

Citizenship as a Comprehensive Doctrine

Ronald Beiner

RONALD BEINER

Citizenship consists in sharing a political community and enjoying the benefits and shouldering the political responsibilities that give effect to this experience of shared political community. According to a tradition of long repute within the history of political thought, the “office” of being a citizen is a central part of the human vocation, and we can only fulfill the highest possibilities of our human nature by giving a privileged status to *this* social role among the panoply of our other social roles.¹ It is standard practice among political theorists to refer to the family of theories expressing this view as composing the civic republican tradition (which stretches roughly from Aristotle in the fourth century B.C.E. to Hannah Arendt in the twentieth century). But there are also many modern liberal theories that give the vocation of citizenship a privileged status within the normative economy of human life; I will use the term “civicism” as a catch-all for theories that accord to citizenship privileged status among human ends, whether political theorists consider these as civic republican theories or liberal theories.

Now the question arises about how this doctrine in its various versions relates to liberalism as the dominant political philosophy of our time. One might say that the core idea of liberalism is that it is illegitimate to privilege any particular overall view of life, particularly to privilege it politically (that is, through the instrumentality of state power). But if civicism is defined according to the view that citizenship has a special status among our other roles and identities, then civicism *does* expressly privilege

one particular view of the ends of life. Is this view then one that is in essential tension with the core idea of liberalism? In this essay I explore this weighty issue, but I will begin with a more preliminary discussion.

Citizenship: A Quick Sketch

If the purpose of political philosophy is to provide a principled account of the nature and appropriate scope and boundaries of political community, then (considering the definition of citizenship suggested above) it makes sense to say that the tradition of political philosophy from Aristotle to the present is more or less defined by a tradition of reflection on the normative foundations of citizenship. In an important sense, then, the whole history of political philosophy offers a continuing reflection on and dialogue about the nature of citizenship, and it is not clear that one can give a full report on the history of reflection about citizenship with anything less than a thorough and comprehensive account of the history of political philosophy in its totality. I obviously cannot provide that here. Instead, I will sketch, in the broadest of broad brushstrokes, the theme of citizenship as it figures, first, in the history of political philosophy, and second, in prominent currents of contemporary theory. Then I will return to the central issue here: whether “civicism” as a view of life is in significant tension with liberalism as the dominant political philosophy of our time and, if so, how the tension should be addressed from the civicist side of the debate.

Book Three of Aristotle’s *Politics* is the first treatise on citizenship, and it remains an essential reference point for all subsequent reflection on what it means to be a citizen:

The citizen in an unqualified sense is defined by no other thing so much as by sharing in decision and office.... Whoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or decision is...a citizen in this city; and the city is the multitude of such persons that is adequate with a view to a self-sufficient life.²

Aristotle’s definition of citizenship sounds modest enough, but in fact it encapsulates an awesomely ambitious account of what is required in order for human nature truly to flourish. Aristotle’s account of what it means to be a citizen is intended to be a conceptualization of the experience of free, native-born males in the *polis* as a unique site for the development of properly human capacities. What the definition affirms is that only a very small number of human beings in the history of humankind (and only a minority of the inhabitants of Athens even during the age of the *polis*) have been in a position to realize their full humanity because they happen to be members of the kind of political community that uniquely gives play to their properly human (political or *polis*-based) capacities.

Rousseau's *Social Contract* and Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* remain the two most important modern treatises on citizenship. At the core of Rousseau's political philosophy is the idea that modern human beings should be judged by the (suitably high) standard of the ancient (especially Roman) experience of citizenship. When Rousseau claims, in a note to Book One, Chapter Six of the *Social Contract*, that modern men know only what it means to be a *bourgeois* and have no notion of what it means to be a *citoyen*, he makes perfectly clear how deficient he regards modern human beings in relation to this standard. This celebration (mythicization?) of ancient citizenship has, of course, not gone uncontested within modern political thought; in fact, Rousseau's account of citizenship was challenged vigorously by later leading liberal thinkers. Hence it has been one of the chief theoretical purposes defining liberal political theory going back to Montesquieu—or perhaps going back to Hobbes, if one considers Hobbes part of the liberal tradition—precisely to challenge the normative superiority of classical republicanism. This has been nicely summarized by J. G. A. Pocock:

[Thinkers such as Montesquieu, David Hume, and Adam Smith] argued that the virtuous man of antiquity was obliged by the lack of a free market to live off the labour of slaves who worked his land and gave him the leisure to serve the republic. His "virtue" made him harsh and barbaric; even his moral personality was impoverished by his inability to exchange goods with his fellows... [With the development of the market, the] rigid and fragile virtue of antique man was replaced by the greater flexibility of "manners."

