

What Is the Use of an Ethical Theory of Citizenship?



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Developing a coherent normative account of citizenship is a risky endeavour. The natural impulse of the political theorist is to discover order in disorder, unity in disunity, intelligibility in apparent confusion. And we theorists would like to think that we have something useful to say to those who practice citizenship yet do not engage in much systematic reflection about it. These aspirations, noble and worthy as they surely are, carry with them the risk of imposing order where there is none, stipulating a fake unity to cover up disunity, rendering intelligible what is mysterious and resistant to analysis, and adopting a patronizing and superior stance toward those who “do” citizenship rather than theorizing it, categorizing and sorting their “doings” before taking the trouble to find out what these doings *mean* to the doers. In stepping back from the practice of citizenship, and attempting to separate out the “noise” from the substance, we risk trapping the practice in a sterile theoretical framework, or seeing in the practice what we *want* to see, rather than sincerely reflecting on the values that are embodied in it.

Notwithstanding these risks, theorizing citizenship at its best is nothing but an extension and clarification of the ordinary act of self-interpretation that is incumbent upon all of us, regardless of our profession or degree of intellectual prowess. As such, while we should theorize citizenship with our eyes wide open to the risks such a venture entails, philosophical reflection upon citizenship and its demands is a noble and worthwhile endeavour, and should not be cast aside lightly. The risks of oversimplification, prideful and patronising attitudes, ideological imposition, and the exaggerated sense of self-importance, can be substantially offset if those who

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theorize the practice of citizenship approach political and social phenomena wanting to learn and be enlightened, not just wanting to reform, enlighten, or render intelligible. We must temper our philosophical ambition with a generous dose of humility and intellectual flexibility.

Above all, we must clarify for ourselves what we can reasonably hope to achieve by our theoretical reflections, as well as acknowledging to others and to ourselves certain limitations inherent in the philosophical enterprise. In this paper, my goal is not to develop a specific account of citizenship, but to offer some reflections on the nature of that enterprise. In this sense, this paper could be considered an exercise in “meta-theory” – theory about theory. There are two basic questions I wish to address, in the hopes of providing some reasonable parameters for the enterprise of studying and theorizing citizenship: First, broadly speaking, what is the positive contribution such an enterprise might make to our lives as human beings? Second, where are the outer limits of the transformative power of a theory of citizenship?

Q. 1 What Might a Theory of Citizenship Usefully Contribute to Our Lives as Human Beings?

As moral and political theorists, it is worth stepping back from time to time from our craft, to ask, *what exactly are we doing, and why?* If we aspire to do more than “paint a pretty picture” of the good citizen, to be dusted off and admired from afar, if we pretend to have something to say of interest to practitioners—as I believe most of us do—then what exactly is it that we hope to *contribute* through our theorizing? What end or ends do we hope to advance when we develop normative accounts of citizenship? Developing an account of the good citizen, however tentative or partial, is a human activity, and human beings do not willingly undertake projects for no reason at all. Of all of the possible reasons that might motivate such an enterprise, is there any that can adequately illuminate the relationship between *theories* of citizenship and the *practice* of citizenship on the ground, in a way that explains how theorizing has some interesting bearing on practice, even if the relationship is complex and problematic? Are there reasons underlying the theoretical enterprise that can make a bridge between the theoretical and practical enterprises without simplistically assuming that theory either simply mirrors practice or stands entirely aloof from it?

Although one could attempt to make some modest generalizations about the practice of citizenship, recording people’s attitudes toward some more or less conventional notion of citizenship, this is certainly not what we are doing when we develop a normative account of citizenship. A normative account of citizenship aims to illuminate the possible value of the activities and relationships associated with citizenship, from the perspective of a person who strives to live a worthy and worthwhile life.¹ Now, if the value of citizenship was a given, as obvious as the value of

¹ The perspective of the villain is useful insofar as it helps to bring into relief that of the responsible, honourable citizen. The perspective of the person who seeks to live a worthy life is described in greater detail in Thunder 2014, chap. 2, “The Concept of Ethical Integrity.”

water for a tree, or the value of milk for an infant, then elaborate discussions and debates about the ethics of citizenship would not make much sense. But as it happens, citizenship is a human role which is susceptible to diverse interpretations and enactments and subject to disagreement among reasonable and responsible persons. And we human beings are reflective and reflexive by nature. We do not simply actualize our potentialities, but we pose ourselves questions like “Who am I?,” “What is my potential?,” “What do my relationships mean for me?” and “What ought I do?” Citizenship, insofar as it gives expression to the meaning of our relationships and duties, our standing in the public square, and the meaning of our lives as persons, is necessarily an interpretive and self-interpretive category.

