

The Ethics of Citizenship in the 21st Century

David Thunder
Editor

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 Springer

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ISBN 978-3-319-50414-8 ISBN 978-3-319-50415-5 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50415-5>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017934072

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface

This collection of essays discusses a range of important challenges confronting the theory and practice of citizenship in a globalized, socially fragmented, and multicultural world. Issues addressed include the ethical and practical value of patriotism in a globalized world, the relation between civic allegiance and religious commitment, the standing of conscience claims in a morally diverse society, and the problem of citizen complicity in political injustice. We analyze the practice of citizenship through the lens of diverse philosophical traditions and perspectives, including Confucianism, Platonism, Thomism, and pragmatism. Although the contributors find their bearings in very different traditions, they nonetheless share the conviction that the crisis of modern citizenship, whatever else it may be, is most certainly a crisis of the ethical values that give shape, form, and meaning to modern social life.

At least since the emergence of the Athenian polis over two millennia ago, citizenship has played a central role in the self-understanding and internal organization of Western societies. Most obviously perhaps, citizenship has served as a marker of “insiders” and “outsiders,” that is, those who have the full panoply of political and civil rights, including self-government and (in more recent times) welfare, and those who have a more restricted set of rights. In addition, ideals of citizenship, including virtues of law-abidingness, public service, tolerance, and civic friendship, have traditionally played a significant role in guiding people’s behavior and attitudes and in establishing shared parameters of social order.

However, it is no longer obvious how or precisely in what form citizenship can continue to serve these functions: the traditional concept of citizenship as a shared ethnic, religious, and/or cultural identity has limited relevance in a multicultural world, and even the connection between citizenship and national belonging has been put in jeopardy by increasing social mobility and the pervasive influence of a global economy and mass media, whose symbols and values often seem porous to national boundaries. A universal, cosmopolitan conception of citizenship seems scarcely more promising, given the natural human need for rootedness and engagement with an embodied community. Enlightenment ideals of a fully secularized citizenship are acknowledged by the staunchest defenders of Enlightenment rationality, such as Jurgen Habermas, to be unsustainable at this historic juncture, insofar as

they presuppose a form of rationality “cleansed” of religious and faith-based assumptions, a proposition many post-Enlightenment philosophers no longer find plausible, and a form of “secularized” public morality purged of all traces of civil religion, another proposition that many sociologists and philosophers would find implausible. Thus, the concept and practice of citizenship, in spite of its continuing relevance as a source of normativity and shared belonging, appear to be suffering a deep crisis.

This volume is conceived fundamentally as a constructive response to this crisis. As such, one of the distinguishing features of the volume is its intensely practical orientation—it is focused on providing the sort of conceptual and normative clarification that can prepare the ground for constructive solutions to our civic crisis. In this respect, though it inevitably involves some intellectual history, sociology, and comparative political theory, it is first and foremost an exercise in *practical philosophy*. Each contributor, after his or her own manner, seeks to penetrate beneath the lived experience of contemporary citizenship, to uncover the ethical principles and values that make it intelligible and sustainable over the long haul. It is this practical orientation that explains the contemporary focus of our investigation.

Second, resisting the habit in contemporary discussions of focusing overwhelmingly on the novel dimensions of citizenship and politics, our investigation does its best to respect the dual character of contemporary problems of citizenship—the fact that they are perennial in certain respects and quite novel in others. In some respects, citizenship must accommodate itself to a fast-changing and increasingly globalized world, and this brings its own peculiar set of problems with it, both problems for the interpretation of citizenship itself, which is a concept “in motion,” and problems for the moral loyalties of citizens, who inhabit multiple social groups and may have great difficulty identifying with the official civic identity of the state. In other respects, however, we are no different from our medieval and ancient Greek predecessors: we too have to confront political injustices and decide how to reconcile fidelity to our conscience with responsible participation in a political regime that does not always honor the claims of justice. Whether novel or perennial, the questions raised by citizenship today are worthy of careful and sustained scrutiny, and that is the object of this collection.

