CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AND TEACHING
MACROETHICS

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INTRODUCTION

There is increasingly widespread evidence that social trust and civic engagement are declining in American society. To counteract these trends many observers argue that what is needed is a revitalized sense of civic responsibility. Faculty teaching ethics can play a pivotal role in this endeavor, but to do so effectively they need an enlarged conception of the mission of ethics education; one that moves from a predominance on values guiding individual behavior and private virtues, to what is sometimes referred to as macroethics, which focuses on those more explicitly public values that build community and ground the moral dimensions of civic life.

Civic responsibility echoes a fundamentally Aristotelian notion. It derives from a belief that ethics is enacted in the social sphere and requires an engagement with and support for a good society (or “polis,” in Aristotle’s case). This is a conceptualization of ethics that stands apart from notions of ethics as primarily a matter of private moral perfection, which characterizes ethical thought in those traditions that emphasize other-worldly reward for ethical behavior, as do certain western religious conceptions of ethics, or those views of ethics that stress individual assertion, as Nietzsche did. An ethics of civic responsibility implies a self-conscious emphasis on ethical behavior that is oriented to collective, social well-being rather than individual fulfillment and probity. It draws on Aristotle’s concerns for the necessity of living in a good state in order to achieve a good or flourishing life, as well as Rousseau’s notions of virtuous citizens acting as legislators in a communal, participatory democracy.
Before teachers of ethics can reasonably be expected to fully and profitably embrace this enlarged sense of a macroethics and begin to specify an intellectual domain of civic responsibility, at least three issues warrant exploration. The first is an examination as to why such a focus is necessary. This examination should not be located in a theoretical conception of ethics alone but in the actual, current conditions of American social life. The second issue requires tracing the intellectual forces that have led American society to a dominant public philosophy that displays an anemic commitment to civic responsibility. The third task is to identify the motivational foundations on which a re-energized sense of civic responsibility and macroethics can be grounded. This article addresses these three issues.

DECLINING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have decried what they contend is an alarming decrease in civic engagement in the United States. Robert Putnam’s attention grabbing, major recent study on this topic, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* presents a distressingly large array of data confirming this trend. The reasons for the decline in civic engagement are complex, but it results in a growing escape into privativism on the part of citizens. Privatism is defined in this instance as the pursuit of individual self-interest that is so excessive it undermines a concern for common well-being. If it continues, these analysts argue, the decline in civic engagement could ultimately threaten the foundations of democratic institutions. More immediately, however, much of the available evidence of decline in civic participation suggests a weakening of these institutions in ways that leave them vulnerable to narrow interests and less able to forge policies that are responsive to common well-being.

What is needed, observers insist, is a regenerated commitment to civic responsibility, with its concomitant ethos of civic engagement. However, the foundations on which American democratic traditions rest, especially given the primacy they place on individualism, tend in subtle ways to constrain such efforts. As a case in point, in our political system there is almost no requirement for affirmative civic virtue. Yet, democracy by definition requires citizen participation. This is the paradox of democratic life: to have a vital democracy there must be an engaged citizenry, but the freedom inherent in democracy releases citizens from the imposition of requirements for participation in public life. Inescapably,
however, there is a need to nourish what Hannah Arendt referred to as "our common world." A healthy common world is one that is neither imposed by authoritarianism nor abandoned to self-interest. The intellectual and educational means for creating such a common life and regenerating the civic commitments on which it depends are essential elements of macroethics.

In addition to the drift toward privatism and the aforementioned paradox, other challenges beset the foundations of democratic life. Among them are changes in the nature of the nation state as the preeminent basis on which commitments to civic responsibility are grounded, as well as the need for new global structures of international morality and responsibility. These challenges, if inadequately addressed, could further undermine our capacity to collectively confront those large issues, like global hunger and environmental devastation that cannot feasibly be resolved by individuals acting alone.

Among the evidence most frequently cited for an erosion of civic engagement is a marked decline on measures of social trust as well as a decrease in voter participation, which is especially pronounced among young people. For instance, in the 1998 and 2000 elections, voter turnout among those 18- to 24-years-old was the lowest in our history. In the most recent presidential elections, only a third of the college-age cohort voted! Political scientists regard this as a classic danger sign for any democratic political system. But voting behavior seems to be a harbinger of an even more pervasive pattern. A recent analysis of the Annual Freshmen Survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA led to the conclusion that "freshmen care less about politics and more about money." According to the survey, students entering college in the fall of 2000 displayed the lowest interest in politics of any entering class in the thirty-five year history of the survey. Perhaps as striking, though, is that nearly three-quarters of first-year students indicated that they want to be "very well off financially."

