

3-D Civics: Citizenship for a New Century

Citizenship, an ancient ideal but largely forgotten in contemporary America, is revised and promoted in this essay. But it's not just the political dimension of citizenship. I argue that long before becoming political citizens, humans must first develop aesthetic and ethical habits that are civic in nature, and that both of these civic dimensions require healthy interactions with the natural world and a social upbringing. The bulk of the essay makes the case for this claim. The resulting three-dimensional citizenship offers an engaged and fulsome alternative to our lives as isolated consumers.

A discussion of citizenship would be considered revolutionary only in places and times when such talk is either prohibited or absolutely necessary. It is the latter case, thankfully, that we find ourselves in today. Citizenship, as I will talk about it in this essay, has always been optional in America. The Founders made a collective but not unanimous decision to create a government that would neither require an active role for citizens, nor the responsibility of the government to create these citizens. Virtue, it was determined, was too difficult to instill and too precarious a foundation on which to found a modern Republic. Better to give citizens a small, representational role in their government, to stay out of their personal lives, and to create a safe and materially prosperous nation in which individuals could seek their own private interests.

Early 19th Century Americans nevertheless were quite active in their local political and community lives. Alexis De Tocqueville well describes the social humming of the places he visited, and described it as a "superabundant force that could do wonders." But such a force, as civic philosophers have told us through the ages, needs constant attention and practice. We shouldn't be surprised, then, that a couple of centuries of limited participation in government and the continuous allure of a life devoted to one's own sense of what is good would diminish a nation's civic capacities. It is hard to motivate

American citizens to take seriously their obligations as public citizens: to pay their school taxes (or any taxes, for that matter); to give charitably, or to make sacrifices for the greater public good. Instead, Americans seem to have painted themselves into a corner where freedom is defined as freedom from others, where we must increasingly depend on ourselves and on all of our gadgets to get through the world. At times this corner feels safe and secure (although the end result is always more distrust and fear), and we might even begin to believe that each of us is independent from the world, an undivided individual free from outside pressures and interference. Free from our dysfunctional families and our annoying neighbors, and the opinions of others. Two hundred channels of TV freedom, the Internet, cyber shopping, cell phones, beepers, palm pilots; our very own house, car, boat, camp, bank account, and retirement fund. We've created our very own personalized universes.¹

Calling for a return to a robust notion of citizenship will sound radical to those who most identify with the above paragraph. And a private-universe life might be possible, and even preferable, in a world with infinite capacities to resource the necessary goods and to sink the similarly necessary trash. But this is increasingly not the world we find ourselves in. One way out is a renewed and robust account of civic life. It's not a new car, but it is a way of life that brings with it a fair number of goods.

In the classes I teach at a predominantly science and engineering university, I regularly ask my students to inventory their lives both in terms of what they have and

¹ Perhaps a character from literature may help. Americans are beginning to resemble the Cyclopes in Homer's *Odyssey*, the one-eyed giants who were entirely self-sufficient, and did not care a jot for their neighbors or for social conventions. According to Homer, the Cyclopes were strong and independent, but also mean-spirited and one-dimensional. Their one eye gave them sight but not vision, and certainly not a depth of perception that included others.

what's missing. I ask them to consider what their lives cost them in terms of stress and unhappiness, and what the systems that support this life leave out, and *who* they leave out. I encourage them to look behind and underneath these systems, to carefully examine the assumptions, and to imagine alternatives. It doesn't take long for us to start talking about possible alternatives to our current lifestyles and assumptions about success and happiness.

One alternative is the ancient ideal that identifies human happiness and fulfillment with our inherently social nature. From the Greek philosopher Aristotle and American Founder Thomas Jefferson, to contemporary writers like Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry, the Good life is measured by the extent, depth, and quality of our relationships with others: family, neighbors, community, government, and the natural world. Our engagement in these relationships is the practice of a three dimensional citizenship.

“3-D Civics” is a visual metaphor suggesting the need to fill up, re-inflate, and reinvigorate citizenship beyond the option to vote and to follow the law. It is not a denial of, or a replacement for, our individual pursuit of the private and personal. Citizenship does not demand that all of our time be spent with and for others. It is simply the recognition of our inherently and hard-wired social nature, habits, dispositions, and needs. At least part of what it means for social beings to pursue and live good lives is to pursue and live their lives with others. Citizenship—as I am conceiving it—is simply the name of the necessary, varied social roles we play. That humans need to be citizens in order to be happy necessarily follows from the natural fact and hard wiring of our social instincts.²

² We may substitute these social instincts in a pinch, but over time—the argument goes—too much substitution erodes the opportunities to be social, and thereby contracts and numbs our social instincts.

Aristotle said it best: we are social³ animals. From our mode of reproduction, to our long dependence as children, to our bodily architecture and language, we are born to be with others, to seek out others, to depend on others. For those who resist this social definition of self, a simple experiment suffices. If they insist on considering themselves fundamentally separate from others and the world, they can cover up their nose and mouth and see how long it takes to give in and gasp.