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Hegel, with his huge debt to the vindication of modernity contained in the classical political economy tradition, represents perhaps the crowning expression of the thought that citizenship in the modern liberal state cannot be exhausted by the notion of citizens unwaveringly committed to the exertions of civic virtue.⁴ Hegel, in common with other liberals, believed that consciousness of rightful membership in the modern state must incorporate a clear acknowledgment of the legitimacy and, indeed, moral necessity of the energies that individuals invest in their private lives. However, if we deduce from this that Hegel's conception of citizenship is a "modest" one, we would be much mistaken. In *Philosophy of Right*, he remarks that "the individual... finds that, in fulfilling his duties as a citizen, he gains protection for his person and property, consideration for his particular welfare, and *satisfaction of his substantial essence*, namely the consciousness and self-awareness of being a member of the whole."⁵ This is a metaphysical theory of citizenship if ever there was one.

Reading Rousseau gives one the impression that the most powerful theorizing about citizenship is located outside of, and in polemical opposition to, the liberal tradition. But students of the history of political philosophy should never forget that there is at the same time a decisively important tradition of reflection about citizenship and civic virtue *within* liberalism. Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill are two great exemplars of civic theorizing within the liberal tradition. For all Mill's apprehensions about

an unrestricted franchise, and for all Tocqueville's anxieties about the unwelcome consequences of the culture of democracy, both of them were strongly committed to enhancing the civic dimension of liberalism, and in that sense, both are important modern theorists of citizenship.

Not surprisingly, the problem of citizenship has continued to shape contemporary debates in political philosophy. Communitarianism, at least as expressed in the work of Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, presented itself as a new vocabulary for articulating an old complaint about the attenuated character of liberal citizenship. (This is emphatically not the case with the communitarianism of Alasdair MacIntyre, who fundamentally rejects modern nation-state-based citizenship as a site for moral community.⁶) In the case of Sandel, for example, the more he has continued to develop his theoretical concerns, the clearer it has become that his real concern is not with community *per se*, but rather with the eclipse of richer possibilities of civic engagement and civic identity in an age dominated by liberal proceduralist conceptions of politics.⁷ His civic-republican critique of liberalism should be set within a broader resurgence of civic-republican theorizing. Civic republicanism has surged back to life, philosophically, in the influential work of Hannah Arendt and, in a more historical vein, in the work of John Pocock and Quentin Skinner, as well as the many theorists they have influenced.

It would be wrong to assume, as regards recent theory, that philosophical liberals have not made their own important contribution to thinking about citizenship and civic life. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action can be interpreted as a new liberal (or postliberal) doctrine of citizenship, and John Rawls's ambitious reflection on the notion of "public reason" in the latter phase of his intellectual career offers another such doctrine. As I will discuss in more detail in the next section, Rawls is anxious to affirm a doctrine of shared citizenship without basing it on a "teleology," a "perfectionist" teaching, or a conception of the proper ends of human life. In that sense, he is committed to repudiating the strong doctrine of citizenship as an essential aspect of the human vocation that one finds articulated in the tradition stretching from Aristotle to Arendt. The fundamental issue is posed by Rawls in relation to what he calls "civic humanism" ("classical republicanism" he regards as a more modest doctrine):

If...the liberal state is not supposed to privilege particular views of life, how can it promote citizenship as shared commitment to the liberal state?

[Civic humanists believe that] the activity in which human beings achieve their fullest realization, their greatest good, is in the activities of political life.... [Liberal justice as Rawls understands it] rejects any such declaration; and to make the good of civil society subordinate to that of public life it views as

mistaken.⁸

The opposing side is represented by Hannah Arendt when, at the conclusion of *On Revolution*, she endorses the ancient Greek solution to the problem, posed by Sophocles, of how “to bear life’s burden”: “it was the polis, the space of men’s free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour.”⁹ The issue here, as it was originally in Aristotle’s doctrine of citizenship, is whether civic life constitutes a privileged location for the expression of our proper humanity, or whether it ought merely to furnish a procedural framework for more diverse, privately defined activities in which we express our humanity. So we see that one of the core debates that has animated political philosophy throughout its history—for instance, in the argument between Rousseau, with his uncompromising republicanism, and his liberal critics, such as Adam Smith and Benjamin Constant—continues to be a living question in contemporary thought.¹⁰