These figures alone would warrant that the higher education community focus more intently on civic responsibility. In some ways, it has begun to do so. For example, many colleges have adopted service-learning requirements. But these more typically co-curricular activities are not precisely the focus of macroethics. Well-grounded conceptualizations of the way we care for one another as fellow citizens and establish notions of common well-being precede and support meaningful, sustained social commitments. It is this prior, foundational task that macroethics is aimed toward. Faculty addressing these issues must rethink the foundations of
democracy in light of changing social circumstances in order to make concepts like civic engagement compelling and worthy of student’s commitment. Doing so requires that these concepts be made relevant to the contemporary context, sensibilities, and needs of college students, and their views of the world they will inherit. This is an enterprise that the community of ethics teachers in American higher education has not yet undertaken in an extended or comprehensive way.

Even if there were no evidence of a decline in civic participation, however, and some have argued that it is not decreasing but simply assuming new forms, this enterprise would still have a vital relevance. Every generation must rethink the nature of its public philosophy and adapt it to the changing circumstances of each successive era. This is the project of civic renewal that is essential for a dynamic society. Without it, stagnation and social entropy become predominant forces. The very act of rethinking public philosophy simultaneously reflects and sustains a commitment to the continuing well-being of society. The failure to engage in this reflection suggests a form of social negligence that ultimately may be more corrosive to a society than bad public policy or external threat, because it degrades a capacity to respond to either.

**Connecting Private & Public Destinies**

Some have argued that in contemporary society we have lost a sense of public places that bring us together. What is being referenced in these arguments is a notion of structural characteristics such as parks, forums and political arenas. But related to these, and perhaps preceding them, is a sense of “common psychic spaces” on which a healthy society also depends. These include a capacity to imagine others circumstances and lives, the will to engage others, and the determination and capabilities to work productively with them to create mutually satisfying social conditions. Such conditions must inevitably incorporate such fundamental ethical issues as a sense of reciprocity, caring and a view of justice.

Identifying these common psychic spaces and their attendant values are a central concern of democratic public philosophy and civic responsibility, but they also transcends them. The idea of “public psychic spaces” affects a wide range of domains in life from politically explicit behavior to professional activity. To live in these shared public psychic spaces we need what David Matthews, President of the Kettering Foundation, calls “civic intelligence.” Being civically intelligent means having the capacity to apprehend facts, as well as to understand what those facts mean to others. As Matthews’s points out, such thinking requires what Immanuel
Kant called “enlarged mentality.” Being educated civically means understanding connectedness to others and to the larger world. “Failing in that, we would be what the Greeks called ‘idiots.’” The term was not used to describe people of low intelligence but those who understand only their private worlds.11

The Nature of Public Philosophy

Since exploring the nature of this society’s public philosophy is a pervasive issue in any discussion of macroethics, a basic definition of the term is needed. As it is used here, public philosophy deals with the nature of persons, the nature of society and the relationship between the two.12 It offers an explanation of the requirements of public life in a democracy through a coherent expression of convictions about rights and responsibilities, as well as the values and institutional arrangements necessary to sustain a vibrant society. Fundamentally, public philosophy asks and attempts to answer questions about what kind of society we want to have and what kinds of social, political, legal and economic values and behaviors best enable us to achieve and sustain such a society.

This definition suggests that public philosophy can be examined on at least three interdependent levels: the individual, the institutional and the cultural. At the individual level, questions such as individual values and motivations for participating in public life are relevant. Areas of concern here include such topics as civic literacy, framing issues in terms of particular interests and the formation and expression of personal convictions. The institutional level concerns ideals of the common good and the social and political arrangements through which the common good is sought. The cultural level emphasizes the ways in which historical values and beliefs give meaning to social life and produce to varying degrees a sense of trust and mutuality.