This gasp is the most basic and profound counter-argument to the view that human beings are individuated and independent from the world. This desperate in-breath is the symbol of our connection with—and dependence on—a world that is greater and larger than us: a world outside, a world of outsiders who are just like us. This in-breath is the gift of life, a taking. Our out breath is the return, a completion of the gift exchange, a symbol and circle of giving.

The give and take of breath is, of course, at the core of our life. It is the first cycle outside of the womb, but many others follow it: the cycles of food, family, play, learning, and loving; giving and taking, relationships, awareness of others, ethical responsibilities, groups-within-groups, participation, health, and wholeness. To put it another way, human beings cannot be happy (exclusively) without others; they cannot raise themselves; they cannot learn language, behaviors, or standards of practice and excellence by themselves.

Citizenship is the sum total of these relationships and interconnections with others. *3-D Civics* is a call to rethink and reinvigorate these relationships. It calls us on us to consider our public lives to be as important as our private lives; to recognize that health is

This numbness or an-aesthesia might feel “normal,” but the Good life argument/discussion is required precisely to demonstrate that this social anesthesia is not good for us.

³ Aristotle actually said that we are “political animals,” but nearly all of his work in ethics and politics is premised on the social nature of human beings. And as I argue below, the political life is possible only among well developed social beings.

a matter of balance and interplay between beings, processes and cycles; that our neighbors are not just the human ones; and that politics is figuring out how to live with others in a world of limited goods and good will.

This social life is complex and multi-faceted, but it is natural, almost automatic. And social instincts will create, by necessity and sometimes spontaneously, practices and frameworks in which to further engage, develop, and evolve these instincts.⁴ Citizens and their surroundings create each other.

The quality of these practices and frameworks are not everywhere equal, and they are prone to abuse.⁵ But it is hard to imagine how much of our daily activities, sense of self, habits, social and moral views, and standards of excellence could arise without social interactions, practices, and infrastructures. Given our social instincts and the places and institutions in which to engage them, citizens are made. Cities (or any well-planned and apportioned civic infrastructures) are best suited to grow citizens, and the civic-citizen loop is synergistic, self-maintaining, and a powerful engine of creativity, happiness, and the good life.⁶ But the infrastructures don't easily create themselves, and they are not

⁴ See F.A. Hayek's work for a discussion of spontaneous order. Philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment are also credited with developing theories of spontaneous order. See <http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/LtrLbrty/bryTSO.html>

⁵ Hence the Enlightenment's rejection of tradition and the social/institutional creation of values. Enlightenment philosophy's "reason-as-king" approach did away with the need for a social narrative to explain how we learn to become moral. With the exception of Rousseau, there's not much discussion in the works of Kant, Locke, and Hobbes, for example, of children, parents, or society's role in moralizing children. For Enlightenment thinkers, moral truth springs forth from the rational, individuated and adult mind, or through social contracts. Considering the powerful and oppressive institutions that these thinkers were trying to overturn, the radical and—practically speaking—far-fetched notion that reason is sufficient, resides in individuals, and requires no training, is understandable. Perhaps we can also blame their conclusions on the fact that many an Enlightenment thinker never married or raised children. It wouldn't be the first time that philosophers were accused of being naïve and utterly disconnected from the "real" world.

⁶ Pericles' "Funeral Oration" is one of the clearest expressions of how a city and its citizens support each other, and how individuals have both private and public lives. He says, "Make up your mind that happiness depends on being free, and that freedom depends on being courageous." Athenians are free to enjoy their city and their freedom because they are willing to defend them with their lives. He says further: "We do

maintained without resources and social capital. Cities, like gardens, can depend on the “natural” instincts of their members, but both also require vision, planning, oversight, management, resources, labor, and constant attention for a successful outcome.

What follows are a few definitions, a brief spelling out of the three-dimensional civic self and its infrastructural requirements, and a call to create a Civic Infrastructure Index that identifies and measures civic infrastructure quality. The goal is to grow engaged, responsible citizens as well as the places in which to grow them. This will require a modern list of requirements, a metric to quantify these requirements, and a persuasive model within and from which to remake and renew the case for the good life as a life that includes a strong civic dimension.

It’s best to start with a few definitions.

- **Citizen:** A single term describing our collective roles as social beings. “Citizen” is who/what we are in our capacities as social creatures. Just as “individual” means “separate, pertaining to one only, not divisible,” “citizen” means “inhabitant of a city” and by inference, a member, not separate or pertaining to only one, **able** to be further divided (unlike an “individual,” the meaning of which is to be incapable of being divided further).
- **Citizenship:** Active belonging to/membership in the groups and institutions that turn on, activate, our social dimensions. “Citizen” is the role; “citizenship” is the practiced engagement of the role with others.

not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.” The civic life is a participatory life that requires on occasion great sacrifice. But it also provides great freedom and the cultural and social conditions that allow us to flourish as socially inclined human beings.

