

Book Review

Political Theory

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Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life, by David Thunder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

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David Thunder argues that the practices and virtues of citizenship should be understood as an intrinsic part of a worthy life, rather than, on the one hand, an instrumental means to support justice and order in liberal democratic society or, on the other hand, a compromise (however necessary) that detaches citizens from a fully moral life. The latter two characterisations of citizenship he identifies as prevalent in contemporary philosophical and political thinking. In contrast to these he articulates the belief that the virtues and moral principles that should direct political life are not inherently different from those we apply in ordinary life, and paints a picture of “citizenship as a vocation.” The book’s argument thus picks up an ancient theme—the relationship between the good person and the good citizen—in the modern context where a more radical disjunction between the norms of personal morality and of public life is widely assumed.

Thunder contests this disjunction, and argues for an “integrationist” ideal of citizenship as a part of a worthy life on the basis of a virtue ethics approach that rejects deontological accounts, “ethics of ultimate ends” (Weber) and consequentialist approaches to the relationship between political and personal morality. This integrationist ideal is distinct from an ideal of personal integrity or consistency of behaviour; its focus is on the integration of spheres of life, it but allows for a “tapestry” (187) of attitudes and virtues in a variety of relationships and roles. Yet all these are integrated within an “attempt as far as possible to achieve harmony in service of what one conscientiously considers to be a worthy way of life” (180). Thunder recognises Ronald Dworkin, Nicholas Wolterstorff and William Galston as others who have also recently presented an ideal of a morally integrated life, while none of these has focused on the role of citizenship in this concern. It should be emphasised that Thunder is not arguing that civic life is pre-eminent, but that it should be

seen as a significant part of an ethical life. He suggests that recovering an ethical account of citizenship offers some hope of raising the level of political discourse, overcoming the manipulation of citizens by lobbyists and demagogues, and reducing the disaffection of citizens from public life (191).

Citizenship is a complex and contested concept; the conception advanced here is a hybrid between an Aristotelian conception of citizenship and one based in constitutional democracy. First, there are the elements of a constitutional democracy, with representative institutions, rule of law, regulated free market economy, and a range of civil society institutions (62–63). But citizenship is understood more substantially than the limited legal entitlements and obligations normally associated with liberal citizenship. For Thunder, the role of citizenship gains its importance from interdependence with others in pursuit of their shared common good, which requires not only political and legal institutions and laws, but also the practices and virtues of citizenship, both as service and participation in political decision making, and a commitment to the common good and shared understanding of justice in the political community that underlie this (67–78). While the emphasis on the common good, practices and virtues give a strong Aristotelian foundation to the notion of citizenship at work here, Thunder aims to avoid more controversial aspects of Aristotle's theory, in particular the teleological approach that presupposes a highest good, by seeing the good of citizenship in terms of process rather than in particular substantive ends.

In a pivotal chapter (ch. 4), the author dissects what he sees as two contemporary versions of the pervasive "separationist account," in which political and private life are seen as necessarily governed by different purposes and principles, so that the ethical positions one espouses cannot be applied fully in the public realm. The first version requires citizens to set aside their deepest convictions in the political arena because of the inevitable diversity of such convictions and the conflicts which they cause; the second sees the realities of political power as requiring actors to depart from some of their religious or moral principles. The first view, represented quintessentially by John Rawls, argues that in a liberal democracy the state must be neutral between alternative comprehensive doctrines, and that citizens must engage politically on the basis of reasons all can share; thus, particular conceptions of the good cannot be invoked in politics. Thunder argues that this division between the political and ethical life of the citizen violates the ethical integrity of the individual, and identifies internal criticisms in the ideas of objectivity, autonomy and stability, and the distinction between conceptions of the good and conceptions of justice that underpin Rawls's separationism. Similar arguments have been advanced elsewhere; here they are important in supporting the articulation of an alternative approach.

The second version of separationism is represented by Reinhold Niebuhr, for whom the ethical considerations operative in private life must be qualified in politics, where violence, coercion, and self-interest have to some extent to be accepted. While not occupying anything like the prominence in political theory of Rawls, Niebuhr's inclusion here is justified because he articulates views widely held among religious citizens who accept the importance of engaging in political life, and his ideas have had considerable influence on practising politicians (including both Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama). For Thunder, Niebuhr "seeks to articulate a normative vision of politics that combines the best of ethical idealism with the best of political pragmatism" (88). But, in his view, Niebuhr goes too far in the direction of political realism, overestimating the extent to which violence and other evils are the necessary cost of political engagement, and thus his account too fragments the moral life of the citizen.

