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Introduction

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Published in:
Philosophical Explorations

Publication date:
2001

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van den Brink, H. H. A. (2001). Introduction: Civic Virtue and Pluralism. *Philosophical Explorations*, IV(3), 152-156.

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Introduction: Civic Virtue and Pluralism*

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Political theory is under the spell of pluralism. Many studies investigate in what way pluralism affects the unity of the democratic polity, the fairness of legal systems and representative democracy, and the requirements of political obligation and civility. In this special issue of *Philosophical Explorations*, the impact of pluralism on our understanding of civic virtue and civic competence is discussed.

It is not easy to define civic virtue and pluralism, and in this brief introduction I will not attempt to do so. Rather, I want to sketch some general aspects of the contemporary debate over these notions. Apart from all the different kinds of pluralism that can be distinguished B social, ethical, cultural, political B there is the interesting aspect that pluralism is both valued and feared. Pluralism is valued because it is taken to enhance personal autonomy, to permit a diversity of authentic lifestyles and cultural practices, to give room to new social and political experiments, and to provide a counterweight to the much lamented negative effects of rationalist and ethno-centric modern political thought. However, pluralism is also widely feared. There are those who fear that contemporary societies provide individuals with too many worthless options, i.e., options the widespread availability of which seem to harm rather than benefit the individual-s interest in making valuable choices. Similarly, many fear that if pluralism goes unchecked, it may produce feelings of alienation from society and ethnic, cultural, or religious fundamentalism. Pluralism may give room to new social and political experiments, but will these experiments not be harmful rather than beneficial to the well-being of individuals and society as a whole? And finally, pluralism may seem an attractive alternative to the outdated assumption of the cultural homogeneity of nation-states, but where does a radical pluralism of loyalties, cultures, and political visions leave the ideals of social cohesion and the unity of the democratic citizenry?

The notion of civic virtue, which has witnessed a remarkable comeback in the 1990s (see Kymlicka and Norman 1994), is sometimes presented as a promising way out of many of the problems pluralism confronts us with. In practical politics, we are only too familiar with politicians who claim that such problems would wither away if only citizens were willing to take responsibility for their actions from a point of view of civility. In contemporary political theory, no serious author embraces this simple rhetorical appeal to civic virtue. To start with, although it may be true that the flourishing of society in part depends on the exercise of virtues such as self-restraint, tolerance, trust, justice, benevolence, loyalty, and political participation, it is equally true that the exercise of such virtues cannot repair institutional shortcomings of the state apparatus. Where the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the state are systematically flawed, one can hardly expect the state-s subjects to repair the negative consequences thereof through virtuous action. Such a division of labor is part neither of the liberal nor of the republican understanding of the responsibilities of state officials and citizens. Furthermore, citizens should not be expected to take on that responsibility in societies that are simply too complex and diverse to be coordinated through face-to-face democratic interaction.

Second, there is the more fundamental theoretical problem that the notions of civic virtue in both traditions seem to presuppose ideas of social organization and cultural homogeneity that are quite foreign to contemporary pluralist societies. In the republican tradition, authors such as Aristotle and Machiavelli understood participation in politics as participation in the wider, organic whole of society in which different estates or classes all exercise roles that were thought to benefit society as a whole.¹ Excellent exercise of these roles was thought of as the exercise of

virtue. Apart from the well-known problems that the metaphysical notion of the political animal in Aristotle's work confronts us with, this functionalistic understanding of civic virtue is problematic in contemporary Western societies for a number of reasons. At the descriptive level, it is hard to account for the self-understandings of members of modern societies in terms of their being limbs of an organic body called society. Today, the loyalties of individuals as well as the scale and self-sufficiency of societies are too complex and varied to fit that metaphor. And at the normative level, the individual well-being and liberty of members of society, not the flourishing of society itself, has rapidly developed into the main anchoring point of normative political theory since the Enlightenment and Romanticism periods.

In the liberal tradition, the notion of civic virtue has perhaps a less glorious past than in the republican tradition. Yet, authors such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill all held distinctive normative ideas about the social and political competencies and responsibilities of individuals understood as members of liberal societies.² And whether these accounts of competence and responsibility were ultimately based on ideas of self-interest and Protestant piety, autonomy, or the celebration of individual liberty, they all seem to have assumed that a good and just society is culturally homogeneous and has a stable and surveyable social organization. In such societies, liberal values such as life, liberty, property, and individual self-government are taken to mean roughly the same to all full citizens. In the face of pluralism in society, however, we see that struggles over the very meaning and the practical requirements of these values for individuals and groups with sometimes radically different loyalties and social positions become the main focus of political debate. Given this insecurity with respect to the meaning and practical requirements of its basic explanatory and normative terms, contemporary liberalism increasingly has a hard time presenting itself as a political doctrine that can account adequately for the basic needs and interests of all.

In light of this brief survey of problems of pluralism and civic virtue, one might ask why it should be considered interesting to investigate their interrelationship at all. The answer is that it is quite clear that political cooperation in contemporary society cannot be accounted for in terms that are wholly free from reference to the notion of civic virtue. Self-restraint, tolerance, trust, justice, benevolence, loyalty, and political participation are still being seen as admirable traits of character and dispositions for action. So instead of throwing out the baby of civic virtue with the bathwater of its seemingly outdated underpinnings, it seems a better idea to ask to what extent new accounts of civic virtue, ones that have learned from the experience of pluralism, might help us arrive at a satisfactory theoretical understanding of the notion.