- **Civic:** “belonging or pertaining to the citizen,” as in “civic center” or “civic initiative.” In a society that takes citizenship seriously one should also find civic forms of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics, as well as models of civic education, agriculture, or economics. A “civic x,” whatever “x” is, is considered necessary for the well being of citizens or as belonging to them and their shared pursuits.
- **City:** A place with natural, physical, and cultural infrastructures that provide context, training, practices, opportunities to grow citizens, to become citizens, and to practice citizenship. We might add further that cities are where **all** the elements/dimensions of citizenship exist (we might not want, for example, to refer to families and households as cities). But the point here is to resist the impulse to refer to cities as only urban, largely populated, and centralized. We need to include towns, villages, communities, college campuses, and all those places where people engage their social instincts.

Three Dimensional Citizenship: Aesthetic, Ethical, and Political

The citizen-self, I shall argue, has three dimensions. This is another way of saying that the social nature of humans can be seen or defined as taking place in three types of ways, and practiced in three different but overlapping arenas.⁷ These dimensions are interdependent and integrated. But by separating them out we can see how cities and their civic infrastructures both depend upon and can accommodate them.

⁷ We should always remember Aristotle’s advice that what is separate in theory is rarely separate in practice.

The Aesthetic Dimension: Sensory Awareness of Self and Others

The term “citizen” normally conveys an image of a political or social relationship between an individual and a government or some other well-defined place. In addition, the practice of political citizenship, as Aristotle and others have noted, requires maturity and reason, what we might call “higher” functions. It might seem odd then to begin a discussion of citizenship with something as basic as the good working order and integration of our five senses—touch, smell, taste, hearing, vision—and the availability and abundance of sensory input. Aristotle, remember, rejected “mere life” or a life of sense perception, as the human function, opting instead for “the soul’s activity and actions that express reason.”⁸ But it would be hard to imagine engaging in rational action without our sensory system in good working order. To put it another way, our sense of self, our awareness of the world of others, and the boundaries and relationships between self and others all require sensory awareness.

Our “sense full” bodies are constantly monitoring, signaling, motioning, receiving, and rejecting the world around us, the others around us. From the womb our senses help create a sense of who we are, where we are, and how we are. We know from sensory deprivation experiments that the human body and brain cease to function normally after only a few hours without input⁹. Infants who are not held and touched often suffer various maladies in adulthood¹⁰ (cite). And conversely, experiences with our own sense of sight (sunsets and other aesthetically pleasing sights), touch, sound, and smells (holiday dinners) remind us of the delight the senses provide in connecting us with

⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a10-15.

⁹ See http://www.bio.brandeis.edu/~sekuler/senpro/topic_1_stuff/sensory_deprivation.html, and http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/g2699/0003/2699000310/p1/article.jhtml

¹⁰ See <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/pdf/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01721.x>, and <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a723657614~db=all>.

others. Without this sensory package, there would be no self, no others, no capacity for communication or relationships. With this sensory package we have a body, a self, and a world of others. The act of perception—the ability to perceive—*is a relationship*. The act of perception is the first connection to the world of others, the first experience with our social selves. It is the first relationship, and it comes before language, morality and politics. I perceive you and you perceive me. My delight in having this perception for the first time as an infant (and perhaps even in the womb) signals a universal response of smiling. Adults looking for this recognition of perception, this recognition of being perceived, make utter fools of themselves trying to elicit those first smiles.

And I would submit that the quality of our “higher” social skills (i.e., the practice of ethics and politics) depends in large part on the quality of the perceptive tools themselves; 2) the quality and quantity of the external perceptive field (the world, others, art, culture); and 3) the quality of ones’ mentors.¹¹

We can begin to make the case for this claim by identifying connections between negative sensory experiences and the negative impacts they gave on our ethical and political sensibilities and on the good life generally. As mentioned above, we have some data on the need for infants to be held, spoken to, touched (in a phrase, loved sensorially). We have data demonstrating the link between violent, abusive adults and their own violent, abusive childhoods.¹² Both are examples of healthy or normal sensory packages not properly initiated or badly abused. We also have some data on the relationship between a sensory system that is not working normally and its influence on the social

¹¹ Demonstrating this connection would be a valuable project.

