The Common Good: An Endangered Species and the Key to Public Virtue

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What we argue in this paper is essentially that the future of human society, and especially that of democratic societies, rests upon individuals valuing, protecting and nurturing the common good; and that the promotion of the common good is currently at risk and may be an endangered species, largely due to the dominance of a marketplace ethos. Furthermore, a focus on the common good should be and typically is based on ethical reasons. Promoting the common good as a means to a hedonistic or instrumental end is not that which will support human flourishing. Rather, an ethical focus on the flourishing of all through the fostering of a world which supports such human flourishing is what we mean here by the common good. Lastly, it is most likely people of virtue that will authentically pursue this ethical version of the common good, as they will be those most likely to be motivated by ethical concerns; i.e., to follow a "moral GPS."

Democracy and Morality

While major principles of democracy can be justified on moral grounds (like human rights and the rule of law, basic liberty and fair opportunity), democracy is not inherently a moral system. Rather, it is a procedural political system that does not assume shared morality (see Guttman & Thompson, 2002, and Habermas, 1998, for debates on procedural and substantive principles of democracy).

As was articulated repeatedly by the architects of the US democratic system, for democracy to be moral, indeed for it to survive, it required citizens of virtue who actively participate in the public political sphere, and most importantly do so in search of maximizing the common good: "The overarching aim of the education the Founders promote is moral: the formation of character" (Smith, Pangle & Pangle, 2000, p. 24). As democracy has spread across the globe, it has taken many forms, but the requirement of virtuous participatory citizens remains at the heart as a necessity for societal and individual flourishing. And this implies those citizens following their "moral GPS"; i.e., acting in service of moral values and ethical virtues.

Currently, democracy is not faring well, both in the UK and USA and more widely around the world. Voters in democratic elections seem to be disgruntled, angry (even aggressively so),

demoralized, and eager to "fight back" against what they perceive as the failures of their democratic systems.

AFurthermore, populist media and politicians try to exploit these emotions. Take, for instance, a particular populist demagogue in the United States who sold himself as the champion of "forgotten men," allegedly determined to bring dignity and prosperity back to America's white working class. He promised to "make America a proud, rich land again." He loves big, passionate rallies and railed against the "lies" of the mainstream press, fulminating against "so-called journalists." His supporters embraced this message. With the politician's encouragement, they also took out their frustrations on blacks and other minorities. The architect of his campaign was a savvy newsman who actually wrote the candidate's popular jeremiad on national decline and who believes in propaganda, not information. Through a combination of deception and charisma, the feared politician ascended to the presidency while the nation's liberals trembled. – Well, this particular politician's name is Buzz Windrip, and luckily this has nothing to do with reality but rather is only Sinclair Lewis's fantasy from his 1935 book, *It can't happen here* (Beale, 2016; Gage, 2017; Nazaryan, 2016).

Citizens of contemporary democracies do indeed have just cause for their disgruntlement, which is unfortunately an inevitability in an intrinsically flawed system. As Winston Churchill said in a speech to the House of Commons in 1947, "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" (Langworth, 2008, p. 574). A large part of this systemic weakness is that both the best and worst feature of democracy is that everyone gets to vote. So problems are inevitable, disgruntlement is to be expected, and resistance and dissent are likely. It is important to note that dissent is a legitimate democratic function (Berkowitz & Puka, 2009; Guttman & Thompson, 1996). However, when the calculus for democratic failure is hedonistic and not ethical, then such resistance is threatening to both democracy and human flourishing. In other words, when citizens dissent against their democratic governments for selfish reasons, democracy as an ethical system is undermined, not served. As Walter Parker (2005) has so cogently argued), this, in fact, is "idiocy."

