

Précis for a New Book

forthcoming with Cambridge University Press

Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life

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(comments and questions welcome)

In *Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life*, I argue that political scientists and philosophers who study the practice of citizenship in constitutional democracies have profoundly neglected the first personal ethical standpoint, viz., the standpoint of someone seeking to live an admirable life, and I seek to offset this neglect by undertaking a serious and sustained investigation into the place of citizenship in a worthy life. Put simply, the book sets out to defend the legitimacy and value, both personal and public, of giving full play to one's deepest ethical commitments in one's civic roles. Its contribution to contemporary discussions of citizenship is twofold: first, it proposes a general model of the process through which citizens integrate their public roles into the psychological and ethical fabric of their lives; and second, it proposes an ambitious reformulation of the public-private distinction, one that presupposes a closer integration of political and ethical commitments, while respecting the distinctive demands of political roles.

The ethics of citizenship is a rich and popular field of study, which includes noteworthy discussions of the peculiar ethical demands of political roles (Niebuhr 1932, Walzer 1973, Sabl 2002, Stout 2004, Allen 2004), a plethora of "perfectionist" approaches to politics emphasizing the cultural, material, and moral goods that liberal democracy extends to citizens (e.g. Raz 1986, Macedo 1990, Sher 1997, Rasmussen & Den Uyl 2005), and numerous attempts to enlarge our conception of public life so as to encompass neglected questions of justice (e.g. Carol Pateman 1983, Susan Okin 1989). However, political theorists have yet to offer us a rich and forthright articulation of the positive contribution of the role of citizenship to a worthy human life, and of the process by which citizenship might be integrated into an agent's broader horizon of value and meaning.

Several philosophers have gestured in this direction, but have not followed through with a fundamental reexamination of the ethical basis of citizenship. For example, Wolterstorff (1997) has argued for the validity of the Christian citizen's aspiration to live a life cut "out of whole cloth"; Galston (2002) has argued for people's right to live out their lives in ways that express their own sense of value and purpose; and Taylor (1989) has exposed the fragmentary and often incoherent nature of the modern "self." But none of these fine discussions offers a general account of the value of liberal democratic citizenship as an expression of a person's ethical strivings. Thus, we are led to affirm the need for a positive account of the place of citizenship in a worthy life.

This is not merely an academic problem. For without a compelling narrative about the contribution of citizenship to a worthy life, liberal democracies become increasingly vulnerable on one hand to political apathy, as politics fails to speak to the highest human aspirations; and on the other, to ethical confusion, as serious and candid ethical discourse is either silenced or reduced to inarticulacy. I aim to address this ethical deficit by elaborating an account of citizenship that takes its bearings from citizens' deepest ethical aspirations. In this way, I hope to provide some modest guidance to citizens as they endeavor to integrate their civic commitments into a worthy life, or at least spell out more explicitly what this process of self-integration involves.

The dearth of scholarship on the relation between first-personal ethical concerns and the demands of citizenship may be explained by the fact that models of citizenship within the liberal

tradition have tended to locate their normative bearings in contractarian accounts of political order, which view citizenship less as an expression of human character and more as a contractual role defined by a set of impersonal obligations. In addition, questions about the meaning and worth of life are frequently perceived as too philosophically divisive to be taken up in earnest by a study of citizenship. Thus, many discussions of citizenship have settled for a convenient demarcation between public and private values which, while not without some pragmatic and moral benefits, has obscured legitimate and pressing questions about the deeper ethical significance of civic life.

Needless to say, any robustly ethical interpretation of citizenship must confront some formidable philosophical opponents. Two that stand out are John Rawls (1971, 1993) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1932), because they are especially representative of the modern separation between ethics and politics. Against Rawls, I argue that his attempt to rule out “thick” conceptions of the good as sources of illumination for principles of justice is implausible because principles of justice share many of the difficulties surrounding conceptions of the good, including their deeply contested character. Against Niebuhr’s attempt to drive a wedge between ethical “purity” and political pragmatism, I argue that he significantly overstates the conflict between ethics and political responsibility; and that ethical and political life are not in fact governed by different types of morality, but by the same basic moral values (e.g. unselfishness, justice, courage) prudently applied to different contexts of action.

The book culminates in an integrationist conception of citizenship, which can be summarized by five propositions: first, citizenship is not a role that can be grasped independently from first-personal ethical concerns, but is a role that is fundamentally *constituted* by the first-personal ethical standpoint. Second, the distinctiveness of the ethical demands of citizenship and political office is nothing more than a special case of relational obligations and reasons for action. Third, pace Machiavelli (1532), Weber (1919), and Niebuhr (1932), taking to heart one’s role as a citizen, at least in minimally functional and just regimes, is not only compatible with ethical integrity, but *essential* for the serious pursuit of a worthy life. Fourth, citizenship is a reasonably capacious role, which people may legitimately “tailor” to their special circumstances and commitments. Finally, pace Rawls et al, giving one’s deepest ethical commitments full play in the political arena is the mark of true political responsibility and an indispensable support to a thriving liberal democracy. The overall approach is illustrated by considering its practical implications in different historical situations, including Nazi Germany, South Africa during the apartheid era, and post-9/11 America.

The argument proceeds as follows: I set the stage in chapters 1-3 by charting the conceptual terrain of the argument, in particular the concept of ethical integrity (chap. 2), the ethos of citizenship in a liberal democracy, and the process through which people absorb civic roles into their ethical and psychological life (chap. 3). The argument enters its more critical and constructive stage in chapters 4-6, where I investigate the prospects for integrity in public life through a critical assessment of what I call “separationist” ideals of citizenship (chap. 4) and the elaboration of an alternative, integrationist account of citizenship, i.e. one that gives the value of ethical integrity full scope in the political arena (chap. 5). I draw the argument to a close in chapter 6, by addressing several possible objections to my account, of a realist, liberal, and integrationist view respectively.

Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life is aimed primarily at political and moral philosophers, social scientists, and theologians who study citizenship and civic participation from a political, psychological, sociological, theological, and/or ethical perspective. But it is also intended for citizens beyond the walls of the academy, who are interested in reflecting more deeply on the meaning of their citizenship and its relation to their higher and broader aspirations in life. Many ordinary citizens, whether voters, statesmen, legislators, judges, or civil servants, have little time to immerse themselves in the theoretical minutiae of academic debates, yet are thoughtful and responsible people who like to ponder what they are doing and why. Whether or not they accept its conclusions, they should find in this book a stimulating conversation partner.

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