If we add to this the fact that there is something important at stake in how we live our lives—that we may do so with more or less justice, generosity, magnanimity, kindness, and so forth—then the activity of interpreting our role as citizens is not merely of theoretical interest, analogous to the interpretation of a mathematical theorem, but of intensely *practical* interest. After all, how we interpret our citizenship and its demands will shape the type of person we become, for better or for worse. This is true not only of the professional political philosopher, but of any man or woman on the street. Nobody, save infants and those deprived of cognitive functions, escapes the fate of being a self-interpreting being, and nobody escapes the fate of personal responsibility for their self-interpretations and corresponding actions.

If this is so, then we all have an interest, in Harry Frankfurt’s words, in “getting it right,” (Frankfurt 2006) both in regard to our overall way of life, and in regard to our relationship with the communities of which we form a part. We *all* have an interest in sifting through candidate answers to the question, “how should I live?” and selecting one that is acceptable, all things considered. Reflexivity and reflectiveness are thus imperatives of the human condition, once we accept that each of us bears personal responsibility for his or her own choices, and once we accept that those choices are not simply predetermined by circumstances independent of the agent.

Obviously, many people do not take seriously the demand to take themselves seriously, to ponder the meaning of their lives, to act with a sense of responsibility. Instead, they may settle for easy and unreflective answers about the meaning of their lives. Nonetheless, this does not make it any less true that our language, institutions, and habits presuppose, for the most part, that we are indeed answerable for our own choices and actions, and that a person who deserves the respect and admiration of others is a person who *takes himself seriously*, and takes care to “get it right” when it comes to understanding who he is, how he relates to others, and how he should act on a day-to-day basis.

If we accept that this interpretive imperative is a valid feature of human life and is binding upon all—even upon those who wilfully ignore it—then the activities of the ethicist begin to look a lot less divorced from the activities of ordinary people than they might at first appear. Theorizing about the value of citizenship and its place in a worthy life begins to look more like an extension of the self-interpretive activities of ordinary persons than the specialized craft of a professional guild. The theorist, after all, is not only a theorist, but a participant in political and social life, and thus he has a practical interest in clarifying the meaning of his relation with the political community. And the citizen, for his part, may not be a professional theorist,

yet he too is a participant in political and social order, and has an obvious practical interest in grasping its meaning and its demands upon him. In short, the task of interpreting the meaning and implications of our participation in social and political life is incumbent, to a greater or lesser degree, upon all of us, professional ethicist and ordinary citizen alike. Notwithstanding the fact that ethical reflection in academia has a more systematic and comprehensive quality than ethical reflection in the media and in the streets, ethical theories of citizenship are fundamentally extensions of ordinary reflection of the sort that all reflective citizens are capable and well-advised to engage in.² As such, political theory can both learn from the reflections of ordinary citizens (there is no necessary correlation between systematicity or logical rigour and good sense!) and serve to clarify, enrich, critique, and make explicit the reflections of ordinary citizens.

Thus far, I have tried to show that the construction of ethical accounts of citizenship is not the strange and idiosyncratic enterprise that it might initially appear to be—that it is fundamentally an extension of the interpretive and self-interpretive enterprise that is incumbent upon all citizens. But to many, it may still appear too “other-worldly,” insofar as it attempts to render civic practices answerable to demanding moral norms. Someone might object, for example, that ethical theories of citizenship, precisely insofar as they paint citizenship at its best, irresponsibly disregard the *actual* circumstances conditioning the practice of citizenship in the real world—in particular, the human tendencies toward self-aggrandizement, war, violence, deception, and corruption.

The charge that theories of citizenship are irrelevant in practice is bolstered by a certain view of moral philosophy that sees adaptation of moral principles to the empirical conditions of human life as a sort of adulteration of morality, a “second-class” morality that is not worthy of the name.³ John Rawls’s theory of justice, insofar as it derives the basic principles of justice from a highly idealized “original position” of mutually disinterested bargainers, may be accused of having limited relevance to the actual circumstances of *real* citizens, who find themselves thrust into unjust societies and structures, with limited economic and political power to defend their interests. Something similar might be said of other social contract theories, insofar as they rest on the conceit of an original agreement or act of consent among equals on the terms of social cooperation, something that neither was nor ever could be achieved in real human communities, which rely on tradition, inherited structures, seniority, and the authority of some members over others, even in the most democratically structured societies.⁴

²This argument parallels, and is undoubtedly influenced by, MacIntyre’s reflections on “plain persons” and moral philosophy (MacIntyre 1992).