Third, while citizenship could be addressed in a more abstract manner, for example, as a way of imagining the commitments of a perfectly reasonable set of agents who need to set the terms of mutual cooperation (this is the approach we find in Rawls’s original position and in Habermas’s discourse ethics), in this volume, we have generally approached the problem of citizenship as a problem for the practical identity and emotional life of the agent thrust into a social network not of this own choosing, rather than as a problem of choosing an ideal community structure or impartially fixing the content of one’s civic duties in a highly idealized context. We are interested in understanding what citizenship means for those who call themselves “citizens” and how the values and commitments woven into this role interact with the agent’s neighboring values and commitments. All of our contributors, in one form or another, whether tacitly or expressly, pose the question, “*What is it like to be a citizen today, and what does this imply for the lives of citizens as human persons?*”

A fourth distinguishing feature of this volume is that rather than studying modern liberal democratic conceptions of citizenship on their own terms, for example, within the context of modern Western states and their traditional philosophical foundations (which is fairly typical in contemporary discussions), we aim to frame modern citizenship in a broader cultural and philosophical context, whether in terms of the fact of cultural pluralism and social mobility or against the backdrop of ideas and values that either are partially recovered from classical sources (such as the idea of the worthy life) or have been developed in non-Western traditions (such as Islamic ideals of submission to God's sovereignty or Confucian ideas about moral virtue and its social configuration). The point of this dialogic encounter is not to reject one of the interlocutors, but rather to see if a richer and more adequate conception of citizenship can emerge from the encounter. It seems fair to assume that all of our authors have a strong commitment to certain aspects of the Western civic inheritance, ideas such as equality before the law and freedom of conscience and association, and in this sense this volume is indeed in important respects a "product" of Western culture. However, our authors are eager to learn from the dialogic encounter with other ideas and values and would undoubtedly acknowledge that learning does not only flow in one direction!

So much for the distinguishing marks of our approach to the problems of citizenship. Now, to the specific themes we address. The essays selected for this volume address four important problems that affect the meaning and practice of citizenship in contemporary societies: (i) first, the nature and purpose of the activity of theorizing citizenship and specifically its relation to contemporary *practices* of citizenship; (ii) second, the types of emotional and moral attachment that constitute and define the civic bond, in particular in the context of modern mass societies; (iii) third, the potential tensions between the demands of civic life and the demands of the individual *conscience*; and (iv) fourth, the challenge of forging a civic ethos capable of embracing a religiously, morally, and culturally diverse citizenry.

The first two contributions address some meta-theoretical questions concerning the general content, motivation, and limitations of an ethical study of citizenship. In the introductory essay, "What Is the Use of an Ethical Theory of Citizenship?," David Thunder frames the general activity of theorizing citizenship against the fact that we humans are reflexive beings: beings who interrogate the meaning of our own activities and lives. As such, inquiry into the ethical value of citizenship is proper to the sorts of beings we are and meets a deep need to render our commitments and actions both intelligible and justifiable to ourselves and others. This need is of course deeply engrained into our psyches, as Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* demonstrates. However, it is more than just a psychological drive: it is a philosophical impulse to know the truth and live our lives in accordance with it. A theory of citizenship that acknowledges this philosophical impulse, illuminates the basic questions behind it, and uncovers even in a preliminary way the values and purposes served by civic identity and engagement can act as a stimulus to further reflection and serve to give some basic orientation to moral conduct. On the other hand, Thunder is at pains to point out that an ethical theory of citizenship cannot bypass the need for practical wisdom nor dispense with the task of moral formation. It can

only illuminate and inspire people who have participated in, or learnt vicariously from, communities in which norms of civility and *convivencia* (“living together”) are taught through example and patient instruction.

In “Varieties of Citizenship and the Moral Foundations of Politics,” Bill English argues that a focus on questions of citizenship is likely to impoverish our political understanding unless we recognize the plural character of citizenship and the ways in which citizenship claims are intricately related to ethical allegiances. Attending to the varieties of citizenship, however, is difficult given the primacy of the modern state as a political unit. We can, in fact, be citizens of multiple polities and communities, depending on the kinds of allegiance each requires, and understanding this truth is crucial if debates about citizenship are to illuminate political discourse, rather than simply recapitulate existing political differences in less precise terms. By examining the kinds of state functions that are bound up with citizenship debates, we can better grasp the larger scope of this concept and its implications. What these debates show—whether they concern economic distribution, cultural identity, or cosmopolitan travel—is that the bounds of citizenship are inherently moral and that citizenship is a marker of community, which, as Augustine points out, is constituted by common objects of love. Rightly understood, questions of citizenship concern the bounds of communities and the moral obligations and opportunities that accompany them.

