

The Perfectionist Imperative: A Kantian Proposal to Revitalize Civic Education

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Introduction

This paper is a consideration of the relevance of the “critics of liberalism” debate to the topic of civic education. The “critics of liberalism” are those political theorists who have identified deficiencies within “liberalism” as the foundational political philosophy upon which public policy is based. The critics include various republicans, communitarians, libertarians, and liberals such as Michael Sandel, Richard Dagger, and William Galston. One starting point for my application of this conversation within political theory to the field of education is that liberalism broadly understood has increasingly been redefined by libertarianism to prioritize individual rights above all else and that this presents educational challenges for the promotion of active participation in politics, the cultivation of civic virtue, and a concern for the common good.

One common theme among the republicans and communitarians is that liberalism downplays the importance of political participation, civic virtue, and the common good by prioritizing individual rights over communal solidarity. I became interested in this debate as it relates to the field of civic education in a liberal democracy such as the United States. I, like many civic educators, assume that a civic education should promote political participation, some notion of civic virtue, and a general commitment to the common good. However, the practical activity of teaching history or government to provide such a civic education quickly becomes problematic because various groups will insist that promoting such things makes one partisan, biased, liberal, or activist.

The assumption made by some libertarians and American conservatives is that equating civic virtue with the promotion of the common good is a covert attempt to promote “progressivism.” Some even go so far as to question the promotion of political participation and voting itself. Who I am, a public school teacher and agent of the state, to tell young people that they should vote rather than play video games? The conception of individual freedom as “non-interference” is taken to such an extreme that some libertarians insist the state has no business promoting the politically active life as being more meaningful or beneficial than the life devoted to consumerism. After all, in a “properly” liberal society, claim these libertarian liberals, the individual is free to define for themselves what the “Good Life” consists of and attempts by the state via civic education to promote certain activities is a step too far.

As a government instructor in both high school and community college settings I have experienced this disagreement over what a civic education should or should not seek to accomplish first hand which is how I initially became fixated on what is called the “viability problem” of liberalism. The argument made by the critics of liberalism is that if a liberal society does not actively cultivate within its citizens the characteristics necessary to perpetuate liberal society then liberal society itself will gradually wither away. According to this view, the state must take sides and endorse specific activities and ways of life simply to perpetuate itself. So, the main question is this: what exactly should civic education in a liberal democracy be doing? In attempting to provide a response, I aimed to identify specific attributes the state should promote via civic education to prepare individuals for the maintenance of liberal democracy, consider which conception of individualism was most compatible with doing so, and on what grounds the individual might comply with the state’s attempt to endorse a way of life that includes political commitments.

Main argument:

My point of departure for this paper is the contention that many republicans and communitarians offer alternatives to liberalism *unnecessarily* because they have conceded too much ground to libertarians in the debate over what liberalism will permit. If the critics of liberalism are correct that deficiencies exist within liberalism the remedy is not necessarily an alternative to liberalism, but a redefinition of liberalism that allows for the inclusion of notions of civic virtue, the common good, and the promotion of a conception of human flourishing that is compatible with liberalism's commitment to individualism. I argue that it is crucial for civic educators to grapple with this issue because civic education is uniquely positioned to either preserve and instill the values that have long been understood as the foundation of democratic self-government or become at best an innocent bystander and at worst an active accomplice in the continued erosion of alternatives to the logic of individual self-interest and market competition. In other words, I contend that a revitalized civic education must find a way to confront the current tendency to conceive education in utilitarian, practical, and job-training terms.

In thinking through the application of the "critics of liberalism" debate to civic education I focused on two interrelated problems facing civic educators in a liberal democracy: 1) How to use civic education to address the long-term viability problem facing liberal democracy; and 2) How to endorse a vision of human flourishing that respects the right of the individual to define themselves absent state coercion. The conclusions that political theorists come to when discussing the role of the state in defining the "Good Life" is that a liberal state should remain neutral, but I contend that applying this debate within political theory to the context of civic

education forces us to reach different conclusions about what is appropriate and necessary for the state to promote and endorse.

I argue that it is more feasible to identify the components of “good citizenship” than the components of the “Good Life” and that consequently the state is justified in endorsing a normative vision of citizenship. The potential problem identified by political theorists within the “critics of liberalism” debate is that identifying the Good or the Right does not give the state the authority to impose it. Again, I think in the context of civic education and preparation for citizenship the answer must be different. The state will never be able to coerce civic virtue or active participation in the political process but it can and should unapologetically promote a normative vision of citizenship. Encouragement is not coercion.