Liberalism and Civicism

If the core doctrine of contemporary liberalism is the idea that the liberal state is not supposed to privilege particular views of life, how can it promote citizenship as shared commitment to the liberal state? As was intimated in the last section, John Rawls offers an important contemporary doctrine of citizenship, but it is central to Rawls’s version of liberalism that he deny that a commitment to citizenship be associated with anything other than an “overlapping consensus” between a diversity of “comprehensive doctrines” (global views of the ends of life). That is, a conception of how citizenship ranks in relation to other ends of life cannot itself constitute a comprehensive doctrine. Since Rawls has been more influential than any other contemporary philosopher of liberalism, it makes sense to take up the question we have just posed by engaging with Rawls’s views with respect to appropriate norms governing how liberals ought or ought not to affirm shared citizenship. In fact, his distinction between political liberalism and comprehensive liberalism goes to the heart of the question about citizenship as a privileged view of life that I want to address.

What centrally concerns Rawls in *Political Liberalism* is the problem of how to get people with a variety of philosophies of life, particularly those defined by religious commitments, to “buy into” the liberal state as a shared political community without requiring that they feel they have to *defer* to someone else’s philosophy of life, or allow that other philosophy of life to trump their own. “Political liberalism” is a device intended to pull off this difficult feat. The idea is that in the case of “reasonable” comprehensive doctrines, there will be enough civic overlap among them that they will all be able to affirm loyalty to a common set of political institutions without subordinating their own existential commitments. Protestants and Catholics, for instance, don’t have to attenuate their attachment to their different religions; they merely have to acknowledge that a *reasonable* interpretation of each of these religions allows space for civic co-existence and even important shared purposes of Protestant citizens and

Catholic citizens. That is the project: it is meant to be a “political” version of liberalism rather than a comprehensive one because it manages to avoid constituting a community of citizens on the basis of a shared philosophy of life.

The core doctrine of Rawlsian liberalism is that of “public reason,” which basically excludes justifying political principles by appeal to non-universally shared existential commitments. Hence he writes:

public reason sees the office of citizen with its duty of civility as analogous to that of judge with its duty of deciding cases. Just as judges are to decide cases by legal grounds of precedent, recognized canons of statutory interpretation, and other relevant grounds, so citizens are to reason by public reason [rather than by invoking their privately held comprehensive doctrines] and to be guided by the criterion of reciprocity, whenever constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are at stake.¹¹

Why is Rawls so averse to casting his liberalism as founded upon a comprehensive view? In many ways, doing so would render his philosophical enterprise a much simpler one. Not least, it would absolve him of charges by his critics (which are not unreasonable) that he is hiding his more robust philosophical commitments behind a façade of neutrality.¹² It is as if Rawls has somehow convinced himself that anyone committed to a comprehensive doctrine—including those committed to comprehensive versions of liberalism, such as Kant and J. S. Mill—latently harbors the ambition to impose this doctrine by force on all members of society.

An important part of what is driving Rawls’s way of formulating his liberalism is the thought that all comprehensive doctrines, whether religious or philosophical, are in principle “sectarian” and therefore cannot be appealed to in underwriting a properly liberal regime. Hence (despite the paradox), it is illegitimate to appeal to a liberal philosophy of life in founding a liberal polity. If Catholics cannot legitimately found the state on a Catholic view of life (because its laws and policies will also apply to *Protestant* co-citizens), and if Protestants can’t found the state on a Protestant view of life (because its laws and policies will apply to *Catholic* co-citizens), then the conclusion might seem equally compelling that one also cannot found the state on a liberal secular philosophy of life, because (again) those who do not subscribe to this philosophy of life will be bound by its laws and policies. Political liberalism claims to solve this problem. Yet this raises the very large question of whether one can be, for civic purposes, agnostic about the ends of life while decidedly privileging the needs of citizenship over the demands of faith (at least in cases where faith is anti-civic). Rawls writes: “To maintain impartiality between comprehensive doctrines, [political liberalism] does not specifically address the moral topics on which those doctrines divide.”¹³ He also writes that “by avoiding comprehensive doctrines we try to bypass religion and philosophy’s profoundest controversies so as to have some hope of uncovering a basis of a stable overlapping consensus.”¹⁴ A “zeal for the whole truth,” he argues, represents a temptation to found liberal society on a more ambitious set of philosophical ideals than is appropriate for a constitutional regime, and political liberalism succeeds in resisting this temptation.¹⁵

But can a view of society that is robustly egalitarian, “civicist” (committed to a strong doctrine of shared citizenship), and basically secular be “impartial between comprehensive doctrines” in the way that Rawls suggests?