The next two contributions fall under the general theme of “Citizenship and Attachment.” In each case, the special attachments of citizenship are discussed, and an effort is made to connect them coherently to more universalistic impulses such as the pursuit of truth and justice. In “Civic Motivation and Globalization: What Is It Like to Be a Good Citizen Today?,” Simon Keller proposes a pluralistic model of civic loyalty which he claims does greater justice to the complexity of our emotional lives than standard accounts, which tend to link civic identity and loyalty quite strongly with national identity and belonging. He points out that the flourishing of states is often linked to the forging of national identities: “creating Italians” or “inventing Australians,” for example. Under the associated model of patriotic citizenship, it is hoped that citizens will give a primary and far-reaching loyalty to the state and hence find motivation to act well as citizens. In the twenty-first century, states continue to be legally and morally significant entities, and there is good reason to want people to have particularized commitments to their own states. Yet, as states lose their connections with identifiable ethnic histories, as people receive more of their news and entertainment from international sources, and as the major problems we face are increasingly transnational in nature, the conditions that maintain allegiance to the state as a primary form of identity are ever further undermined. Patriotic citizenship, furthermore, has always brought with it ethical and epistemic dangers, which are arguably exacerbated by recent global changes.

What could take the place of the familiar model of patriotic citizenship? We should start, Keller suggests, by understanding the complexity of our emotional lives as citizens. A loyalty can be derivative yet very strong, and there are significant forms of emotional commitment apart from loyalty to one’s state or nation. Keller sketches a broad picture of the good citizen on which she is not patriotic and does

not identify primarily with her country, but on which she nevertheless holds a strong commitment to her country, grounded in an accurate understanding of her place in her local community and the wider world. This model of citizenship, he suggests, is both recognizable and widely achievable.

Emma Cohen de Lara, in “The Affective Dimension of Citizenship: A Platonic Account,” offers a complementary exploration of patriotism in light of Plato’s *Laws*, which, like Keller’s discussion, is especially attentive to the affective bonds through which civic allegiance is realized. Contemporary literature on citizenship, Cohen de Lara observes, tends to define citizenship as rights-based, that is, as political membership by means of which one is entitled to certain civic, social, and political rights. But this approach does not do full justice to the *affective* dimension of citizenship, or citizenship defined as the emotional experience of a collective bond. In this essay, Cohen de Lara conceptualizes the affective dimension of citizenship by reappropriating insights from Plato’s dialogue *Laws*.

Cohen de Lara shows how Plato, in the *Laws*, develops an interesting psychology of the citizen. Being a member of a political community, for Plato, means that one has internalized the laws of the political community, both on a cognitive and affective level. This process of internalization occurs through participation in public festivals where the laws of the polity are set to music and recited. The rhythmic bodily agreement that is part of the choral performances creates the affective bonds between the citizens. Moreover, the affective bonds between the citizens are directed toward a common object of affection, namely, the laws of the polity. These laws, furthermore, have so-called preambles that explain the reasoning behind the law. Hence, both on an emotional and a rational level, the citizens are, as it were, molded together. Cohen de Lara recognizes some of the limitations of Plato’s theory when it comes to the modern, liberal democratic polity. Still, she argues that Plato helps us to conceptualize the affective dimension of citizenship that we can observe today in one’s own subrational affection for one’s country and fellow citizens but also, in a negative sense, in the tensions that develop between long-term citizens and newcomers. The affective dimension of citizenship is part of the empirical reality which we inhabit. Plato’s insights help us recognize, articulate, interpret, and possibly change these emotions.

The third theme to be considered in this work is “Citizenship and Conscience,” that is, the place of conscientious judgment and action in the political arena. In “Conscientious Citizenship: Arendt and Aquinas on Conscience and Politics,” Angela Miceli argues that a Thomistic approach to conscience and its public standing can help us give the claims of conscience some normative grip in the political arena, the sort of grip they would lack if understood in purely subjective terms. She begins by observing the need, acknowledged by many political thinkers, for a space in the public sphere for moral reflection and conscientious objection, in order to resist pressures to conform to unjust political and legal norms. Hannah Arendt points to Socrates as the paradigmatic citizen—a citizen who, in her view, is responsible solely to himself and to his own internal dialogue. Miceli argues that Arendt’s account of Socratic conscience fails in two important respects: first, Socratic conscience is limited to the individual and has little or no political influence, nor can

convictions of conscience be shared among citizens. Second, such an account of conscience does not solve Arendt's own dilemma on the failure of conscience; that is to say, she cannot explain why Eichmann's collaboration with the extermination of the Jews was *wrong* and reprehensible.