A chief advantage of interpreting public philosophy as existing at these three levels is that it makes clear that it must exhibit an interdisciplinary character, as well as evolve from an enlarged sense of ethics, or macroethics. This observation offers a segue into an essential examination of the evolution of certain critical features of our society’s public philosophy and trace how their concomitant notions of individualism, as well as their manifestation in the modern university, can obscure the importance of civic responsibility. This exploration is presented below.
Perspectives on Contemporary Public Philosophy

Democracy has ancient roots dating back to the Greek and Roman City States. When those states failed, in part because their civic structures atrophied, faith in democracy as a workable system faded. It would be two thousand years before an enduring republic, involving a nation state, emerged with the founding of the United States. This was a crystallizing event, but democracy had been evolving in Western Europe since the 12th century. A range of historical and economic factors was driving that evolution. However, several seminal concepts arising out of the Enlightenment gave powerful impetus to the development of classically liberal thinking and set the stage for the creation of modern democratic societies. These concepts led ultimately to a distinctive set of values that provide the epistemological grounding for our political institutions, as well as for the modern university.

The notions of equality, self-agency, and reason are of foundational importance here. The first of these — equality — which is reflected in the work of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, argues that individuals have equal rights. This proposition connotes that, since individuals have such rights, appropriately supportive legal and political structures are essential to insure that those rights and the freedoms they foreshadow are not violated.

The second concept — self-agency — has a more complex history in religious tradition, but is also central to Reformation and Enlightenment thought. It suggests that moral and ethical responsibility reside with the individual, subject to his/her own conscience and the self-imposed constraints that influence from the dictates of conscience, such as religious and other affiliations, and the outcomes of moral reasoning. Self-agency has a unique cast in Enlightenment terms, however. Locke linked this concept with his general views on ownership to create a formulation of self-ownership. Inherent in the principal of self-ownership is the right to free association with others, which is indispensable to democratic political processes. Conversely, as Locke insisted, self-ownership also permits individuals to exhibit alienation from others. Within this context, individuals are empowered to make choices and pursue a destiny based on those choices, especially with regard to the pursuit of private interests, such as personal happiness, the accumulation of wealth, commitment to others — or withdrawal from them.

The Enlightenment faith in reason supported confidence in a human capacity for judgment, and, therefore, makes the freedom to pursue a secular, personal destiny plausible, as well as making possible the
political organization to protect such individual pursuits. The centrality of reason emerges here, by requiring rational justification, rather than divine authority, as the appropriate basis for the use of political power, as well as for the validation of knowledge. This, as we will see later, has important implications for colleges and universities.

These concepts are powerful anchors of the public philosophy of democracy. The concept of equality postulates that individuals have rights; self-agency conveys a capacity for self-determination; and faith in reason establishes a belief in the ability of human beings to sustain self-governing polities. The pre-eminent characteristic of democracy is that the legitimacy of government derives from the freely given consent of the governed. However, for individuals to give allegiance to the government requires that they have the freedom of conscience and the rational capability to realistically make the judgments on which that allegiance ideally should rest. It is from these notions that the liberal virtues of freedom, the rule of law, tolerance, privacy, and intellectual openness are derived.

As it emerged within the framework of these values, the state assumes a critical role in assuring, through the establishment of fair procedures, the opportunity for individuals to pursue their private ends. Ideally, the state, though, must remain neutral with respect to the content of these pursuits and cannot impose choices on its citizens without their consent. For their part, citizens (except under well-defined circumstances) have no binding obligations to the state, other than to obey the procedural rules and avoid violating the rights of fellow citizens. Under this set of political arrangements, then, there are no binding obligations on individuals, which are antecedent to their own choices. In other words, beyond those, which the individual chooses, there are no a priori demands for positive behaviors toward others, or, more importantly to our purposes, for public well-being either. The obligations of citizenship are primarily negative: “don’t violate the rules.” As explained earlier, the inescapable realization is that in our political system there is almost no requirement for affirmative civic virtue. Yet democracy by definition requires citizen participation. This is the paradox of democratic life: to have a vital democracy there must be an engaged citizenry, but the freedom inherent in democracy releases citizens from the impositions of requirements for participation in public life.

In the absence of these requirements, democracy can still remain strong if there is a societal ethos of trust, mutuality and traditions honoring sacrifice for the common good. The power of such an ethos depends
on a public philosophy emphasizing social responsibility, as well as a web of complimentary institutions to reinforce the core values of that philosophy. But the traditional institutions, like religion and the family that are socially conducive have weakened, or assumed other forms, in our culture. Furthermore, at least one stream of influential philosophical thought following the Enlightenment has complicated, if not openly diminished, our conceptions of social responsibility and accorded individualism, not just primary, but singular importance.