As Plato (1945) understood and as the architects of the first large scale democratic society in the US understood and frequently opined, self-governing societies require citizens of a certain sort to function effectively. They require citizens who are virtuous and who participate in the public sphere to seek and support the common good. Parker (2005) cautioned against "idiocy," pointing out that the understanding of the term in ancient Greece was selfishness. An idiot in this sense is not necessarily a person lacking intelligence; rather an idiot is a person who only cares about him or herself. In essence it is a person who cares not about the other and certainly not about the collective of others, whether it be the local community, society, or global community. In other words, beware of idiots for they do not value the common good. It is the common good that is in jeopardy of failing such societies now, not because it is no longer relevant but because, like an endangered species, it is rarely seen in public and under threat from a natural predator. The common good is dying because it is no longer valued. In a sense, it is quite like the fairy Tinkerbell in the child's tale of Peter Pan. It will fade away and die if it is not loved. The common good is an endangered species, and like any endangered species, if we want to forestall its permanent demise, we need to enact policies and practices that mitigate against those predatory forces that have threatened its survival. Just as we pass laws to protect the habitats of endangered species and policies to change the behaviors of those that prey on them, we need to consider the mechanics of the threat to the common good and move to mitigate against those threatening forces. However, as the adage goes, you can't legislate morality, so we need to educate and socialize for it instead.

Both civility and virtue in the public sphere seem to be giving way to hatred, fear and selfishness. This can be seen at least in recent high profile political votes in the United Kingdom (Brexit), the United States (the 2016 presidential election) and, for a period of time, Colombia (the 2016 peace treaty referendum). In all cases, part of the dynamic was an unexpectedly large representation of people voting for some combination of prejudice against or hate of others, xenophobia, and/or greed; in Walter Parker's rendering…idiots. Public virtues seem to be losing the battle to self-focused values. In the case of the USA at least (and likely in other nations), one explanation is that capitalism is overwhelming other "value pillars" upon which

the country was founded. The USA was founded on a mix of Judeo-Christian ethics, democratic virtues, the pioneer spirit, resistance to oppression, and the free market. The siren's song of personal material wealth seems to be far more compelling than the public virtues. Capitalism, as one founding strand in the form of the free market, is the "kudzu" that strangles other values strands, or the natural predator that threatens the very survival of a public morality focusing on the common good. Slowly and inexorably, the societal focus on competing in the marketplace in order to accrue personal wealth has become the dominant cultural value and virtue in direct contra-positioning to the pursuit of collective human flourishing, and particular the flourishing of those unable to compete in the marketplace, such as those without marketable skills or investment capital or those who, largely for issues of historical prejudice, are disempowered or excluded from such commerce.

In democratic societies, a central thrust of being a virtuous citizen is to advocate not just for one's own interests (material or otherwise), but to balance those with furthering the common good. The concept of the common good is thus central to both the functioning and survival of (at least) democratic societies and to acting as a virtuous democratic citizen. Unfortunately, when the common good is not a dominant strand in the thinking, values, and public functioning of citizens of a democracy it opens the door for the biased and selfish motives that allow democracy to devolve into a mathematical enterprise of hedonism where each citizen votes for self-interest and those with the most like-minded allied voters mathematically win. As noted already, democracy, by itself, is not an ethical system. It is a procedural system that offers the opportunity for ethical functioning but does not guarantee it. For it to be ethical, it requires citizens of virtue, particularly including the public virtues of democratic functioning, who use those virtues as a moral GPS to direct their civic actions.

Democratic Virtue

So what is democratic virtue? In a series of reviews of the literature on democratic virtue (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Berkowitz, 2000; Berkowitz, Althof & Jones, 2008), we have identified a core set of such characteristics of the ideal democratic citizen. Derived mostly from Sehr (1997) and (White, 1996), these include:

- An ethic of care and responsibility
- Respect for the equal right of everyone to the conditions necessary for their development
- Appreciation of the importance of the public
- Independence (within the context of community), self-respect, and self-esteem
- Courage
- Honesty

The resulting question concerns the source of such characteristics. As Parker notes, "There can be no democracy without the citizens who create it day after day, and they and their public do not fall from trees" (2005b, p.656). He expands by explaining that such,

> (…) engaged citizens do not materialize out of thin air. They do not naturally grasp such knotty principles as tolerance, impartial justice, the separation of church and state, the need for limits on majority power, or the difference between liberty and license. They are not born already capable of deliberating about public policy issues with other citizens whose beliefs and cultures they may abhor. These things are not, as the historical record makes all too clear, hard-wired into our genes. (…) Rather, they are social, moral, and intellectual achievements, and they are hard won (Parker, 2005a, p. 347).