The last two chapters of the book develop the alternative view advanced here mainly by engaging with a series of carefully selected and presented objections. The first, and most substantially treated, is that an integrationist commitment rules out making necessary compromises and taking responsible political action. Thunder distances himself from idealistic views as well as the alternatives for which politics necessarily requires departing from standard ethical requirements of conduct and character, whether expressed in Machiavellian, Weberian or Walzerian terms. His way of reconciling moral beliefs and political necessities draws on his broadly Aristotelian approach, in which the moral actor balances all considerations in deliberation. This perspective allows him to avoid two positions he sees as problematic—the deontological one which faces a dilemma between the demands of moral principle and the practical needs of politics, and the consequentialist one where moral deliberation is effectively suspended in view of the calculated external outcome. On the view advanced here, it is only when we consider particular cases that we see that the considerations to be applied to political actions are not significantly different from other complex areas of human action, where, when we have decided responsibly, we do not have to make any radically immoral compromises. Thus Thunder's response to the dilemma of dirty hands is effectively to dissolve it in identifying the ethical response as doing what is right in each instance "all things considered," and invoking the principle of double effect when there are inevitable unintended harms (127–30). This extends to the issue of the complicity of citizens in supporting political institutions and actors—an issue which is particularly critical to this argument (172–76). Thunder makes it clear that citizenship does not involve uncritical loyalty to the state, but rather a commitment to the common good of the polity and its citizens; he recognises that this way of thinking about

acting as a citizen in a modern state does not rule out struggles of conscience, and also suggests ways in which citizens might limit their complicity in evil by, for example, selective resistance (176). Yet his responses here may seem to offer too smooth a resolution of the real challenge not only to moral principle but also to moral character that political action presents.

Among other objections that are more convincingly addressed are, first, what may be called the *civil society objection*—that the virtues and values of democratic citizenship rest not in politics but in smaller communities. Against this, Thunder argues that the independency of citizens makes the ways in which citizens negotiate their public and political role at least as essential to a worthy life as their roles in the smaller communities that others have invoked. Thunder also dismisses the *romantic/individualist objection* that the integrationist ideal of citizenship places a strait-jacket on freedom and individuality; he maintains that while living as a citizen with others with whom we are interdependent requires us to respond and adjust to those others, it does not have to impose a single life-style on citizens—that there are many ways of being a good citizen. Against the *religious incompatibility objection*—that democratic citizenship involves too great a compromise with living a Christian life—he argues that constitutional democratic citizenship should not be seen as essentially aligned with a culture of, or example, radical individualism or materialism; thus, it is not conflict with Christianity, involving only the inevitable degree of tensions that exist in living a community life with others of varying perspectives (18). Even though there will be state decisions that Christians will disagree with, this does not mean that the idea of citizenship should itself be disparaged by Christians.

Finally there are two concerns about the compatibility of civic virtue and constitutional democracy—one from proponents of each side. The first objection is concerned about the *unsustainability of citizenship* in the kinds of society that constitutional democracies presuppose and promote. Here again Thunder argues that constitutional democracy does not necessarily undermine sources of solidarity in the way that critics have suggested. The second, the *ethical wars* objection, is that the integrationist view, in allowing the pursuit of the citizens' deepest beliefs in the public realm, fosters the fragmentation and conflict that liberal theory and politics have been developed to prevent. Here he argues that the life of ethical integrity, viewed as a tapestry of more or less coherent life goals, does not require rigidly promoting a single view of the good life, but can admit the validity of other perspectives and be adapted to particular circumstances.

This book raises what is at first sight an unfashionable question, and offers a deeply considered answer and an original perspective on citizenship viewed within contemporary moral and political theory. The argument it outlines is

wide-ranging and systematic, though in many places more concise than a full examination of each of the issues and alternative theories addressed would require. The argument that the practices of citizenship can be part of a morally worthy life is quite compelling. There remain some doubts about how exactly the hybrid elements of citizenship cohere, as ultimately the core content of citizenship is not as clear as it might be. Moreover, perhaps the aim to reconcile citizenship and the moral life leads to overstating the case in some respects. In particular the issues of moral dilemmas in politics and the complicity of citizenship seem too smoothly resolved. The exceptional nature of many political choices, and the way in which these involve the exercise of immense power, may make political activity and citizenship more different from ordinary life than is acknowledged here, and which require more consideration.

Finally, a major strength of the book is the way in which it addresses objections arising from a broad spectrum of political views; readers approaching it from many different perspectives should find in it something to consider. In recent years the admissibility of particular moral and religious beliefs in public life has been widely debated by liberal political theorists, but asking whether the public life of a citizen is compatible with a moral life brings a fresh perspective to a range of issues that have concerned political theorists and philosophers.