³Certain comments by Immanuel Kant, in particular about the independence of morality from the empirical data, might lead one to take this view, although to what extent this is a faithful reading of Kant is quite another question.

⁴I do not mean to entirely dismiss the utility of political theories that rest on thought experiments or philosophical conceits. There is, after all, a respected tradition of utopian and dystopian literature. Abstracting away from real political and social conditions can sometimes serve to shed valuable light on the real conditions of social life. For example, utopian and dystopian accounts of

In light of the excessively abstract and unreal quality of highly idealized approaches to political theory such as those I have just mentioned, skepticism about the practical relevance of ethical theories of citizenship is quite understandable. However, there are ways to approach the question of citizenship that do not fall into the trap of abstracting away from the difficult and messy conditions of real societies. There are ways of theorizing citizenship that are neither flat-footed, uncritical descriptions of the social landscape (an enterprise whose possibility is at any rate highly debateable⁵), nor elaborate structures of principles that conveniently disregard salient empirical conditions of political life. We can approach citizenship with a blend of realism and hope, striving to understand the practice at its best, without turning a blind eye to the difficulties of implementation in an imperfect world partly dominated by evil and unjust persons and organizations. I would characterise such an approach as broadly Aristotelian in spirit, not in the sense of embracing all the nuances of an Aristotelian picture of social order, but in the sense of sharing Aristotle's passion for discovering not only what is pleasing to behold from a distance, but what real societies and human beings are capable of achieving, consistent with the constraints of human nature and the lessons of history.⁶

This approach accepts that systematic inquiry about political and social order is not merely oriented toward theoretical knowledge, but toward the improvement of self and society. To study citizenship may bring the satisfaction of a more refined understanding of oneself and one's community—a benefit not to be underestimated—but it is also, of its very nature, a critical study of our commitments and priorities as human beings. After all, to exercise one's citizenship is to attempt to bring oneself into a “right relation” with the surrounding community. As such, the study of citizenship cannot be indifferent to the quality of our lives as human beings. To use Christine Korsgaard's language, a theory of citizenship is a clarification of our “practical identity,” “a description [of yourself] under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” (Korsgaard 1996, 101).

We are led to inquire into the meaning and values implicit in the practice of citizenship not for its own sake, but because as human beings, we can neither live virtuously nor make sense of our lives outside of the structure of a human community and outside the structure of a system of law and order. The commitment to personal growth and virtue naturally leads us to inquire into the conditions under which personal and social development is *possible*. This is what leads us to the study of political community, and concomitantly, to the study of citizenship. The preconditions

social order may serve to render certain values or disvalues more salient in our imagination. Nonetheless, building utopias and thought experiments is a risky endeavour, and is no substitute for the task of thinking through the conditions facing agents in real societies.

⁵Cf Finnis 1998, 40–42 for a succinct refutation of the viability of “value-free” social science.

⁶Aristotle's discussion of oligarchic and democratic regimes is a good example of this grounding of theory in history and praxis. Aristotle does not simply stipulate the proper mix of oligarchic and democratic principles. Rather, he begins by adjudicating historically familiar debates among oligarchs and democrats. See Aristotle's *Politics*, bk. 3, esp. 1280a6–1284b34; and bk. 6, esp. 1318a10–1318b5 (Aristotle 1984).

for personal and social development naturally include culture—here understood broadly in terms of moral dispositions, habits of mind, and ethical ideals—and institutions, or rule-governed practices. The ethics of citizenship connects relatively seamlessly with the cultural question, but not all accounts of citizenship are adequately attentive to the institutional context of citizenship. Any attempt to discuss the ethics of citizenship while ignoring or by-passing the institutional question would be a piece of other-worldly speculation or an exercise in utopian thinking.

One of the closing passages of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is instructive in this regard. It points out that "discourses" alone will not suffice to persuade people to act justly and virtuously—a point that marks the transition to politics, which complements philosophy and high culture with law and punishment. A normative theory of citizenship must attend not only to the moral values and virtues of community life such as justice and cooperation among equals, but the institutional conditions under which these values can in fact stand some chance of being *realized* and respected by the community at large.