They must be cultivated (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006) through a deliberate process of socialization and education, most notably but not exclusively in the family and the school. As the leaders of the *Making Caring Common* project (https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/) have aptly argued, we need to understand what works in parenting and schools to help our children develop the capacity and inclination to prioritize care for others over hedonistic self-interest (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014).

The Development of a Concern for the Common Good

This is far easier said than done. Valuing, advocating for, and protecting the common good requires both socialization and psychological capacity. The *Making Caring Common Initiative* has advocated for education and parenting that, in part, expands a child's "circles of care and concern" from the self, to known others, to membership groups, and ultimately to society and humankind (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). However, Robert Selman (1980) has spent decades demonstrating that such expansion of social understanding develops slowly and only when requisite cognitive capacities are in place. Hence education and parenting have to follow psychological principles and timetables (Selman, 2003), much as a virtues approach needs to respect the developmental sequence of habituation to virtue.

The most rational approach to saving the common good from the extinction of threatening market forces that seduce the hedonistic, competitive and aggressive aspect of human nature is a concerted multi-faceted approach to socializing those virtues and competencies that are requisite for effective democratic citizenship. As we have noted elsewhere (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006), in parallel to the blueprints of *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CIRCLE, 2003) and its latest iteration *Guardian of Democracy* (Gould, 2011), informed and engaged democratic citizenship has to be understood as a mix of "knowledge, skills and attitudes(or dispositions)" (Patrick & Vontz, 2001). The knowledge is comprised of those facts (e.g., historical, civic, etc.) which help understand and influence democratic processes. The skills are participatory (social, emotional and political) as well as intellectual competencies that enable competent civic functioning. The "attitudes" are those character strengths, virtues and values that serve as the "GPS" for both motivating and directing one's civic engagement toward ethical collective goods (Althof & Berkowitz, 2013). As these are different psychological constructs, they require different psychological and pedagogical inputs (cf. Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, for a more expanded explication). Here, we only touch on the broad strokes of school-based character education as a central component of this plan.

Our general argument centers on the contention that a moral world can only be built and sustained by moral people, and that such people must be raised and educated to have the requisite characteristics of the kinds of virtuous citizens that democracy and the common good require. Schools play a significant part in this, and that is where our focus will be for this discussion, although family, communities of worship, media, and government all play a part as well.

As we have documented it in detail elsewhere (Althof, 2003, 2014; Althof & Stadelmann, 2009; Berkowitz, 2011, 2012, 2017; Berkowitz, Bier & McCauley, in press) and because it is not the central focus of this paper, we will only briefly review the characteristics of effective character education here, and only as they relate to educating for a concern and capacity for promoting the common good.

- First, a concern for the common good must be an authentic educational priority. The school (or other educational entity) must consider the development of ethical democratic citizens who effectively promote and sustain the common good to be one its central mission elements.

- Secondly, concern for the welfare of others (both individually and collectively) must be a salient and important part of the lived life of the school; people must actually treat each other that way; i.e., out of an authentic concern for the well-being of others.

- Third, the valuing of and motivation for the common good must be built upon intrinsic motivators and not extrinsic reward and recognitions which reduce and undermine the internalization of those values and motives.

- Fourth, as Dewey (1966) so cogently argued, schools must *be* democracies. Students (and staff) need to authentically experience the power of their own voices in the common sphere arguing and searching for the common good; i.e., they must be empowered members of a true caring democratic society.

- Fifth, schools must have an eye toward the long game; i.e., they need to understand the developmental limitations and opportunities at each point in the life-span and design their curricula, school climates, and pedagogy accordingly. They need to understand

that students do not need to be mature democratic citizens at 5 or 15 years of age, but rather should be given manifold opportunities to develop slowly and inexorably toward mature virtuous citizenship. Schools need to be designed accordingly.

The lived experience of having models of and opportunities for caring about ever-expanding circles of concern is necessary for the socialization of such a socio-moral civic GPS in children and adolescents. Public virtue can only flourish in societies that truly value, model, socialize, and educate wisely for expanding circles of concern. Then the common good will no longer be an endangered species and public virtue can flourish and help promote a more ethical world.

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