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Comments

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James Wilson: *Democratic Equality*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019, Pp. 307).

Democracy is widely considered the most or perhaps the only legitimate form of government, though its precise justification is a matter of dispute. Two main lines of justification are that democracy is justified by the goods it reliably produces (instrumental) or because of it embodies respect, autonomy, public justification, equality or some other moral value or principle (intrinsic). Several recent influential accounts of the justification of democratic authority attempt to merge the two approaches by arguing that democracy can derive both its form and its point from a conception of equality. Democratic authority is justified because only democracy embodies equality of status and authority. Democracy is understood as a distinctively egalitarian form of government, while equality is understood along democratic lines.

James Wilson's *Democratic Equality* is not so much a defense of this justificatory strategy as it is a detailed working out of a specific version of it and its implications. Wilson's goal is to explicate a conception of political equality that is essential to democracy, to show why it is valuable, and to work out its practical, institutional implications. Democracy is good primarily because it instantiates and supports political equality, which must also be understood in the context of democratic life. Wilson develops a distinctive account of equality, while also showing how a clearer understanding of political equality should inform our evaluation of democratic norms and institutions.

In developing this conception of political equality, Wilson follows the lead of Tom Christiano, Niko Kolodny, and Daniel Viehoff in thinking that equality should be understood as equality of authority or status. Democracy derives its authority, on this view, by giving everyone equal authority or power. What this amounts to or requires, however, is a matter of dispute. Wilson argues that equal authority is properly understood as a requirement of equal, sincere consideration of the judgements of one's fellow citizens in the process of democratic deliberation.

Wilson makes several claims about this conception of political equality as equal consideration. Political equality, for instance, requires that political institutions reflect the publicly recognized equal status of citizens. This makes political equality a strong constraint on the types and forms of democratic institutional arrangements. Political equality should also act as an on-going regulative democratic norm. Merely implementing an institutional framework or decision rule that tends to distribute power equally is not enough, democratic institutions should be "temporally sensitive." This amounts to a rejection of proceduralism with respect to implementing institutions meant to distribute power equally. Further, political equality entails equal appropriate "consideration," rather than equal political power. This goes beyond the power to issue political commands or directives and includes the requirement that consideration of one's judgements be included in public deliberation.

The core idea of the book is that “equal political standing amounts to being in an ongoing political relationship of equality with other citizens” (6). The defense of political equality as an “ongoing relationship” is probably the most distinctive aspect of the approach defended here. This relationship of equality entails that we “recognize each citizen as equally entitled to render authoritative judgements as to how to organize and regulate all citizens’ common life” (49). Wilson takes the idea of a relationship between citizens quite literally, describing it as a form of “civic friendship.”

While Wilson finds the analogy between political equality and friendship to be “intuitive and fairly obvious” (59), others may not. In any case, it is clear from the analogy that what equal consideration requires is quite demanding. Friends must take one another’s judgments into consideration when acting together. It is not enough for friends or citizens to engage in sincere deliberation; to give adequate consideration means sometimes deferring to the judgements of another even when doing so would involve something that the others prefer not to do (58-59).

Even if we accept this account of friendship, we might question how a personal relationship like friendship can really be extended the largely impersonal realm of democratic politics. Nothing remotely resembling friendship would be an accurate description of the relationship that most legislators and citizens have to one another in any existing democracy, past or present. In a society of friends, democracy is unnecessary and, assuming that decisions are not made by unanimous assent, friendship does not adequately characterize the relationship between political actors. This is not exactly an objection. Wilson is engaged in a normative project of establishing what a well-functioning democracy would look like and what norms it would embody, the fact that no democracy has these features is not necessarily a mark against it. Nevertheless, if the conception of political equality that is meant to support democratic authority is so far from what we would expect in a real democratic society, there is a sense in which we have changed the subject and are no longer talking about what democracy and equality require.

We should take the relation between democratic theory and practice seriously is important partly because Wilson is clear that he does. To that end, he spends Part III of the book showing how his conception of political equality can inform contemporary political debates about democratic norms and institutions. This part of the book is well-reasoned, and Wilson thinks that radical reforms are mostly not necessary to bring existing democratic institutions closer to his conception of political equality.

There is a bit of a disconnect between the account of political equality developed in Part I and II and the discussion of how that political equality can inform democratic reform, though, and I have already hinted at why that might be so. The book is an exercise in political theory of the type that is neither fish nor fowl. It engages with core philosophical concerns at the heart of democratic theory but does not follow the arguments down to their foundations. It also engages with intuitional questions in democratic theory, but not at the level of detail that one would expect from either the formal or empirical literature. Whichever side of that divide you are on, you are likely to be unsatisfied by the approach here in some way. That said, it makes sense to go the route Wilson did. The rigor of the

philosophers and obsession with first principles can often seem pedantic and pointless, while the more empirical approach often lacks any serious engagement with the type of foundational issues that Wilson is rightly concerned with.

One may feel somewhat unsatisfied because it is exceptionally hard to capture all aspects of the topic that good political theory aims at; nevertheless, everything here is well done and will likely inform the debate on equal political authority and democracy going forward. I have really only mentioned some of the main themes in this book, which is dense and full of insight. It is especially important insofar as it defends a conception of political equality based on the relational egalitarian notion of equality of status that does not cash this idea out in terms of equality of power. Taken as a whole, Wilson presents a thoroughly worked out conception of political equality as well as its relation to democracy and democratic institutions.

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