¹² We properly identify crimes of child abuse as moral crimes, but they are also aesthetic crimes because they abuse and violate the relationship between social/aesthetic mentors (adults) and their young students, and often destroy or damage the aesthetic dimension of the social self. Aristotle says in a number of places that a good upbringing is critical to our capacity to be happy (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b5.).

nature of those who possess such systems. I am speaking here of autism. While autism is wide spectrum disability, those who have it generally manifest the following qualities or behaviors:

- Limited eye contact and social interaction
- Moral indifference and the lack of empathy toward others
- Sensory integration difficulties resulting in over- or under-stimulation
- Preference for living in their own constructed world

Researchers are still a long way from knowing exactly what’s going on with autism, but my own reading and personal experience with one of my children suggests a strong link and interdependence between our sensory systems and our ethical abilities. For whatever reason, people with autism have a broken and/or misfiring sensory system. This broken system makes it hard for them to interact with the world around them. And this inability to interact with the world makes forming sensory relationships—and the moral and political relationships that would normally follow from these sensory relationships—very difficult or impossible.¹³ In addition, avoiding the sensory world of others makes it difficult for people with autism to interact with others during the critical stage of language learning and development (people with autism, according to Temple Grandin, prefer to think in pictures rather than language, and many use language for reasons other than communication (more as repetitive stimulation, or “stimming”).¹⁴

¹³ See Temple Grandin’s discussion of her difficulties with social/emotional settings in Sacks. See also Baron-Cohen’s *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* for a discussion of the link between sensory/brain inputs and the ability to “read minds.”

¹⁴ My own anecdotal experience is that my child does want to interact socially with others, but finds it enormously confusing and difficult. Perhaps the sensory mis-firings (sometimes too much, sometimes too little) make interaction painful and something to be avoided at every opportunity. See Grandin’s *Thinking in Pictures*.

Whatever the causes and underlying mechanisms, autism represents a case study linking the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the social-self citizen-role.

Much more work needs to be done in this area, but we might nevertheless urge awareness of the importance of our sensory tools (the “what”), sensory fields (the “where”), and mentors (those who help us to turn on our sensory tools, and with whom we first come in contact relationally as social, sensory beings) in creating ethical and political citizens. And we might carefully and metaphorically (at least for the time being) observe what Thomas Berry first described as “cultural autism.”¹⁵ It is one thing to have an internal disability that limits or distorts sensory awareness and inhibits social interactions, and another to live in a world/culture where that awareness is blocked or distorted. Surely there must be an impact on our sensory-social capacities when we are cut off from the natural world.¹⁶ Social critics worry about the violence-producing effects of television and video games, but what do countless hours in front of these two-dimensional screens do to our sensory-social capacities. I don’t think it is a stretch to use the autism criteria above—limited eye contact and social interaction, moral indifference and the lack of empathy toward others, sensory hypersensitivity, and a preference for

¹⁵ “My own description of what has happened is that my generation has been autistic. My generation has been so locked into itself that it was totally without any capacity for rapport with the natural world. My generation could not get outside itself and the outer world could not get in. There was a total barrier between the human and the non-human. This is what needs to be explained. This autism did not begin with the modern centuries. The support for what has happened existed within that part of our tradition that did not emerge from Rene Descartes or from Francis Bacon or from Isaac Newton.” (Berry, “Ethics and Ecology”)

¹⁶ Aldo Leopold saw this most clearly (John Muir also comes to mind). The Phi Beta Kappa woman whom Leopold describes as never once hearing the seasonal honks of geese has lost not only her sense of geese, but also her capacity to care for them morally or to fight for them politically (Leopold, 20). A thoroughly modern world cuts off our senses and our relationships with the natural world. And if we don’t know or care that it is there, we’re not likely to be able to engage in the political discourse necessary to protect it. It is no accident that the first section of *A Sand County Almanac* is given to inviting readers to rediscover the joy of being outdoors. Only after the awareness is recovered can Leopold begin to discuss ethics, education, and the need to protect wilderness. See also Robert Sack’s *Homo Geographicus*.

living in a personally-constructed world—to describe many everyday, average Americans:

- The love of the bold, loud, big, and caloric (“America the Supersize”);
- The dependence on a constant temperature range between 65-75 degrees Fahrenheit, the dislike of rain and other weather, and the closing off of many aspects of the natural world;
- The too many hours spent “screening;”
- The too few hours spent in civic activities;
- The ease by which two people can pass one another in a public space with nary a glance or recognition of the other,¹⁷ let alone the recognition that the space they are in is a shared, public space;
- The willingness to blame others or to react with violence rather than compassion.

I don’t want to push the metaphor too far or to equate cultural autism with autism, but I do want to claim that there is a connection between our sensory awareness of others and our ability to relate to others as moral, social, and political beings. The aesthetic dimension of citizenship is necessary—we can’t be social without it; relational—both in terms of needing others to help us turn it on and to develop it well, and in terms of first

¹⁷ There is an American college campus where folks are expected (and reminded often by the President) to greet one another in passing. And to imagine that it is come to this: social skills having to be relearned. More and more our social instincts and behaviors have to be taught rather than just activated. My university, for example, once offered classes on how to eat a formal dinner. In the age of fast food, endless activities to ferry our children to (often around the dinner hour), and fewer grandparents—and formal Sunday dinners—down the street, young people are simply unaware and unpracticed in the art of eating in a public, formal setting. And what many of us middle-agers consider intentionally bad behavior on the part of the younger generation is probably more a matter of never having been “socialized.” They’re not anti-social so much as simply a-social. See David Ehrenfeld’s “Pseudocommunities” for an anecdote (In *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, Vitek and Jackson (eds.), Yale University Press, 1994).

connecting us to others; and contextual—it happens in a place. The aesthetic dimension is a necessary ingredient to the good life, and it serves as a first step in the further development of the ethical and political dimensions of citizenship. The quality of our lives depends in large part on the quality of this aesthetic dimension.