The authors in this special issue may all be said to aim at such alternative, contemporary accounts of civic virtue. The authors of the first and last of the five articles — Richard Dagger and Russell Bentley and David Owen — do so against the background of a republican understanding of civic virtue. The authors of the other three articles — Herlinde Pauer-Studer, Rainer Forst, and David Archard — rather engage with the liberal tradition. The first two articles discuss quite general aspects of the republican and the liberal traditions — the politics of place and anti-perfectionism respectively. The last three articles investigate specific civic virtues — tolerance, the public exchange of reasons for political action, and loyalty.

In his article *Republicanism and the Politics of Place*, Richard Dagger confronts the ideal of cosmopolitanism with the classic republican insight that commitment to politics, and therefore to civic virtue, depends on citizens' identification with a place they know as their own, such as a city-state or a nation-state. Dagger is not uncritical of classical republicanism and its understanding of civic virtue. Yet, he argues that in a globalizing and pluralist world, the idea of a politics of place, with its stress on the values of publicity and self-government, is still relevant.

Cosmopolitanism simply assumes that members of the many different regions of the world are able to transcend their own narrow interests and concerns and act as public-spirited citizens of the world. However, none of them provides an account of where citizens might find the motivation to do so. Cosmopolitanism can learn from republicanism that citizenship of the world should rather be understood as local citizenship that is responsive to global moral responsibilities than as unencumbered citizenship of a truly global legal and political order.

In her article ›Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Civic Virtue,‹ Herlinde Pauer-Studer takes on the perfectionist challenge to the liberal ideal of (limited) neutrality of the state. She focuses on perfectionist theories that claim that societies should, through their legal and political institutions, promote certain conceptions of the good and of civic virtue. Developing an argument from the value of individual autonomy, Pauer-Studer argues that such perfectionist programs should be kept away as much as possible from ›the design, aims, and justification‹ of the basic institutions in society. It is not the task of the state but of citizens in their social and political interactions in society to set standards of moral perfection and civic conduct. Pauer-Studer acknowledges that the results of voluntary encounters over these issues in society may not be as ›perfect‹ as the results of state perfectionism might ideally be. But given the general lack of coercion in such voluntary encounters, Pauer-Studer argues, they will not be a complete disaster either, as so many consequences of state perfectionism have been in the past.

Rainer Forst, in his article ›Tolerance as a Virtue of Justice,‹ analyzes a specific and well-known virtue in pluralist societies: that of tolerance. Forst makes sense of this virtue by first providing an answer to the so-called paradox of toleration, which states that it is morally good to condone what is morally bad. Forst proposes to think of toleration as a ›normatively dependent concept‹ that can only be accounted for adequately if it is linked to a particular conception of justice. This Kantian conception of justice states that only those moral norms are strictly binding for everyone that can be justified with the help of a principle of reciprocal and general justification. Such norms define the realm of the tolerable: the breach of justifiable moral norms need not be tolerated. Yet, Forst unhesitatingly recognizes that there are many projects and values the importance of which is open to reasonable disagreement. Such disagreement calls for the virtue of tolerance understood as ›the capacity and willingness to accept the principle and criteria of justification of generally binding norms in an ethically pluralist society.‹ According to this conception of tolerance, tolerating ethical beliefs and practices that are not one's own is not the same as tolerating bad beliefs and practices.

In his article ›Political Disagreement, Legitimacy, and Civility,‹ David Archard discusses the civic requirement central to much politically liberal work on political disagreement in pluralist societies: that of ›public reasonableness.‹ Public reasonableness demands that citizens who engage in political action should offer their fellow citizens reasons for their actions that can be generally accepted. Archard investigates two possible arguments for this demand, one from a liberal principle of legitimacy and one from a natural duty of political civility. Both arguments fail. Archard goes on to argue for a minimal interpretation of the civility argument according to which we are not obliged to give reasons for our political actions that others can *accept*, but that others can *recognize as our own* reasons. Our political reasoning need not transcend political disagreement, but it should articulate the point of our disagreement, so that we can reasonably disagree. Archard sketches four virtues the success of such a strategy of dealing with political disagreement depends upon: integrity, honesty, conscientiousness, and openness. Finally, he sketches how his argument might be embedded in a proceduralist view on the coordination of political disagreement in pluralist societies.

Finally, Russell Bentley and David Owen, in their article "Ethical Loyalties, Civic Virtue and the Circumstances of Politics," ask how citizens of pluralist societies might attain a sense of political belonging without this harming their loyalties to sub-political sources of identity such as culture and religion. By means of a critical discussion of Rousseau, an analysis of the basic character of contemporary constitutionalism, and the circumstances of politics, they identify two sources of political belonging. The first is recognition of one's formal status as a citizen; the second is acknowledgment of one's "mode of being" as a citizen. With respect to their formal status, all full citizens are equals. But with respect to their political mode of being as determined by, most important, their membership of democratic majorities or minorities, citizens are not equals at all. Bentley and Owen argue that our understanding of civic virtue needs to be linked to both sources of political belonging. As a consequence, they distinguish "majoritarian" from "minoritarian" civic virtues. The majoritarian virtue they discuss is *responsiveness* to groups in society, the needs and interests of which are hampered by policies favored by democratic majorities. The minoritarian virtue they discuss is *endurance* of the consequences of such policies. The authors argue that only the widespread exercise of both virtues is sufficient to secure citizens' confidence in the polity and its stability.

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Notes

* Introduction of *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action*, IV/3 (2001): 152-156, 8 Van Gorcum & Comp., Assen, The Netherlands.

¹For an outstanding historical reconstruction of republican thought on civic virtue, see Pocock

(1975). For an account of different understandings of the exercise of virtue within this tradition, see Burtt (1990). For recent (neo-)republican works that include reflections on civic virtue and pluralism, see Pettit (1997), Dagger (1997), and Van Gunsteren (1998).

²See Berkowitz (1999). Influential recent liberal works that develop conceptions of civic virtue and its relation to pluralism include Macedo (1990) and Galston (1991).