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978-1-107-06893-3 - Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life

David Thunder

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## Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life

What does citizenship have to do with living a worthy human life? Political scientists and philosophers who study the practice of citizenship, including Rawlsian liberals and Niebuhrian realists, have tended either to relegate this question to the private realm or insist that ethical principles must be silenced or seriously compromised in our deliberations as citizens. This book argues that the insulation of public life from the ethical standpoint puts in jeopardy not only our integrity as persons but also the legitimacy and long-term survival of our political communities. In response to this predicament, David Thunder aims to rehabilitate the ethical standpoint in political philosophy, by defending the legitimacy and importance of giving full play to our deepest ethical commitments in our civic roles and developing a set of guidelines for citizens who wish to enact their civic roles with integrity. In this way, this book provokes a lively conversation about the ethical foundations of public life in constitutional democracies.

David Thunder is a Research Fellow at the University of Navarra's Institute for Culture and Society (Religion and Civil Society Project) in Pamplona, Spain. Previously, he held several academic appointments in the United States, most recently serving as Postdoctoral Fellow at Princeton University's James Madison Program (2008–09) and as Visiting Assistant Professor at Villanova University (2009–12). He earned his BA and MA in philosophy at University College Dublin and his Ph.D. in political science at the University of Notre Dame. Dr. Thunder's research examines the normative dimensions of life in human communities and aims to foreground the lived experience of persons who seek to live worthy and meaningful lives. His work has appeared in venues such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Political Theory*, and *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*.

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DAVID THUNDER  
*University of Navarra*



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## Preface

*Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life* is basically the book I wished someone would write, but finding no one had, felt impelled to write myself. Although many interesting and illuminating works had been written on the practice of democratic citizenship, the virtues of public life, the relationship between our public and private roles, and the sociological and normative foundations of civil society, almost all of the authors I encountered who had something to say about modern citizenship fell into one of three categories: The first group treated citizenship as if it were a more or less self-contained compartment of the moral life, with its own internal logic, which had little to do with the more lofty and ambitious horizons of the moral life. The second tended to draw overwhelmingly *negative* connections between citizenship and the quest for human excellence, viewing it, at least in its modern garb, as a moral *hazard* rather than as a positive contribution to the worthy life. The third group asserted or implied that citizenship could be humanly ennobling, and could be integral to a worthwhile human life, but did not go far enough in explaining *why* we should embrace the responsibilities of citizenship, and how we might go about integrating those responsibilities into our wider goals and projects in life. In short, few if any discussions of citizenship explicitly took up the challenge of showing how citizenship can be a humanly ennobling and meaningful role, all things considered.

Now, this long-standing refusal on the part of political philosophers to uncover the deeper ethical rationale for modern citizenship and to defend it against its critics seemed to me to be a refusal to face the legitimate questions of a growing body of citizens who are disaffected and disillusioned by the corruption and failures they perceive in their political

leaders and institutions. “What use is citizenship,” a disillusioned citizen might ask, “if our public institutions reek of corruption? Why should I play my part in supporting institutions that are morally compromised?” Or he might wonder, “Why pay taxes when I know a big chunk of them will be used on expensive and morally questionable policies, at home or abroad – that is, if they are not embezzled by corrupt politicians first? Why vote or participate in public life when my contribution is a mere drop in the ocean? Why devote my time and energy to civic activities, when I can make more of a positive impact in other spheres of life?” While I do not claim to answer all of these questions in this book, I do aim to develop an account of citizenship that is sensitive to the importance of these sorts of questions, and capable of shedding some light on the broader issue at stake, namely the contribution of citizenship to a worthy human life.

I researched and wrote the first full draft of this book between September 2007 and April 2011, and further expanded and refined the argument in 2013 once I had the two reviewers’ comments in hand. Thus, the bulk of the research and writing spanned about four years in all. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the project had already been fermenting, like good wine, for at least five years prior to my formally putting pen to paper to write the book. In my doctoral dissertation, drafted between 2003 and 2005, I had criticized John Rawls’s norms of public deliberation for compelling citizens to set aside some of their conscientiously held ethical commitments in the public square. This was the seed from which the larger book project grew. Confronted by Rawls’s separationist logic, I began to grasp the importance of the idea of *integrity*, understood as a wholehearted commitment to the pursuit of a worthy life, as a crucial dimension of the moral life whose value could readily be appreciated by citizens spanning many different creeds and walks of life. Writing the dissertation convinced me of the necessity of mounting a more rigorous and comprehensive defense of the value of integrity against its separationist detractors in the academy, and of demonstrating its positive role in sustaining a form of politics that ennobles rather than degrades the human spirit.

Completing this project has opened my eyes to the fact that academic debates are not merely “academic”: they often either reflect and reinforce, or alternatively contradict and resist, broader cultural, political, and institutional trends. For example, the idea of “realism” in politics, or *Realpolitik*, can be and undoubtedly has been used to justify the torture of terror suspects, the use of drones in warfare, morally questionable

military campaigns, the acceptance of bribes, the making of empty election promises, tax evasion, welfare fraud, and so on. Similarly, the idea of separating public principles of political morality from “private” ethical and religious commitments tends to reinforce the superficiality and sophistry that are endemic to modern political debates, rather than encouraging us to articulate the deeper philosophical principles motivating our political positions. Last but not least, the pretense of many political philosophers to prescind from deep ethical questions about the values that give life its meaning effectively disables them from offering any meaningful philosophical responses to the apathy, cynicism, and disillusionment that are quite commonplace in the present generation of citizens toward the state and toward politics more generally.