The current literature provided by political theorists is stuck between maintaining an anti-perfectionist, instrumental position, which insufficiently promotes civic virtue and autonomy; and an ancient, Aristotelian perfectionism that diminishes individual liberty by identifying “good citizenship” with the “Good Life.” It is as if our choice is between a state that cannot promote or endorse anything for fear of trampling on the individual’s autonomy and a state where the “Good Life” requires political participation. The task for civic educators is to construct a middle way that maintains the proper deference to individual autonomy that any liberal society must possess to be liberal that also communicates a conception of individualism that pursues the common good, seeks solidarity, and respects reciprocity. Despite the criticism leveled at him from liberals and republicans alike, I contend that Immanuel Kant’s vision of human flourishing of a rational, autonomous individual who nonetheless pursues his or her own self-perfection, betterment of others, and of humanity is uniquely positioned reconcile the competing desires to preserve individual liberty and promote civic virtue.

The Literature:

The starting point for my consideration of how liberal civic education can be revitalized is Michael Sandel's critique of liberalism in *Democracy's Discontent*. Sandel argues that liberalism's "central idea is that government should be neutral...[and] should not affirm in law any particular vision of the good life" (Sandel 6). While some defenders of liberalism may reject Sandel's characterization of liberalism as being too narrowly individualistic—that is, a somewhat unfair representation of liberalism's commitments—his perception that liberalism has become overly individualistic is an appropriate assumption for an examination of how to revitalize civic education. At the heart of his criticism of liberalism is a desire to reinvigorate more active and virtuous approaches to citizenship. Sandel says that "to share in self-rule...requires that citizens possess, or come to acquire, certain qualities of character, or civic virtues" and that producing citizens with the needed virtues "requires a formative politics" (Sandel 6) and civic education that is not neutral on whether political participation should be encouraged or of what good citizenship consists. A civic education designed to produce Sandel's active citizen who identifies with the community and pursues the common good would be, much more than a liberal civic education, based on "the Aristotelian assumptions regarding *eudaimonia*...[and] take as [its] starting point the idea that there is a final end to human purposes, for the sake of which activities are undertaken" (Hinchliffe 14). In the end, Sandel's critique of liberalism relies on ancient conceptions of freedom stemming from Aristotle and he even identifies Kantian autonomy as the root of liberalism's emphasis on the "unencumbered" self whose individual rights take priority over the demands of the community. While Sandel clearly desires that individuals feel a sense of duty and obligation to the community, his interpretation of Kantian autonomy prevents him from perceiving Kant as a useful means to this end. The main reason that I argue Kant is useful in

achieving Sandel's goal is that civic education in a liberal society simply cannot begin from the assumption that the "Good Life" requires participation in politics. Yet, arguments that civic education promote civic virtue for instrumental reasons alone are also insufficient. Individuals cannot be relied upon to cultivate civic virtue because that is what "good citizens" do. Individuals must have an intrinsic motivation to adhere to moral demands and Kant provides such a conception of human flourishing.

In addition to Sandel's critique, I find Richard Dagger's work in *Civic Virtues* particularly relevant to a revitalization of liberal civic education and consider my contribution to this debate an attempt to further develop Dagger's ideas. He offers what he calls "republican liberalism" as a middle-way between liberalism as it currently exists and the republican alternatives promoted by theorists such as Sandel. Dagger insists that "liberalism necessarily contains its own standards of excellence – standards that prevent it from being neutral in any robust sense and that comport well with a republican interest in civic virtue" (Dagger 119). The conception of the "Good Life" and human flourishing that Dagger insists a liberal society should promote is the life of autonomy and civic virtue. The emphasis on autonomy is what allows Dagger's vision to remain liberal, but it is his definition of autonomy that makes republican commitments to civic virtue possible at the same time. Dagger's normative conception of citizenship is not forced on people by the state, but is instead encouraged as a natural utilization of the autonomy that is cultivated by the state through civic education. According to Dagger, "without specifying a particular way of life as the one that everyone should follow, republican liberalism holds that people must be prepared to exercise autonomy and play the part of the active, public-spirited citizen" (Dagger 119).

Liberals such as William Galston admit that liberalism cannot remain neutral about the “Good Life” but he rejects rational autonomy as something that the liberal state is justified in promoting as necessary to citizenship. Galston fears that prioritizing rational autonomy will empower the state to challenge ways of life that are based more on faith than reason. My argument is that if democratic self-government requires rational autonomy then the state should unapologetically endorse it as a component of the “Good Life” and explicitly cultivate it via civic education. Liberals such as Galston correctly attempt to provide a more normative task for a liberal civic education, but fail to satisfactorily identify what it is that a liberal civic education should promote. In contrast to standard liberal conceptions of autonomy, Dagger insists that “to conceive of autonomy as total independence and self-sufficiency...is to misconceive it. Autonomy is self-rule, but it is rule that aims at the realization...of the self” (Dagger 38). The development and exercise of the capacity of autonomous thought and action is, according to liberals such as William Galston, a vision of the “Good Life”, but Dagger points out that “republican liberalism seeks to *promote* and *cultivate*, but not to *maximize*, certain values” (Dagger 194). In this way, Dagger hopes to split the difference between the robust republicanism of Sandel and the minimalist liberalism of Dagger. Yet, Galston’s objection to such an approach highlights the problem that civic educators must address: what happens when the stuff of “good citizenship” is considered indistinguishable from a “way of life”? Is the state justified in promoting a life of rational autonomy over a life of faith?