The Ethical Dimension: Interactive Relationships with Others in a World of

Personal Choices

Citizenship's social-ethical dimension is created when socially aware and dependent beings become—to use Aristotle's description—active, rational choice makers. Social beings move around, decide to one thing or another, and regularly interact with others who are engaged in similar behavior. The ethical dimension of citizenship describes our one-on-one relationships with others in a world of personal choices. It connects us one-on-one with others. It is the dimension where what we decide or do affects others well or badly. It may also affect the agent well or badly. Having become sensorily aware of the world around her, the young child soon learns that pulling the dog's tail or whacking her brother with a board has consequences. The dog or brother returns the harm, or a parent scolds the child and teaches her that it is "wrong" to make such choices. The wrongness or rightness of the actions will often have the criterion of harm associated with it, and will also reflect the person family, community and/or culture's values. These values reflect the customs, laws, rules, conventions, and practices of the social spheres that shape, teach and govern the child's actions and interactions.¹⁸ The ethical dimension of

¹⁸ We might define "actions" as individual activities that do not affect other agents; whereas "interactions" are activities that potentially affect other agents. Punching a pillow, for example, might be considered an action (assuming it is your pillow, doesn't offend anyone, etc.) Punching a person for no reason is an interaction. Some actions done in private are deemed acceptable, but the same action done in public

citizenship begins to occur when we are not just aware of others, but interact with them in ways that make our behavior “responsible.” Moral codes, from the Hebraic Ten Commandments and Buddhist Eightfold Path to the simple rules of etiquette, delineate acceptable from unacceptable personal behavior in a world of others. I do not wish to demean the great moral codes by lumping them in with rules of etiquette. My intention is merely to demonstrate that what we mean by “moral” or “ethical” is a function of our awareness of others, our necessary interactions with others, and the capacity for these interactions to harm or help others, where “harm” is generally defined as “antisocial” and “help” as pro-social.¹⁹ Etiquette belongs to the ethics category because it defines behavior that offends in a social setting.

Like our sensory awareness, I believe that our ethical awareness is both hardwired and in need of proper activation.²⁰ Where we best learn to be ethical will be discussed below, but it is important to note here that how we learn moral and social rules has everything to do with others. We do not and cannot learn them on our own or use reason to figure them out for ourselves. One only has to observe the very young or newcomers to a culture to understand how diligently social creatures work at observing, experimenting with, and

(interaction) is considered rude. Staring at a person (or any other socially aware being) is rude. Staring at a painting is not. In the “Etiquette of Freedom” Gary Snyder tells the story of an indigenous culture where children are taught not to stare at natural objects, even mountains, because it is rude. Interactions, therefore, can range widely across human and non-human beings.

¹⁹All the big, bad, moral infractions (murder, rape, torture, deception, theft) are interactions that harm others directly or that take advantage of, pervert or prevent our social instincts. Honesty, integrity, fidelity, compassion, and forgiveness, on the other hand, are moral virtues precisely because they preserve or enhance social interactions. Aldo Leopold provided one of the best definitions in his “A Land Ethic:” “An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation” (Leopold, 238)

²⁰ See David Hume, Adam Smith, and Francis Hutcheson for discussions of the theory of moral sentiments. Aristotle, too, makes it clear that the virtues must first begin as habits, and that these habits must receive the proper encouragement in order to become full-fledged virtuous dispositions.

learning about ethically and socially accepted behavior. Reading or viscerally understanding the rules is the least of it. Mastering the ethical dimension requires practice, constant iteration, interpretation, discernment, error/failure, and practical judgment.

Mastering the ethical dimension requires teachers as well. These teachers do not just state the rules. Whether well or badly they live them, enforce them, and provide counsel on tough cases. Teachers, like students, are themselves practitioners in the ethical dimension. Collectively these relationships are in constant motion. Interactions, choices, responses, lesson learned, a thousand times a day and among dozens of relationships: family, friends, teachers, neighbors, strangers, pets, plants, and wild animals. Somehow we manage to learn the rules and their many exceptions, and in time we may become an expert in the ethical dimension.²¹ By “expert” I mean only that we know the rules, can apply them consistently across choices and contexts, and can describe them to others. An expert will also know when a specific rule does not apply. The expert is to be contrasted with the person who does not know the rules, or who finds it difficult to learn them,²² or who refuses to follow the rules. Only in the last instance do we call people immoral or unethical. But, to repeat, what I think we mean by this is that unethical people are so described because they are either abusing social instincts/behavior or refusing to acknowledge that their behavior is a relational interaction with another social being, and that his behavior is harmful precisely because it is anti-social.