Unfortunately, the tendency to either suppress or obscure the ethical value of civic life, or else to interpret it quite narrowly (say, in terms of impersonal norms of justice rather than in terms of the pursuit of a worthy life), is quite pervasive both within and beyond the corridors and classrooms of our universities. Though we might wish things were different, those of us who believe there is something genuinely important at stake in the vindication of an ethically grounded vision of citizenship, something that affects not only the life of individual persons but also that of entire nations, will surely face an uphill battle in countering the separationist logic that has become one of *the* hallmarks of law, politics, and economics in the Western world. Under these circumstances, writing a book that aims to rehabilitate an ethically grounded ideal of citizenship and public service, one that refuses to separate political endeavors from the quest for human excellence, is in itself an act of faith, faith that ideas about what is good and noble in life can ultimately have some positive impact on our way of thinking and way of life. If my arguments hit their mark, at least some readers for whom the separationist position (whether under its Rawlsian or Niebuhrian guise) seems inevitable, will hopefully be led to reconsider its merits, while others more sympathetic to the integrationist position I advocate will hopefully find in this book useful resources for resisting the separationist position, and a suggestive starting-point for seeking a reasonable alternative to it.

The book you have in your hands is the outcome of a lengthy period of intellectual formation, reflection, and conversation, during the course of which I have naturally accumulated numerous debts of gratitude. Our intellectual development is in some ways quite a mysterious process, something that may happen in ways we hardly notice – an argument we disagree with, or a book we are in awe of; a philosophical conversation

over lunch, or a passing remark by a colleague. Little by little, the ideas crystallize, nourished by the thoughts and observations of friends, colleagues, and authors living and dead, until they acquire a distinct form and allow themselves to be refined into explicit propositions and arguments. I certainly do not pretend to understand this process, or to recall all of the personal and professional debts I have accrued as it unfolded. But I will do my best to acknowledge by name the people and institutions that have played some role, whether modest or pivotal, in inspiring and facilitating the birth of this book.

I am thankful to four institutions for employing me on terms that provided me with ample time to research and write this book. First, the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton facilitated my transition from “dissertation mode” to “book mode” after a busy year of post-dissertation teaching, by providing me with a teaching-free postdoctoral year (2007–08) in which I could immerse myself in the philosophical literature on citizenship and public life and at least discern in a serious way what sort of book I wanted to write. I would also like to extend a warm thank you to the James Madison Program in the Politics Department of Princeton University, which provided me with a friendly and intellectually serious academic home in which I could finally settle on the topic of the book, conduct in-depth research on it, and begin to write it, in 2008–09. The seminars and lectures I attended at Princeton’s James Madison Program, Political Philosophy Colloquium, Program in Law and Public Affairs, and Center for Human Values were a tremendous intellectual stimulus and education for which I will always be grateful.

The third institution that provided me with an academic home during the preparation of this manuscript was the Matthew J. Ryan Center for the Study of Free Institutions and the Public Good at Villanova University, in conjunction with Villanova’s Center for Liberal Education and Department of Political Science. Through the generous support of the Ryan Center, I was able to teach reduced course loads in 2009–11, which afforded me enough time to make steady progress on the manuscript. Most recently, my position as a Research Fellow at the University of Navarra’s Institute for Culture and Society has provided me with a very supportive and intellectually stimulating environment in which to undertake the final revisions of the manuscript in mid to late 2013. I am grateful to staff and colleagues in the Religion and Civil Society Project, the Institute for Culture and Society, and the university at large, for making this such a congenial and supportive work environment.

Whatever imperfections remain in this manuscript, it is a much stronger and more rigorous work for having received the critical and constructive scrutiny of Cambridge's peer reviewers and copy editors, not to mention a good number of friends and colleagues. I would like to thank the staff and editors at Cambridge, especially the senior editor Lew Bateman; his senior editorial assistant Shaun Vigil; and the Project Manager, Bhavani Ganesh, for managing the whole submission and production process professionally and courteously. I am grateful to the two external reviewers for helping me refine and expand the argument in ways that would anticipate a number of important objections that escaped my notice in the first draft of the manuscript.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my friend and former dissertation advisor, Michael Zuckert, who has gone far beyond the call of duty both in supporting my intellectual growth and academic career in whatever way he could and in shepherding along the whole book-writing process, through his wise counsels and thoughtful and constructive feedback on the entire first draft of the manuscript. Mary Keys, who also served on my dissertation committee, has been extremely generous with her advice and support as the book unfolded. Knowing that she believed in the success of this enterprise even when it was in its embryonic stages helped me forge ahead with the book even when I could not quite make out the light at the end of the tunnel. My friends Peter Wicks, Kevin Cherry, Bob Taylor, Carmen Pavel, and Leif Wenar were kind enough to bring their expertise and scholarly acumen to bear in reading and commenting on various parts of the manuscript before it went into production. Their comments helped me tighten up the argument and make certain parts of it considerably more perspicuous than they would have otherwise been.

