

David Thunder: Review of: *Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life*

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How can the fact that a person is a citizen of a certain political community contribute to the moral excellence of that person? This is the core issue of the recently published monograph *Citizenship and the Pursuit of a Worthy Life* by David Thunder. His project is to counter the “separationist thesis” in modern western liberal political theory, which promotes the separation between ethics and politics. In his view however, citizenship within a liberal democratic society can be an expression of a person’s highest ethical striving. Thunder is in the broadest sense a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist with an inclination to perfectionism. The book is divided into two parts: I. *Charting the Conceptual Terrain*, in which an in-depth explanation of the conceptual tools and the virtues connected with good citizenship is presented and II. *Prospects for Integrity in the Public Square*, in which the “separationist thesis”, exemplified by John Rawls and Reinhold Niebuhr, is identified, criticised and contrasted with Thunder’s integrationist ideal of civic engagement. Subsequently the proposal is defended against possible objections.

Thunder asks what the contribution of citizenship could be to an admirable or worthy life. Can being an active member of a political community ennoble our lives or is there on the contrary a chance of devaluation and corruption through forms of civic engagement? The author states that modern political philosophy since Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Kant has neglected the idea of “making men moral” by civic participation. Contractarian theories mostly incorporate just a minimal set of ethical rules and principles like respect for property and contracts, a ban of violence in order to promote a high level of personal liberty amongst the subjects of the social contract. Those contractarian theories are seen also as a response of the disastrous wars of religion. But after all Thunder still bemoans the minimal ethics they convey. In his opinion the absence of a clear narrative about the ethical value of citizenship in

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contemporary liberalism may generate a value vacuum which makes our constitutional democracies vulnerable to political apathy. Yet another result might be a new quality of manipulative rhetoric filling that space with political ideologies. Thunder argues strongly against the separation of (public) politics and (private) ethics. He admits the pitfalls of such integrative ethics through the danger of abuse in context of totalitarian regimes or unjust policies. However he evades the problem by giving ethical judgement preference before any kind of unreflective patriotism or loyalty. Moral responsibility may even lead people to turn against public institutions or the state as a whole, like the examples of Martin Luther King or colonel von Stauffenberg illustrate. But this is not a sound argument against any fruitful engagement in a civic role. So why is Thunder so strongly against the “wall of separation” between ethics and politics? This is because he believes that the highest end – the worthy life – can only be accomplished by integrating one’s role as a citizen into the own ethical life. A worthy life is an excellent life, that deserves admiration by others. The basis for a worthy life is not external goods or talents but character. Such excellent character is best characterized by certain qualities, primarily a persisting will towards the good and ethical integrity.

Now ethical integrity is an interesting concept. The agent’s will towards the good must be accompanied by the conviction that it is oriented to objective goods outside the mind of the agent. Furthermore a person of ethical integrity “evinces an enduring, robust and wholehearted commitment to integrate his desires, dispositions, actions, projects, and relationships into what he reflectively, responsibly, and honestly takes to be a worthy life” (p 32). Here the reader can see a certain openness to various life concepts under diverse internal and external conditions that might be considered worthy. That is why Thunder calls it an “ecumenical approach”.

Ethical integrity is not a state of mind but an ideal pursued in the process of self-integration. A worthy life accordingly is never arriving at but always striving for ethical excellence. The virtues that are said to boost this process of accomplishment are: fortitude, patience, temperance, honesty, humility and epistemic responsibility. They are called virtues of integrity and are quite in accord with the civic virtues of justice, magnanimity, practical wisdom, fortitude, temperance, humility, and a friendly, well-wishing disposition. Although Thunder acknowledges a plurality of values he seems to be in favour of a certain hierarchy of values.

The integrationist ideal of civic engagement is the answer to many questions posed in this work. Chapter 5 discusses how to think about policies of “dirty hands” and the relation of citizenship with forms of patriotism but also civil disobedience is classified as “loyal opposition” aiming for reform. Following the integrationist ideal the agent may choose to play the role of a citizen and improve in habituating and imitating of virtuous role models. Universal ethical judgements have priority over role-based judgements like the common good has priority over the good of the regime. Also civic roles should be selected based on “individual capacities, character, relational responsibilities and sense of calling.” (p. 162).

So what is Thunder’s actual aim in writing *Citizenship and the Pursuit of a Worthy Life*? It seems to be not just another variant of a construct of ideas in the domain of virtue ethics but rather the author paves the way for future analysis to come in this field; he seems also driven by social responsibility when expressing discontent about the predominant political focus on economics and efficiency instead of ethics and the

cultivation of civic virtues. In this light citizens on a quest for meaning and purpose in life should not be left vulnerable to ideological manipulation, but should rather find a strengthening resonance in their civic community. If noble human aspirations are further neglected, Thunder suspects this could lead to widespread disaffection from political life as an undesired result.

In his recent work Thunder produces plenty of loose ends like fundamental questions on public and private as well as positive and negative duties and rights of the citizen. This is however in a way inevitable in the set scope of analysis. Even if one is not fully convinced by his criticism of liberal contractarianism, this is a valuable contribution to the introduction of virtues into political philosophy. David Thunder's book is a very authentic and intellectually stimulating read.