²¹ I offer an account of this process in my book *Promising* (Temple University Press), chapter five.

²² Temple Grandin describes in Sacks (269) her difficulty understanding human social cues, rules, and conduct.

Unfortunately cultural autism applies in the ethical dimension as well, but here it is well defended by a liberal, individualistic, relativistic ethos that states with confidence that:

- Ethical standards can be learned on one's own, using reason;
- Ethical values are relative to culture, and even hopelessly gray within homogeneous cultures;
- Actions not expressly prohibited by law are optional on the ethics playing field; and that
- In a culture of relative values there is little or no room for the varied roles of teachers, mentors, and practice fields (except perhaps in one's home, but here too fractured families and multi-family households often make quick work of any claim that there are common or shared standards to be learned and mastered).

Even the symptomatic behaviors of autism get played out in the ethical dimension. Since there are no common values identifying such interactions as useful and good, limited social contact and interaction become matters of personal choice. Modern Americans, having become anaesthetized to the natural world and even to the social world around them, are increasingly becoming morally indifferent to this world of others. It's either become "none of our business" or "not our fault" or "a matter of winners and losers." A mix of cynicism, righteous indignation, and various assaults on the "American way of life" has turned everyday Americans into cranky, angry, withdrawn, and morally indifferent world citizens. Like the aesthetic dimension, the ethical dimension is increasingly collapsing inward. The social and cultural outcomes may be hard to predict

with precision, but the personal outcomes are, I think, easier to see. Americans are increasingly fearful, dissatisfied, and lonely. They have more and more choices, but less confidence and certainty about any of them. And they are less optimistic about their individual futures, as well as the future of America.²³ As we shall see below, as political decisions and policies become more and more important in a culture where ethical standards and customs have less and less impact and influence, our capacity to participate as political citizens is, unfortunately, negatively influenced by our contracted ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. When we need to practice politics most, we are least able.

To review, socially dependent creatures operate in three social or civic dimensions. The aesthetic dimension literally puts social creatures in touch with the world around them. Aesthetically, the good life is defined in terms of the quality of our sensory tools, contexts, and mentors. The ethical dimension defines the relationships and interactions social creatures have with one another as individual members of a family, culture, society, or city. This dimension is dependent on the aesthetic dimension, and operates with rules and customs to prevent anti-social/unethical interactions and to promote social/ethical interactions. Like the aesthetic dimension, the ethical dimension requires a moral sense in good working order (and no doubt causally connected to the aesthetic sense), ethical fields (interactions with others; the “practice” field) and mentors. The Good life ethically is the good working order, and the products thereof, of our relationships with others.

The Political Dimension: Public Relationships with Others in a World of

²³ See Robert J. Samuelson’s *The Good Life and its Discontents: The American Dream in the Age of Entitlement*.

Limits

The third and final dimension²⁴ is what we most associate with citizenship, the political dimension. If my dimensional account is accurate, it should be clear by now that ethical citizenship is difficult to practice without the good working order of our aesthetic selves. So too, political citizenship needs both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of citizenship in order to function properly. The practice of politics is the most difficult of the three because it requires collective action, as opposed to “simple” awareness or one-on-one relationships.

Social beings, as Aristotle noted, are necessarily political beings. Motivated by both necessity and interest, humans form into groups, and these groups must act collectively to divvy up the goods, goods that are always limited by one thing or another. The political dimension, therefore, can’t help but be about division, distribution, dissent, consent, power, winners and losers.

Engaging in this process with and against others is the practice of political citizenship. It is difficult and messy, and it takes up a lot of time. But choosing not to participate, or being prevented from participation by a particular form of government inhibits our capacity to pursue the good life; in short, to be fulfilled as social, human beings. At the very least failure or inability to participate in political citizenship can leave you without your fair share, or any share, of the goods one needs to live well. But even fat and happy non-participants are failing to exercise the very political freedoms that must be practiced and exercised (like our muscles) in order to stay in good working order. The practice of

²⁴ My physics colleagues tell me that the universe we live in is actually ten dimensional, and they are always eager to “show” me these dimensions mathematically. I have so far declined the offer, but I am open to the possibility that citizenship too may have more than three dimensions. This account is a work in progress.

politics fills out our social agenda. Not only is it good for us because it prevents tyranny, loss of political rights and freedom, and by providing a fair share of the pie, it likewise rounds out our development as social creatures. It represents a fully-fledged social creature in a well functioning civic infrastructure. As in aesthetics and ethics, so too in politics: citizens and cities creature each other.²⁵