For example, thinkers like Nietzsche and later Foucault quarrel with the Enlightenment, arguing that the structures of reason and equality have become ineluctably bound to “normalized” standards of behavior, which demand obeisance as the price of communal membership. These thinkers contend that the internalization of responsibility by the individual is the vehicle through which this conformity, and the rigid social coherence it produces, are achieved. The “anguish of responsibility” to use Foucault’s phrase, becomes yet an additional constraint, like reason, suppressing the creative assertion of subjective will. The work of these writers was intended to advance the very cause of individualism to which the Enlightenment had given such impetus. But they did so by charging that Enlightenment notions of morality and reason actually corral human consciousness and behavior, limiting what is permissible and, therefore, realistically possible. The avowed intent of Nietzsche, and his intellectual descendants, was emancipatory. Their work assaults the privilege of tradition and permits greater differences among human beings. Indeed, Nietzsche insisted that individuals stand on their own feet without the debilitating props of narrow procrustean reason, suffocating tradition or “herd-like” responsibility to others. As a result, the earlier notions of the self as possessing agency were replaced by the assertion of self. The self now no longer merely incorporates and defines the standards of reason and morality on an individual basis, but fully creates them.

The effects of these analyses are an increasingly more radical view of social life as irreducibly prescribed by the terms of individualism. The triumph of capitalism, with its own generally similar formulation of individualism, further solidifies these values, in as much as there are now no successful counter-balancing models of political economy with their attendant social values. These views have influenced modern consciousness and, by emphasizing a kind of solitary individualism, amplified the tensions between privatism and public well-being. They have inevitably influenced the terms of discourse in liberal institutions including colleges and universities; they pervade pedagogical as well as political values.
In the contemporary university, the dominant consequences of the Enlightenment are twofold. The first is a realization that reason enables human beings to generate knowledge. Generating knowledge requires a capacity to be reflective, self-critical, open to a diversity of perspectives, and willing to alter judgments in the light of new evidence. These are habits of mind that are at the intellectual center of liberal institutions.

**Implications for Colleges and Universities**

The second consequence of the Enlightenment is an affirmation of reason or rational justification as the basis on which knowledge is verified and advanced. Moreover, rational justification is not only an intellectual but also a moral necessity of liberal democratic institutions. It demands that the application of authority in legal, political and intellectual settings be legitimized by reasons that are publicly presented and broadly understood and accepted. Citizens have the right to expect, even demand, that they be given reasons for actions taken by those who possess power. This right stands as an essential bulwark against arbitrariness and the tyranny it can foster. For this right to be meaningful, however, citizens must have the capability to evaluate justifications that are offered to them. This capability is cultivated in the institutions of society devoted to inquiry, interpretation and rational justification. Although institutions like courts of law are engaged in these functions, the organizations most specifically and wholly committed to them are colleges and universities.

Over time, in higher education, the dominant procedural determinants of rational justification have become indissolubly linked with empiricism. Like the ideology of the modern liberal democratic state, empiricism is neutral with respect to content; it merely establishes the rules for investigation. As this century has unfolded, colleges and universities have been impelled by this increasingly dominant paradigm to avoid any curricular thrust that actually argues for, much less inculcates, values of civic responsibility.14

The result of these traditions is that neither our current political dispositions nor our intellectual conceptualizations can readily enjoin the values of community and civic engagement that are ultimately necessary to ensure the vitality of free political and intellectual institutions. A key problem for faculty is to participate in the larger cultural effort of civic renewal and attempt to develop intellectual frameworks that insure the expression of essential convictions about civic responsibility, without imposing demands on individuals that vitiate the very foundations on which our political and intellectual freedoms rest. This is the dilemma
that bedevils the legacy of both Aristotle and Rousseau. Their commitments to collective well-being are sometimes interpreted as overriding the sanctity of individuals and authorizing totalitarianism.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{THE MOTIVATIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY}

Research on human development suggests that there are three domains that are essential for mature civic functioning. The first is \textit{civic understanding}. It entails a sophisticated awareness of democratic principles and the ethical requirements of public life. The second involves the \textit{motivation to act on those principles} and behave ethically. Such motivation depends on emotional connectedness to others and civic identity. The third demands skills in \textit{democratic practices}. These include the ability to engage effectively in moral and political discourse as well as political processes.\textsuperscript{16}