Now if what has to do with happiness as well as with the virtues, and also with friendship and pleasure, has been sufficiently discussed in outline, ought one to assume that our chosen task has its end? Or, as has been said, is the end in matters of action not contemplating and knowing each of them but rather doing them? Then it is not sufficient to know about virtue, but one must try to have it and use it, unless there is some other way that we become good...if discourses by themselves were sufficient for making people decent, then justly "they would take many large fees," as Theognis says, and one would need to provide them, but as things are, discourses appear to have the power to encourage and stimulate open-natured young people, and would make a well-born character that loves what is truly beautiful be inspired with virtue, but they are unable to encourage most people toward what is beautiful and good. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. X, 1179b1–10 (Aristotle 2009))

An Aristotelian respect for the basic constraints of human nature, for those aspects of our existence that are integral to a meaningful and worthwhile life and those tendencies that are part and parcel of our mortal condition, does not entail that theories of citizenship and political order must blindly ape the patterns of human behaviour or indulge man's most depraved instincts. Nor does it mean that theories of citizenship must put political expediency and survival above all other human goods. A normative account of citizenship, at its best, calls forth our better selves, reminding us of the goodness we are capable of, in spite of the temptation to capitulate to selfishness, and in spite of our participation in institutions and social structures that may penalize us for putting our lives at the service of the community. A normative account of citizenship, while it refuses to close its eyes to existing social, cultural, and institutional constraints, tries to imagine a form of civic life that is humanly dignifying and tries to devise strategies for making society and culture more hospitable to that dignifying vision. In this sense, a normative account of citizenship is constructive and future-oriented, not merely critical of the status quo.

Q. 2 Where Are the Outer Limits of the Transformational Power of a Theory of Citizenship?

So far, I have suggested that the enterprise of developing a normative account of citizenship, far from being a pure exercise in utopian thinking, is at its best an engagement with the facts on the ground, an attempt to develop an interpretation of the practice of citizenship that respects its operating conditions but also calls forth the agent's higher self. It is now time to consider the other side of the coin, namely the limits inherent in theory as an instrument of moral, political, and social transformation. We political philosophers are quite susceptible to the temptation of exaggerating our own role in political life, or overestimating the transformative power of our intellectual craft. We may even be tempted, from time to time, to imagine ourselves in the role of a philosopher-king, contemplating the revolution our own ideas could effect in the political landscape and the public mindset—if only people would pay more attention to them!

This temptation rests on at least two errors: (i) first, the error of exaggerating the power of theory to soundly motivate action and direct practice; and (ii) second, the error of thinking that the values defended by the theorist can be implemented through an act of power emanating from one center, say a powerful agent with the “right ideas.” By considering each of these errors separately, we can get a clearer picture of some of the limitations of political theory as an instrument of social change.

Political theory can undoubtedly *clarify* motivation and *illuminate* the values at stake in the practice of citizenship. However, we human beings are on the one hand largely (though not entirely) creatures of habit, highly influenced by our early education and socialization as children and adolescents, and on the other hand capable of directing our lives according to our own preferences and desires, for better or for worse. The force of habit and personal commitment (for better or for worse) is typically just as powerful as the ideas we are exposed to as adults. For this reason, theory, while it can clarify and to some extent channel existing motives, cannot usually defeat opposing motives or make up for missing motives. For example, if a person has become desensitized to beauty and goodness, or hardened to the suffering of others, reading about values or aesthetics is unlikely to suddenly open his eyes to beauty and goodness. Such a person needs a conversion of the heart and mind, and this is occasioned either by a personal crisis or a dramatic and moving encounter with beauty or goodness, frequently revealed in another person or in an unmerited insight apparently granted from on high.

Similarly, the vantage-point of the political theorist, however informed by practice and conversation and reading, is nonetheless the vantage-point of a single person, and insofar as it aims to embrace a wide array of phenomena under a single coherent idea or theory, necessarily stands at a certain distance from the vantage-point of the political actor who must make decisions that are highly conditioned by his own unique role in the political system, and of course by cultural and institutional constraints as they operate upon *him*. The strength of political theory is that it

can provide an account of citizenship and political action that is valid for a large number of political actors. But for this very reason, it must leave generous leeway for the practical wisdom of citizens, who are not constructing general accounts of citizenship, but deciding how to act *here and now*, with all of their personal baggage involved, including their capacities, talents, sense of calling, institutional roles, political power, and social networks. Though a theory of citizenship may illuminate and clarify what is at stake in the decisions of the citizen, it must ultimately leave a good deal up to the informed deliberation and decision of the citizen, and it must restrain its inclination to usurp or suppress the pivotal role of practical wisdom in political life.

