actually functioning as an anti-check.

Because of their proximity to criminals and the proceeds of criminal enterprises, the police have a strong temptation to corruption. Many individuals do in fact cross the line and become criminals themselves. An additional problem is that in police forces everywhere there is an unspoken rule that you do not inform on bad cops. Many officers become aware of such individuals, but they do not bring them to justice. The code of silence is stronger than their oath to uphold the law.

Another principle of the legal system is that family members cannot be forced to incriminate their close relatives.

A mother, for example, cannot be required to testify against her son. When the police impose a code of silence to shield criminal officers, they are effectively trying to use the "family defense." This is unacceptable. It applies only to natural families. Neither the police, nor the military, have the right to cover up rather than correct criminal activities within their own ranks.

For police abuse, it is essential to grasp that this is completely unacceptable. Such officers are breaking a bond of trust, a public trust that has granted them great power. When power freely granted is abused, when it is directed back at us by the police (or any other institutional officials), this is unequivocally reprehensible.

The first step is to take away the power of the police to intimidate. We must reject their unethical means to a supposedly ethical end.

20. CAPITALISM AND CORPORATIONS

Capitalism, historically, has been viewed as a companion to democracy. The development of free markets, in which anyone could participate, enabled ordinary people to take control of their lives and confront centralized economic power, just as democracy initiated an assault on political power.

Markets, of course, have existed since the dawn of time. People have always strived to satisfy their basic needs, by producing as much as they could and then bartering the rest. A real turning point, though, occurred with the invention of coinage.

Money divorced people from the need to produce their own food, and through this it enabled specialization and the foundation of trades. Further, through the use of savings it enabled the first "investments," in the ingredients needed for greater production capacity, and in the tools associated with new production technologies.

With time, markets increased in size. This in turn led to concentrations of economic power (capitalism in effect helps create the problem it is supposed to solve), and with them the first modern forms of economic competition. Such development also fueled a variety of economic institutions, centered around different production specialties. Similarly, the first financial institutions were created, starting with the proverbial moneychangers at the temple gates.

Capitalism is defined as any system of markets. More deeply, though, it is money: its sheer existence. "Capital" is simply saved money. Any society that uses money necessarily is at least partly capitalistic, and hence exposed to all of the system's risks.

In recent decades the growth in economic activity has been phenomenal. One consequence of this is that the largest corporations now have more economic power than most nations. There is an undeclared war around the world between corporations and governments, and for the most part the companies are winning. Business regulation is failing, and a new form of global aristocracy is being established, within the structure of democratic nations.

This is not an equilibrium position. The tension that has developed between business and government must be resolved. If the companies prevail, we will have democracy in name only. If the governments can revitalize their protective function, and rein in the corporations, we may yet have a well-functioning worldwide democracy.

The corporate system now constitutes an alternative approach to the overall organization of human society. It impacts every aspect of our lives. It also has innumerable deleterious effects, including on government, employees, consumers, communities, and the environment.

In the first lesson in this series, we learned that democracy is based on a core set of principles, and further that it is

in conflict with capitalism. The reason for this is that capitalism has its own distinct foundation.

Democracy is based on cooperation. Capitalism (and the corporations through which it is implemented) celebrates and is inseparable from competition. Democracy stands for human equality, personal freedom, and their associated ethics. Corporations operate on the principle that, "if we don't do it, someone else will," which is identical to the idea that, "we have the power to do it, so we will," i.e., natural law.

For democracy, value lies in diversity. Under capitalism, money is the measure of all value. Moreover, selfish interests are more important than the common good. Inequality is acceptable, and inevitable. And life, everything in life, is a business. Everything, and everyone, is a product for sale.

The benefits of markets are great, but the threats posed by modern corporations are so severe that they must be properly checked. Such checks can be divided between those that apply to the companies, and other checks on their executives.

Executives are of course subject to civil and criminal penalties if it can be shown that they have broken the law. In virtually all democracies, though, the law is selectively applied. "White-collar crime" is neither investigated nor prosecuted.

This needs to be rectified. In addition, executive behavior can be controlled through ostracism and shame. Activists need to identify not only unethical companies, but also their leading managers, and then pillory these individuals in press releases and at demonstrations.

Checks on the companies themselves are the responsibility of government, the media, and also the people. For the first, government regulation needs to address every possible area of abuse.

For the people, the main checks are company protests, from letter writing to demonstrations, but more importantly boycotts. Boycotts can force virtually any company, certainly any consumer products company, to change. Since so many companies are unethical, it is essential that boycotts become much more widespread.

A related regulatory issue, to empower consumers, is that all products must be properly labeled. Labels should include not only the product's ingredients, but also a description of the social and environmental costs that were incurred in its manufacture. In particular, anything that involves genetic engineering or cloning must be labeled as such.

The final checks are structural remedies. For the first, corporations should not be legal persons. Such status is actually another example of an anti-check: a barrier that exists to a well functioning society and democracy. In the United States, the Supreme Court ruling that granted it must be reversed.

In addition, there is the issue of profit. It all starts with the profit motive. The communists believed that the problem was the existence of private property, but they got it wrong. It is not that everyone should be poor, it's that no one should be too wealthy. The real problem is profit. Profit, at least as it is created on a large scale by corporate institutions, needs to be eliminated. All for profit organizations should be restructured as non-profits.

Present-day capitalists will of course oppose this change. They argue that individuals act only out of self-interest, not for others, and that society therefore requires unfettered selfishness. Through such beliefs capitalists, *ipso facto*, reject the possibility of ethics.

Capitalism is creating an authoritarian structure that is akin to a new form of feudalism. The reason for this is that it is a system of exploitation. It follows the tenets of natural law. Under its principles and practices, the most ruthless always win. Humanity cannot base its society on this type of structure, on a system that is obsessed with selfishness and greed and where everything is evaluated in monetary terms. We must choose democracy, and implement the controls that are required to ensure that markets, and market participants, do not overwhelm our lives.