Miceli offers a different account of conscientious citizenship by examining the theory of conscience offered by Thomas Aquinas, a theory that holds much in common with Arendt's. Since the two thinkers are not considered to hold much in common, she first demonstrates the similarities between their respective theories of conscience. Then, she argues that Aquinas offers a solution to the two problems identified in Arendt's theory. Specifically, she argues that by focusing on a *relational* aspect of conscience, citizens can share convictions of conscience with political potency. For Arendt, this is an impossibility since she believes that conscience is too personal to give rise to political action. Further, by distinguishing between true and false conscience and by offering a set of criteria with which to judge true and false convictions of conscience, Aquinas offers an answer to the problem of the failure of conscience, i.e., to the typological possibility of Eichmann.

Like Miceli, David Thunder, in his essay, "An Ethical Defense of Citizenship," is concerned with the ways in which political participation inevitably draws citizens, for better or for worse, into morally significant actions and relationships. The starting point for Thunder's argument is the observation that in many parts of the Western world, we have reached a low point in public confidence in the moral value and relevance of citizenship, in the integrity of our political institutions, and in the nobility of public office. Consequently, if we are to secure the political field for those among us virtuous enough to serve the common good, we need to restore public confidence in the ethical value of citizenship and public service. One small step in this direction would be to allay understandable moral qualms about the practice of citizenship. And that is precisely what Thunder aims to do here. He hopes that by defeating or at least weakening some serious ethical objections against citizenship, he can at least help pave the way for the larger task of developing an ethical ideal of citizenship that can inspire citizens to put their talents at the service of the common good. The three objections he addresses are rooted in (i) the alleged complicity of ordinary citizens in a range of collective and institutional evils, (ii) the alleged necessity of ruthless utilitarian reasoning in political life, and (iii) the alleged incompatibility of modern citizenship with the Christian way of life. Each of the three objections, according to Thunder, can be answered or at least significantly deflated.

The final theme to be explored is "The Ethics of Citizenship in a Multi-cultural Society." The first two essays in this section consider the virtues and character traits citizens require in order to engage constructively in a political space marked by moral and cultural heterogeneity, while the third essay explores the possibility of articulating civic norms sufficiently capacious to accommodate Islamic religious beliefs without endangering the core values of a liberal society. In "Virtue Politics: Developing Confucian Citizenship and Confucian Citizens," David Elstein considers the resources available within Confucian thought for developing an ideal of civic virtue suitable for the conditions of a modern constitutional democracy and argues

that Confucian thought could support a thin theory of civic virtue capable of appealing to diverse religious and philosophical schools of thought. Although consensus about moral virtues is a serious hurdle in pluralistic societies, Elstein argues for a thin conception of Confucian moral virtues which would have a better chance of securing wide agreement. Elstein also makes the case that this line of thought can reconcile more successfully the cosmopolitan aspect of Confucian philosophy with loyalty to a particular moral and political community. The result is a theory of citizenship grounded in classical Confucian thought, but that takes democracy as a necessary condition for the full realization of Confucian virtues. Insofar as a plausible case can be made for the generality of these virtues, Confucian citizenship can make a case that there are common goods and common standards of behavior all people can share.

Paolo Monti is interested in the practice of citizenship in the context of a specific form of moral disagreement, namely, disagreement that involves religious differences. In “From Social Practices to Reflective Agency: A Postsecular Ethics of Citizenship,” Monti argues that instead of thinking of the ethics of citizenship as a static set of secular norms, we ought to think of the norms of citizenship as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between coequal citizens, each of whose perspectives and values are informed and transformed by the interaction. No single person or group—whether secular or religious—controls the meaning of citizenship, and consequently, the notion of a dichotomous choice between a purely secular and purely theological ideal of citizenship does not make sense. In this sense, Monti advocates an ethic of citizenship that transcends the traditional secular-religious divide.