What preoccupies Rawls in *Political Liberalism* is the worry that theocratic Christians will see the state as a legitimate vehicle for forcing their views upon those who do not share their view of life, and the way he formulates his liberalism is intended to convey that he is doing his utmost to avoid the charge from nonliberals that *he* is doing precisely the same thing to *them* (namely, foisting his secular philosophy of life upon those who do not share it, and employing state power to do so). But I want to suggest that one can also raise problems with Rawls’s comprehensive doctrine/political doctrine distinction that have nothing to do with religion. Suppose one is a Marxist or an environmentalist. Can one separate these political commitments from grander views of the ends of life? The issue is not whether these “sectarian” views should be allowed to impose their philosophy on the whole society (on the model of theocracy), but whether these views can even be given a legitimate hearing in ways that express their intended scope. What we wind up with, it seems, is a general contraction or flattening of the domain of political reflection and debate.

Rawlsians worry that allowing the state to become a forum for a contest between views of life entails lack of respect for co-citizens whose views of life are being challenged. Does a Green Party activist show disrespect for fellow citizens by trying to expand the existing terms of political discussion by means of a far-reaching engagement with alternative philosophies of life? Do we risk wars of religion by allowing politics to be a mutual contest of such philosophies, as Rawls seems to suggest? If most nonliberal political views—not just those held by religionists—engage grander views of what is at stake in politics, the only citizens who will not have their political commitments delegitimized will be Rawlsian political liberals. And in fact the same challenge applies in the case of *liberals* (like Christopher Hitchens) who are committed to challenging religionists in politically charged ways that Rawlsian strictures would not permit. The incoherence in Rawls’s doctrine of public reason seems to flow from trying to be inclusive and exclusionary at the same time: it is a big tent that welcomes all “reasonable” comprehensive doctrines, but must bar those that are unreasonable. But if the boundary between reasonable and unreasonable is defined by whether one wishes to bring a not-yet-shared set of comprehensive commitments to bear on political life, it is hard to see how this will not entail an illiberal contraction of the scope of political deliberation by predefining many political possibilities as unreasonable before they have even been given a chance to make their case. If (again) Marxists had to adhere to the same strictures applied to fundamentalist Christians, they would be barred from making the political arguments they make on the basis of the philosophic commitments that define them as Marxists. Being required to cast their views only in terms that would be antecedently accessible to all citizens, Marxism would thereby be banished as a political possibility; it could survive only as a form of private faith. The paradox is that

while Rawls's political liberalism set out to avoid coercing people into a liberal philosophy of life, exclusion by normative fiat of those outside the liberal mainstream is precisely what is achieved with respect to existential commitments that straddle politics and worldview.

As I have argued elsewhere, Rawls's neutralism concerning comprehensive doctrines looks more plausible than it really is because *Political Liberalism* focuses so single-mindedly on the problem of religion.¹⁶ If we shift to a different sphere of life (say, the problem of social class), it is harder to see how one can hover neutrally above perfectionist ideals and, in particular, how one can hope to do so while affirming doctrines of shared citizenship. Consider, for instance, how the civic aspiration embodied in U.S. public schools compares with the very different civic attitudes embodied in British-style "public schools," that is, highly elitist, class-based private schools. How can a preference for the former not rest upon a comprehensive doctrine? How can one deny the substantive egalitarianism built into the civic ideal, intended to embrace all citizens of the republic? A "political liberal" who defends public schools, as opposed to elitist private schools, cannot do so on the grounds that the latter violate the constitutional requirements of a liberal democracy as such, for the public culture in England is, no less than the United States, the public culture of a liberal democracy. In *Diversity and Distrust*, Stephen Macedo offers a compelling argument that the commitment to public education constitutes a "shared civic project."¹⁷

Affirmation of this shared civic project is itself tied directly to a particular "perfectionist" ideal: sharing a civic community with all one's fellow citizens. Nor is the liberal state neutral with respect to the success or failure of this shared project: all public investments in education are ways of siding with one vision of the good rather than the other. What this shows is that what is at stake in partisanship on behalf of an ideal of civicism, of shared citizenship, is the choice between competing comprehensive conceptions, that is, competing understandings of individual and social good. It will not do to respond that it is not for a political philosopher to judge between the comprehensive philosophies that these two visions of education express. Either way, one is aligning oneself with conceptions of the good, philosophies of life, one ranking of human ends over against another ranking of human ends. In short, one cannot escape finding oneself in "comprehensive doctrine" territory.

