

Why isn't there a Feasible Alternative to the Democratic System?

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Mottoes:

Faust: “Und sehe, dass wir nichts wissen können! / [...] Bilde mir nicht ein, was Rechts zu wissen”

(**Johann Wolfgang Goethe**, *Faust*, lines 364 and 371).

Polonius: “Give every man thy ear, [...] / Take each man's censure”
(**William Shakespeare**, *Hamlet*, I, 3, 68-69).

This is a paper on the epistemological foundations of political doctrines. The central thesis – for which I propose my own argumentation – is that specific epistemological views have political implications.¹ In particular, there are significant correlations between fallibilism² and absolutism,³ on the one hand, and democratic and totalitarian doctrines, respectively, on the other hand (schematically: fallibilism ► democracy; absolutism ► tyranny). Within this framework, one of my goals is to argue that a fallibilist position has substantial

* I delivered the *full paper* corresponding to the *present abstract* on September 18, 2004, in England, at a conference entitled *Philosophy: Problems, Aims, Responsibilities*. This particular conference was held at the University of Warwick (Coventry).

¹ Here I use the key term “implications” in the broadest sense of this word, that is to say, not in the restricted and technical sense used in logic. It is the sense in which the generation of some facts makes plausible the conclusion that other facts will (or will not) occur.

² Obviously, fallibilism designates here a point of view about human knowledge. It maintains that we cannot know anything *for certain* about the facts of the world we live in.

³ Naturally, absolutism claims that we are able to attain apodictic certainty in our beliefs about the world. E.g.: we can be apodictically certain that particular statements, principles, or theories are true. Consequently, absolutism is opposed to fallibilism.

consequences not only for the philosophy of science and for everyday life, but also for political *thought*.

A second key thesis that I advance is that David Hume's view on this score is indeed utterly wrong. This could be an extremely irreverent assertion, but it is one for which I do not apologise. In his *magnum opus*, *A Treatise of Human Nature*⁴ – among other of his works – Hume maintained a position opposed to the first thesis above, or at least so I argue. Precisely because of this opposition, I believe that Hume is completely mistaken.

I advance – *among other arguments* – the following line of reasoning for both of the above theses. I have not found this in any previous author. In the briefest way possible, my argument is as follows. Autocratic systems of government always legitimise themselves through ideologies. All ideologies, in their turn – as *political* beliefs – rest on significant *epistemological* presuppositions. This is especially so to the extent that they are deemed to be entirely assured, and hence to be *knowledge* beyond *experience* (e.g. the National Socialist and Marxist-Leninist ideologies). Can the pre-eminence of a particular race, of a specific nation, or of an economy that eradicates private property be upheld by reference to experience? Obviously, they cannot. Therefore, such ideologies are dogmatically maintained as a result of an irrational creed, supported by propaganda promulgated by state institutions.

On the other hand, the case for the superiority of the democratic system rests on *knowledge* gained from *experience*, viewed as the single source and the only basis of rational opinions. Even when rulers make mistakes, we are all (more or less) able to learn from the experience. This is why we can detect and correct such mistakes, so long as freedom of opinion and the possibility of exerting the pressure of public opinion on political leaders exist. Therefore my conclusion is that if we admit – in the *epistemological* realm – that little can be known other than what can be learned from experience, then it follows – in the *political* sphere – that there is no *feasible* alternative to the democratic system.

The upshot of my arguments is that fallibilist beliefs and attitudes shared (usually unconsciously) by politicians represent a necessary condition – although not a sufficient one – for the preservation and development of a democratic

⁴ See especially the “Conclusion” to Book I. For other somewhat related passages, see also Book I, Part IV, the last paragraph of Section II, and the “Introduction”, and also the “Abstract” of the *Treatise*, as well as some of Hume's correspondence. Specifically, for *merely* a very few examples, see the Humean letters of 13 February 1739 and 01 June 1739 to Henry Home (better known as Lord Kames). There are some more moderate reflections on this stance in the first section of Hume's masterpiece *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* etc.

system. Further, I argue that a *theoretical* substantiation of democracy is interdependent with assuming a fallibilist outlook.

On the other hand, I develop the thesis that a consistent absolutist view adopted (usually instinctively) on the part of a ruler *can* pave the way for despotism. In the latter part of my paper, I argue comprehensively that totalitarian ideologies have started out – at all times – from absolutist assumptions. I conclude that an absolutist outlook *seems to be* a necessary – even if not sufficient – condition for the *justification* of an authoritarian policy.