Besides overestimating the power of theory to guide and motivate practice, another way we might overestimate the transformative power of theory is to think that the step from theory to practice is as simple as putting sound ideas in the mind of a great and wise statesman, so that they might be implemented by him—albeit mediated through his practical wisdom—“top down,” like a small piece of yeast that penetrates and transforms the whole dough mix. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately!), moral and civic ideals can rarely be properly established in a large, dispersed population through the strategic actions of a few powerful individuals. I do not deny that there may be exceptional moments of crisis in which the heroic or exemplary action of a great statesman can have a powerful transformative impact on public mores and behaviour.⁷ However, in the ordinary course of events, transformations in public mores and behaviour cannot be effected rapidly and effectively by a few powerful actors except by means that are irreconcilable with the value of personal freedom, such as fear-mongering and ideological (i.e. irrational, epistemically suspect, manipulative) propaganda.

Moral and political transformation in a free society is achieved through persuasion, education, and example. It aims to engage not only the passions, but the *reason* of the citizen. The citizen must—proportionate to his age and reasoning abilities—become actively and rationally complicit in his own transformation, otherwise that transformation is built on the external manipulation of his passions, rather than on genuine rational reflection, and is liable to be reversed when the passions find another object that is more satisfying or pleasurable.⁸ But speaking to the reason of citizens is an extended and gradual endeavour, which normally requires the free cooperation of educators, parents, and communities. It is one thing to shift people’s

⁷ Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Abraham Lincoln come to mind as possible examples. Let the reader think of his or her own favorite exemplary and transformative public figures.

⁸ My rejection of predominantly passion-driven forms of influence is perfectly compatible with the legitimate and crucial role of the emotions in rational discourse and persuasion. There is a world of difference between the emotional manipulation associated with ideological discourse, which has no serious interest in the pursuit of truth, and rational discourse that appeals to or induces emotional dispositions, whether compassion, fear, affection, or courage, without abandoning the pursuit of truth.

incentives by denying them information or feeding them a “party line,” quite another to win them over to a better way of life, responding to their questions and objections along the way.

A state-imposed programme of civic ethics, even if it happens to be based on a more or less sound theory of citizenship, is unlikely to make for better citizens, unless it does the hard work of winning over communities and educators, adapting its curriculum to local conditions, and balancing instruction with inspiring real-life role models that citizens can learn from. In short, civic ideals, however coherent and well-grounded, only become securely embedded in the mind and heart of a population when they are *freely* embraced on the ground, supported by the presence of exemplary citizens in local communities, and transmitted from generation to generation through educational institutions that are not simply dictated by government policy, but embraced, adapted, and owned by teachers, parents, and (proportionate to their maturity and stage of development) students.

A tremendous amount of cooperation would be required to successfully and respectfully instill sound civic ideals in a large population, and that cooperation would, of course, be contingent upon the free choices of countless citizens, not just on the opportunities and obligations created by public policies. For these reasons, any political theorist with the ambition of influencing civic culture or transforming society with his or her ideas had better keep in mind that quick-fix, top-down solutions usually rely on manipulative and tyrannical tactics, and that the true friend of freedom will restrain his transformative zeal and patiently advance his ideas through a delicate balance of legislation, rational persuasion and cooperation.

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To reiterate, the purpose of this essay has not been to develop a substantive normative account of citizenship, but to provide a broad framework for thinking through the practical contribution and relevance of a normative theory of citizenship. I have sought to clarify what a theory of citizenship might hope to achieve beyond the intrinsic satisfaction of seeing things more clearly (*theoria*), and what sorts of limitations confront the theorist’s ambitions when we give due weight to the values of rationality and personal freedom. I have suggested that a theory of citizenship is fundamentally a continuation of the task of self-interpretation that is incumbent upon all citizens, and that this task must avoid slipping into utopianism by keeping in mind the basic limitations of human nature. In addition, I have argued that the transformative impact of theory is necessarily limited by the fact that the epistemic vantage-point of the theorist is importantly different from that of many practitioners, as well as by the fact that social transformation is contingent on the free cooperation of many different persons, something that no single person, government, or institution can hope to guarantee. To the extent that these clarifications are found acceptable, they should serve as useful guideposts for the theoretical enterprise, and as sobering reminders of the dangers of philosophical hubris.

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