The political dimension of citizenship, despite our usual identification of “citizenship” as a political term, is probably least felt or practiced among every day Americans. Representative government has made participation in the political process optional, and there seem to be fewer and fewer opportunities to participate, and, fewer still, interested participants.²⁶ But it is not just that we’re too busy, too consumed with our personal lives or too tired at the end of the day. We’re all that, but more important, we’re generally not very good at politics. We’re out of practice, short-tempered, uninformed, lacking the necessary social skills, and morally and sensorily contracted.²⁷ Without our aesthetic and ethical dimensions in good working order the practice of politics for everyday citizens is very nearly inconceivable, and both clumsy and ineffective when attempted.²⁸ When awareness is impaired and numbed and when people choose to limit their interactions

²⁵ One can find this claim in many places. Here’s J.G.A. Pocock: “Civic Humanism denotes a style of thought...in which it is contended that the development of the individual towards self-fulfillment is possible only when the individual acts as a citizen, that is, as a conscious and autonomous participant in an autonomous decision-taking political community, the polis or republic” (85). See also Adrian Olden’s *Citizenship and Community: Civic Republicanism & the Modern World*.

²⁶ Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* is the source for much of the data supporting these claims. We vote less, sign fewer petitions, join fewer boycotts, have less political knowledge and trust, and are less likely to engage in grassroots activism. See <http://www.bowlingalone.com/data.htm> for many of Putnam’s data sets.

²⁷ See Dan Kemmis’ *Community and the Politics of Place*, particularly chapter five.

²⁸ This was probably a **foreseen and intended** consequence—at least for Madison—of a representative form of government.

with others, it is hard to know what would get them to the political table or how they would manage to participate effectively if we did manage to get there.²⁹

The good life argument is clear however: we need this political engagement to be happy, and this political engagement needs us. Similar to the other two dimensions, mastering the political dimension requires our political sense in good working order, political fields where the political self is activated, and mentors. While most Americans have been shut out of running for federal or state political office, there remain opportunities to practice politics at the local and regional levels. Whether it is the school, church or museum board, or one of the innumerable standing and ad hoc committees of various political and civic associations, there are ample opportunities to engage in the political dimension of citizenship.³⁰ These various political and civic associations are the practice grounds. It is also here that we find mentors and learn the art of politics.³¹ There are rules, strategies, and etiquette to learn. It can get rough, we can lose, and it takes up a lot of our evenings. But it is unavoidable, necessary (both practically and socially), and an integral part of civic health.

²⁹ Try to imagine, for example, an autistic politics. With neither the well honed ability nor interest—or at the very least an impaired version of them—it is difficult to imagine a group of people with autism engaging in a political process/conversation.

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson created a four level pyramid government structure: Federal, State, County, and Ward Republic. The Ward Republic's function was 1) "to check petty tyrants at home; 2) to maintain the revolutionary spirit of 1776; 3) to provide a base for general education; and 4) to ensure a space in which the citizens can become proficient in the art of politics" (Matthews, 83). It does us good to imagine the nation and our capacities to be engaged citizens were there an entire level of government tasked with the purpose of practicing politics.

³¹ Mentoring can come much earlier and in the home. A socially and politically active home is good preparation for the practice of politics. Although the home where I grew up was not particularly politically active, I do remember one time attending a city council meeting where my father argued against a zoning variance request that would potentially "harm" our neighborhood. He won, but my memory was of the process itself: there was something a citizen could do if she/he disagreed with a political decision; there was a process to be followed; it required knowledge of "how" to do it (an etiquette of politics); and there were occasions when the average citizen could make a difference.

Contexts and Infrastructures: Place, Community, and Polis

Here's what we know so far:

- The “citizen” is the sum of our roles as social, public human beings.
- The social self has an aesthetic-sensory dimension, an ethical, personal-choices-in-relationships dimension, and a political, group-choices-about-limited-goods dimension.
- These roles are natural (“prima natura”), but need cues, contexts, teachers, and practice to become “secunda natura.” (Citizens and cities create each other.)
- There are better and worse ways to “turn on” these instincts. Mentors, contexts, experience matter.
- Much of the American Experience has worn away and substituted for our social-civic instincts in a grand substitution experiment that should probably be called off.
- Growing citizens is now a doubly difficult burden: We need to re-engage the blunted, anaesthetized social skills that have been lost in America’s substitution experiment, while simultaneously growing/creating citizens in the traditional ways.³²
- Signals abound that Americans are not particularly happy, healthy, educated, engaged, aware, empathetic, at least in relationship to their standard of living and freedoms, and as compared with other nations.

³² An article in the *New York Times* described the August 2003 Northeast blackout as caused in part by the shortage of “reactive power,” a necessary power used by power plants and power lines to maintain magnetic fields, but a power that otherwise does no real work (it is not measured in watts and can’t run your dishwasher). **Reactive power** may be a useful metaphor to describe the necessary background conditions for social capital to do its work.