I agree with Richard Dagger that the promotion of rational autonomy is a convincing answer to liberal democracy’s viability problem, but it remains to be determined on what basis the neutrality of the liberal state will be abandoned to promote it. If it is the case, as many of these theorists claim, that specific skills, dispositions, and virtues are necessary for liberal

democracy then prescribing a normative vision of citizenship is unavoidable. The problem that I identify with theorists such as Dagger, Galston, and others is their unwillingness to concede that the cultivation of the capacities, dispositions, and activities of “good citizenship” may be barely distinguishable from a more comprehensive vision of the “Good Life” or human flourishing. In the end, their reluctance to promote rational autonomy and civic virtue on intrinsic, perfectionist grounds diminish their arguments because it avoids the question of what will motivate the individual to adhere to any normative vision of citizenship that civic education promotes.

As Paul Weithman points out, the argument that people will be motivated to exhibit civic virtue because it is a desirable component of good citizenship assumes a level of civic duty and obligation that cannot be relied upon. The substance of good citizenship cannot be justified as a means to an end and will not likely be accepted by the individual as such. What is needed is a compelling vision of human flourishing that is an end in itself that also happens to prepare people for and predispose them to a life of active citizenship. If a liberal civic education is not willing to equate the “Good Life” with political participation, then subsuming the content of “good citizenship” under the comprehensive idea of the “good human” would have the result of promoting virtues as goods-in-themselves that also happen to be good for citizenship.

Weithman’s main contention is that individuals will be more likely to embrace a conception of civic virtue that is framed broadly as virtue in-itself. The conclusion that I have made, using Weithman’s argument, is that somewhat counterintuitively the state can “get more for less” in terms of how directly it encourages political participation and civic virtue if it promotes a broad-based civic education of human flourishing that is conducive to active political participation but not justified for that singular purpose. What this would require is for schools to not sacrifice the liberal arts and social sciences in the name of job training or an emphasis on

STEM subjects. The current trend within liberal democracies such as the United States is to reduce not only the basic course requirements in social science that would provide direct civics instruction but also the liberal arts and/or humanities more generally that expose students to philosophy and ethics.

Arguably the cause of this shift is the degree to which liberalism has conformed to the assumptions and values of the marketplace within which individuals are expected to choose their identity and destiny unrestrained from considerations beyond their narrow self-interest. Promoting civic virtue as a necessary ingredient of “good citizenship” will fall on deaf ears because an economic calculus will render participation in politics as unnecessary to success in the marketplace. Citizenship is not perceived as relevant to preparation for the workforce so any normative conception of it must be promoted on intrinsic rather than instrumental grounds. The stakes are high if liberal democracy fails to revitalize civic education in such a way that individuals will embrace citizenship and willingly participate in the maintenance of liberal society.

Conclusion

I argue that the proper foundation for a revitalized liberal civic education is the perfectionist approach found in the moral and practical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. His vision of human flourishing is one of freedom as self-actualization, which for Kant requires autonomy and virtue, both of which happen to be necessary components of the type of republican citizenship that liberal democracy requires to thrive. Kantian freedom is a “positive” freedom that is not singularly geared toward the role of citizen but that nonetheless prepares individuals for the type of citizenship that both republicans and liberals claim is desirable. A proper education, for Kant, would actively equip individuals to think for themselves not only to achieve

independence, or “enlightenment,” but also to improve society. In the end, the liberal state must aim to produce active and virtuous citizens via civic education by casting a wider, more comprehensive net that communicates a Kantian vision of human flourishing because “human beings, in their efforts to be good and to do good, must be moved to act through nothing but the thought of the good itself” (Sweet 164).

Such an approach to education admittedly has much in common with some elements of the classical Christian education movement associated with conservative Christians and celebrated recently in Rod Dreher’s new book *The Benedict Option*. The stated motivation of these conservative Christians to pull their children out of the public school system is not incompatible with the criticism of liberalism summarized in this paper, but the end result of such an education appears not to be preparation for citizenship based on reciprocity but rather further civic fragmentation. What the public school system arguably needs is a more perfectionist civic education that seeks to develop “good humans” and not simply “good employees” or “good Christians.”

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