Monti’s account of citizenship is grounded in the analysis of our condition as “co-practitioners” in civil society. As active members of society—workers, activists, consumers, players, etc.—we constantly participate in a number of social practices, and these practices come with sets of embedded beliefs, rules, habits, and values. Within this framework, Monti suggests that a reflective consideration of the web of practical cooperative relationships that ordinarily characterize our agency as actors of civil society may adequately ground a normative ethics of citizenship. Every citizen is in fact dependent on social cooperation and is in some way responsible for it, yet nobody enjoys a complete monopoly of its constitutive cognitive and motivational resources. This reflective awareness affects the self-understanding of both religious and secular citizens and calls for an epistemic and practical disposition to cooperatively rearrange and reformulate one’s own arguments and actions in the light of the structural co-implication of one’s own belief with the beliefs of others within the same public spaces. On this approach, the notion of citizenship is also multilayered as is our belonging and participation in civil society, at a local, national, and global level, not necessarily bound to membership in a single political entity.

The third essay in the section on citizenship in a multicultural world is entitled “Liberal Citizenship and the Search for an Overlapping Consensus: The Case of Muslim Minorities.” This essay, by Andrew March, tackles a question of increasing relevance across the world, not least in Europe, where the Muslim population is projected to grow significantly over the next few decades and global Jihadist

ideologies have sought legitimation in the religion of Islam, namely, the possibility of reconciling Islam with the basic commitments of citizenship in a constitutional democracy. This question is crucial, and its resolution will be decisive, for better or for worse, for the political role of Islam in both established and nascent constitutional democracies. March is not interested directly in what policies a liberal state should have toward Islam nor in what practices on the part of citizens are compatible with justice and equality, but rather in what *views* held by citizens—in this particular case, Muslim citizens—are reasonable responses to the liberal terms of social cooperation. His aim is to investigate under what conditions Islam could provide its adherents with authentically moral (rather than merely instrumental or pragmatic) reasons for signing onto the terms of social cooperation in a liberal society, and what sorts of concessions a liberal society could reasonably make to Muslim minorities with a view to winning their loyalty, without endangering the core values of a free society.

Interestingly, all three approaches to the ethics of citizenship in a multicultural society are united in (i) their implicit acceptance of the permanence of deep disagreement as a constitutive feature of modern polities; (ii) their rejection of the notion that civic morality can or ought to be neutral among competing conceptions of the good; (iii) their belief that civic morality is inevitably shaped in its content, if not exclusively, certainly in part, by the moral demands of cooperating with people with significantly different points of view; (iv) their evident concern with the reconciliation of morally substantive commitments and loyalties with the moral and practical exigencies of living in a culturally and morally heterogeneous society; and (v) their refusal to treat the norms and virtues of citizenship as entirely *sui generis* or independent from the norms and virtues of a good human life.

Although this collection does not pretend to offer a systematic treatment of the ethics of citizenship, it does offer some careful and original discussions of specific questions raised by civic life in the twenty-first century, in particular questions that implicate our sense of purpose, meaning, and identity as human beings inserted, for better or for worse, into the warp and woof of social life. Another distinguishing feature of this collection is that rather than working exclusively within the context of liberal theory or state-based institutions, we aim to situate contemporary challenges of civic life in a broader cultural, philosophical, and historical context, bringing “Western” ideals of citizenship into dialogue with Confucian, Islamic, and classical concepts and confronting our inherited statist paradigms of citizenship with the facts of globalization and social mobility. Attending to this broader context can potentially free our minds from lazy assumptions and blind spots that may creep into our understanding of citizenship and enrich our philosophical imagination as we attempt to adapt the theory and practice of citizenship to a fragmented, culturally diverse, and globalized world.

Contents

Part I Theorizing the Practice of Citizenship

What Is the Use of an Ethical Theory of Citizenship?	3
David Thunder	
Varieties of Citizenship and the Moral Foundations of Politics	13
William English	

Part II Citizenship and Attachment

Civic Motivation and Globalization: What Is It Like to Be a Good Citizen Today?	29
Simon Keller	
The Affective Dimension of Citizenship: A Platonic Account.	49
Emma Cohen De Lara	

Part III Citizenship and Conscience

Conscientious Citizenship: Arendt and Aquinas on Conscience and Politics	65
Angela C. Miceli Stout	
An Ethical Defense of Citizenship	85
David Thunder	

Part IV The Ethics of Citizenship in a Multicultural Society

Confucian Citizenship of Shared Virtue	105
David Elstein	

From Social Practices to Reflective Agency: A Postsecular Ethics of Citizenship 127
Paolo Monti

Liberal Citizenship and the Search for an Overlapping Consensus: The Case of Muslim Minorities 145
Andrew F. March

Correction to: The Ethics of Citizenship in the 21st Century C1