Besides those who directly commented on this manuscript, whether in early or final drafts, there are other less tangible yet no less real intellectual debts I have accumulated along the way. First, I have obviously been inspired by the ideas and arguments of numerous philosophers living and dead, whether to support and expand a particular line of argument, to better understand an idea I wanted to resist, or to see things with a broader and more penetrating vision. Some of the philosophers who have had an obvious and lasting impact on my thinking about citizenship and the good life – notwithstanding (and in some cases, *because of*) the fact that I disagree with some of them in fundamental ways – are Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, William Galston, Robert Adams, Bernard Williams, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Rawls.

Of course, few writers find their inspiration *exclusively* in the written word, or find the library a sufficiently stimulating intellectual companion. I have discussed this project, or its core ideas, with dozens of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, between my years as a graduate student at Notre Dame and my final edits of the manuscript at the University of Navarra. I try to mention below mentors, peers, and students who have contributed through their conversations, ideas, feedback, or suggestions to the arguments expounded in the pages of this book. But if I have omitted anyone, I beg their forgiveness in advance!

People with whom I have, either on a regular or episodic basis, had the privilege of discussing ideas more or less directly implicated in the argument of this book prior to its completion, include Michael Zuckert, Kevin Cherry, Peter Wicks, Leif Wenar, Carmen Pavel, Bob Taylor, Paul Weithman, Alasdair MacIntyre, Phil Quinn, Fred Dallmayr, David Solomon, Mary Keys, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Roos, James Helmer, Matt Mendham, Christian Miller, Mark Jensen, John Perry, Jeff Langan, Michael Lamb, Ryan Davis, Barbara Buckinx, Derrick Chambers, Paul MacDonald, Danny Frost, Matthew Rose, Eric Gregory, Brad Wilson, Lucas Morel, Mark Mitchell, David Forte, Paul Kerry, Danielle Allen, Matt Franck, Sherif Girgis, Stefan McDaniel, Sanj Kulkarni, Phillip Muñoz, Alan Patten, David Leftowitz, Stephen Macedo, George Kateb, Philip Pettit, Jeffrey Stout, David Tubbs, Ana Samuel, Loubna El Amine, Ian Ward, Derek Webb, Andy Bove, Colleen Sheehan, Maria Toyoda, Catherine Warrick, Markus Kreuzer, Michael Moreland, Tom Smith, James Wilson, Lara Brown, Fabrice Beland, Bill Werpehowski, Dan MacGuill, Steve Napier, Jim Fitzpatrick, Scott Johnston, Katie and Jules van Schaijik, Bill Gonch, Beth Riordan, Ben diFrancesco, Kyle Santoferraro, Brendan Petersen, Pete Colosi, Dan Moseley, Gerard Casey, Michelle Clarke, Micah Schwartzman, Chris Callaway, Loren Lomasky, Paulina Ochoa, Tom O'Donohue, Montserrat Herrero, Morgan Thunder, and Sarah Thunder.

I am fortunate and grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss some of the central ideas of this book at seminars and conferences over the years. I presented the opposition between Rawlsian public reason and agent integrity to the inaugural Association for Political Theory conference at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on August 18, 2003, and presented an internal critique of Rawls's view of public reason, later to be published in the *American Journal of Political Science* (vol. 50, no. 3, July 2006), at the Political Science Graduate Conference at Marquette University on March 19, 2005. I presented a very

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early, and frankly rather underdeveloped, account of integrity as a graduate student at Notre Dame, to the Political Theory Brownbag symposium on October 8, 2004, where I was forced to make a significant course correction in my thinking on the subject, to allow that people may be mistaken in their moral convictions and still count as persons of integrity. I later presented another aspect of my account of integrity, namely its compatibility with role distinctions, at the Northeastern Political Science Association annual conference in Philadelphia on November 16, 2007 (“Can an Ideal of Personal Integrity Be Reconciled with Public and Private Roles?”). Last but not least, I would like to extend a special thanks to Michelle Clarke for inviting me to serve as a commentator at one of the most well-conceived and interesting conferences I have ever attended, on the “Ethics of Patriotism,” held at Dartmouth College, New Haven, on November 21, 2009. My participation at that conference and my interaction with its thoughtful participants helped me better understand the virtues as well as pitfalls of patriotism, which I discuss at different points in this book, in particular in Section 5.1.2, “Does Citizenship Foster Uncritical Patriotism?”

It seems fitting to conclude by thanking my parents, to whom this book is dedicated. They brought me into the world and taught me, through their example, that the best and most worthwhile things in life come to us by being faithful to our promises and to those in our charge, through thick and thin, and working at our station even when it requires us to renounce some of our dreams, at least when something of great value is at stake. This example of dedication was a vivid proof to me, from an early age, that integrity is something real and possible, even if I could not quite find the words to express that value until I wrote this book.

Pamplona, Spain, January 27, 2014