This research underscores that a program to engender in students a sense of civic responsibility should include an awareness of the following three considerations. \textit{The first is an understanding that private and public destinies are inseparable}. A societal emphasis on individualism, combined with material abundance, often leads Americans to naively overlook the fundamental necessity of interdependence and the extent to which life is sustained in community with others. Moreover, although highly mobile social patterns enable Americans to periodically reinvent themselves, we nevertheless achieve our identity to an overwhelming extent through collective, institutional life. \textit{Second, it therefore follows that if we are so largely dependent on social life for the success of our private destinies, then public well-being is a private necessity}. Until this is fully comprehended, an indifference to common well-being can lead to a kind of nihilism. \textit{Third, in a democracy, we must understand that public well-being is achieved by citizen participation}. Without civic participation, there is by definition no democracy. Without democracy, the means to “collectively” address issues of common concern disappear. These considerations can lead students to apprehend the importance of the public philosophy of democracy and the convictions that encourage constructive engagement in social life.

Students (like many citizens) tend to believe that democracy is natural and inevitable. As history demonstrates, however, democracy is fragile. It is also not necessarily consistent with intuitive and historically validated views of human nature. As Charles Frankel pointed out in his book \textit{The Democratic Prospect}, it is a system in which those in power are required to protect the rights of those who are not, even while those who
are not in power are trying to wrest power from those who have it.\textsuperscript{17} And those who don’t have power are obligated to respect the authority of those who do, at least until they can legally throw the rascals out. Maintaining such a system requires that a people exhibit great commitment to its precepts, social discipline, and a large reservoir of cultural competence in the skills of civic engagement such as reasoned dialogue and negotiation; not to mention great faith that everyone will play by the agreed upon rules. For instance, those who peacefully give up power do not want to be subsequently executed for their cooperation, nor do those who allow others to remain in power expect such a fate. But throughout history, in non-democratic regimes, it has been all too common for the transfer of power to be occasioned by the murder of the sovereign. Students should learn to appreciate, therefore, that the democratic system, the benefits of which they often take for granted, requires self-conscious and determined efforts to insure its continuance.

Factors that lead to Civic Engagement

An understanding of considerations like those described above can lead students to apprehend the importance of the public philosophy of democracy and the convictions that encourage constructive engagement in social life. Additionally, at least four general factors can be identified, which lead people to engage in civic life. These are: 1) A model of democracy that rests on a pervasive set of ideals that support Civic Virtue and democratic social relations. The thinkers articulating this view range from Aristotle to John Dewey. Indeed, Aristotle’s concern with human flourishing or “eudaimonia” as the ultimate end of human action and his emphasis on the importance of “exemplars,” and Dewey’s notion of “social intelligence” are particularly relevant here.\textsuperscript{18} 2) Awareness that others are counting on us to be engaged; this arises in part from a culture that encourages people to be aware of others needs and which inculcates a sense of mutuality, reciprocity and trust. It is a constellation of qualities that the political scientist Robert Putnam and others call Social Capital. 3) An additional factor leading to political participation is recognition that one’s interests are at stake and that a calculation of rational self-interest, which advances those interests, demands civic involvement. This is the formulation of classic liberalism with its notions of the value-maximizing individual. 4) Such involvement, however, requires knowledge of the salient issues and an understanding of how to influence the political process; therefore, effective citizens must posses Civic Literacy.\textsuperscript{19} These fac-
tors can be used as lenses through which civic engagement can be explored with students.

CONCLUSION

The macroethics of civic responsibility embodies an orientation to teaching college students that is grounded in a conviction that we must be alive to the needs of others, and not just politically, but morally engaged with them as well. In this regard, it may be instructive to consider Kierkegaard’s belief that ethics begins with the willingness to subordinate one’s personal preferences to the legitimate needs of others. For our essential concern in pressing for greater civic responsibility is not simply with producing more politically active citizens but with a vitalized sense of how we attend to and care for one another. It is the realization of the necessity for members of a society to engage in a continuous, pervasive moral dialogue around such principles, which then guides their behavior, that we are ultimately attempting to impress upon students.

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NOTES

1 The research reported in this article has been undertaken in part through the support of a grant from The National Endowment for the Humanities. I am greatly indebted to my colleagues in that project, especially Drs. Ronald Green and Aine Donovan at Dartmouth College for their long hours of conversation on these issues and for their support and shared convictions.


5 Putnam, op cit.

6 O’Connell, op cit.