The theories of citizenship surveyed in the previous section certainly offer extremely robust accounts of the vocation of what it is to be a citizen. Rawls clearly views it as incompatible with the core idea of liberalism to endorse an account of citizenship as philosophically ambitious as those of Aristotle, Rousseau, or Hegel. Yet, one has to appeal to *something* if one expects citizens to accord a high degree of seriousness to their civic responsibilities (especially if there is some measure of tension between their privately held comprehensive doctrines and their civic commitment). This is the conundrum from which Rawls is trying to free himself. How successful is his effort in this regard?

The key problem with the distinction between comprehensive doctrines and Rawls's political doctrine is as follows. Why should devotees of an "unreasonable" comprehensive doctrine allow a need for common citizenship to trump this all-encompassing commitment (which is precisely what the adjective "comprehensive" is meant to conjure up)?¹⁸ If the answer is that we are obliged to be *fair* to co-citizens who hold divergent commitments, we can again ask why this sense of fairness should have trumping power over an all-encompassing interpretation of what gives purpose to life. In other words, why would an adherent of a non-liberal comprehensive doctrine defer to an understanding of shared citizenship that did not even claim for itself the moral and philosophical authority of a comprehensive doctrine? To be sure, one can say: "forget about those committed to anti-civic comprehensive doctrines; rather, put your civic energy into cultivating citizenship with those capable of citizenship." Still, it does not seem very satisfying theoretically to abstain from giving a comprehensive account of citizenship as a human good if one might have, on a different understanding of liberalism, given such an account. It is as if Rawls, in conceiving the idea of a political doctrine that is not a comprehensive doctrine, puts a self-willed, moral-philosophical vacuum at the center of his philosophy of citizenship. Why should that be thought to be a practical-political *advantage*? These questions of "why should citizenship trump X?" therefore lead us towards the idea that only citizenship formulated *itself* as a comprehensive doctrine can answer these challenges. If being a citizen among citizens is an important part of living a full, flourishing life, then we can begin to respond to questions about why merely political commitments can trump comprehensive commitments, which are by definition more metaphysically and more existentially ambitious. But moving in this direction would require Rawls not only to drop his political/comprehensive distinction, but also to embrace liberal perfectionism (that is, a version of liberalism resting upon an ultimate conception of human flourishing). Acknowledging that commitment to citizenship stands within the sphere of reflection on the ends of life will not turn liberalism into a form of secular theocracy.¹⁹

To put the argument a bit polemically, I would go so far as to suggest that political liberalism *does not exist*—it is a phantom of the Rawlsian imagination. A liberal regime always reflects and embodies a liberal view of life, even if it is not cashed out in terms of Kantian or Millian autonomy. If liberals prize ecumenical citizenship above commitment to some more parochial but more over-arching vision of things, that is *itself* a liberal view of life. The more Rawls emphasizes the need to subordinate comprehensive doctrines to the needs of what one can call "pan-civic citizenship," the more he asserts, willy-nilly, his *own* (fairly attractive) comprehensive doctrine—which ought to be defended as such. Calling this "political liberalism" merely obscures what should instead be acknowledged as a foundationalist principle. Putting the point in Rawlsian vocabulary, Rawls's civicism is more "perfectionist" than he intends it to be (or if it is not, it fails to serve the purposes Rawls intends it to serve).

A Catechism for Citizens

The ideal of life associated with civicism can be articulated in the form of a set of prosaic yet nontrivial maxims:

1. Be a good citizen.
2. Attend in a serious way to public affairs, including those pertaining to the world of international politics (that is, read good newspapers).
3. Try to relate to all fellow citizens *as* fellow citizens, rather than privileging relations within subgroups.
4. Do not be resentful of state taxation or forms of state regulation that are in the service of public goods, including distributive justice as a public good (that is, be open to the possibility that there *are* such things as public or civic goods). This is not to assume that agencies of state power never get abused, or never make excessive intrusions upon individual freedom, but one should not sloganize about individual freedom in order to repudiate civic goods *per se*.
5. Do not be cynical about government. While recognizing that in the modern era, states must employ massive bureaucracies, do not pre-sume that the ends of government are fully reducible to their bureaucratic or technocratic means.

The hope is that most citizens will put into practice some version of these maxims of civicism. But even if that is so, this is not a basis for thinking that civicism, whether in thick or thin versions, is philosophically noncontroversial. If conceptions of citizenship determine how we choose to live our lives (and how can they do otherwise?), then citizenship is indeed a comprehensive doctrine.