- The good life—as conceived as a mix of public and private—eludes most Americans.
- The good life is still available to us, but it must be chosen, and it must emerge in cities, places, and communities that consciously choose it, plan for it, and create structures to encourage it. The public side of the good life doesn't happen without a lot of infrastructural support. And it probably won't be chosen if it is presented exclusively in terms of duty and responsibility.
- What we're talking about here is a *reverse substitution experiment*: the replacement of our consuming life and its run down on the carbon bank and its inability to make us happy with a civic life that is less consumptive and more socially engaged.

The three dimensional account of citizenship has, not surprisingly, three contexts or infrastructures where each of the dimensions is best expressed and developed. They are Place, Community and Polis. What's important to remember here—and what place, community and polis have in common in this discussion—is that middle-sized creatures like ourselves, with middle-sized sensory apparatus—we don't/can't sense the too big or the too small very well—and an evolutionary history in and with similarly middle-sized communities, locales, families, and political structures, have a predisposition to function well in middle-sized contexts. For this reason the civic self operates best in the middle range of place (local and regional), communities (families, neighborhoods, churches, colleges and universities, sports teams, civic associations), and politics (Jefferson's Ward Republics or Aristotle's ideal population that can be “taken in at a single view”).

Place

The aesthetic self needs sensory input to turn on the sensory machinery. Parents fill the nursery with colors, textures, and sounds. Young children are introduced to the outdoors or taken to concerts, museums, the beach, festivals and sporting events. The young person's memories of first experiences are sensory memories: smells, sounds, sunsets, lights. Music, art, and sports are an integral part of the K-12 education, and even the hardcore subjects are best learned and remembered when connected to activities whereby students sensorially experience the lesson. And although we occasionally seek out the really big, loud and colorful experiences, our day-to-day life is spent mostly in the company of small and medium sized sensory experiences, parsed out in human time, with patterns and rhythms that mirror our own physical patterns and rhythms of heartbeat, eating, sleeping, walking, running, voice tempo and modulation.

Our evolutionary history has occurred mostly in and around the natural world, and so natural places have an obvious connection to and impact on our sensory system. But humans have also lived in groups for most of their history, and cultural and artifactual inputs—art, music, and culture generally—have also played an important developmental role.³³

Place is the context where we become aware of ourselves and of others. The greater the quality and quantity of our sensory interactions, the greater, deeper, and wider is our self-awareness, and our awareness of others.³⁴ We can't turn this sensory apparatus on

³³ I have now lived about one third of my life in a rural region. I grew up in a medium city, and lived for five years in New York City. I see now the value of all of these places in developing my aesthetic/sensory capacities, and wish I could find a way to combine the best of all three for my children. Our great cities, with their culture, parks, lakes and rivers, may provide the ideal places for the development of the aesthetic citizen.

³⁴ Aldo Leopold's upbringing was filled with both natural and cultural stimulus (See Curt Meine's biography of Leopold). At the age of seventeen Leopold could, astonishingly, identify 261 bird species.

by ourselves, and so the quality and quantity of our mentors and experiences matter.³⁵

Place is the collective locations and objects of sensory input and experiences whereby citizens activate their aesthetic awareness.

Community

Community is the context wherein we activate, learn, and practice the moral dimension of our social selves. So much of what we learn about how to behave, how to choose, and what to think of others is a product of our lives in communities: families, schools, neighborhoods, churches, sports teams, institutions generally, clubs, friendships, festivals, etc. In each of these contexts standards develop, are promulgated to members, learned and mastered by members³⁶ (or rejected). This social norming process is continuous and powerful, and while we are free to accept or reject certain aspects of our ethical and etiquette training, it would be hard to conceive of someone who could reject all of it and still be considered a social being.

Community takes many forms and shapes and it is important to recognize that they contain many and varied sub-communities, from neighborhoods and festivals, to sports teams and organizations that focus on membership defined by gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or social and political views. *Community* is defined as the collective of contexts whereby human beings become socialized ethically, where they learn and practice the rules, norms, and the expectations of a given culture and/or its subcultures.

Polis

His deep and acute awareness of the natural world—and his cultural and literary depth—were key influences, I believe, in the development of his land ethic, and his capacity to work with citizens and farmers to develop land management practices.

³⁵ How do hours in front of television and computer screens impact children? What does a life devoid of interactions with nature do to our capacities as moral and political members of our communities and societies? We need measurement tools, terms and units to start gathering these data.

³⁶ These standards are likewise rejected, but rejection is part of the process of cultural value formation and transformation.

The *polis* is simply the place where we practice politics; where we come together to make collective decisions about limited resources. Active, political citizenship is tough going because the individual voice is now one among many, and the process is full ambiguity, distrust, power plays, and shifting allegiances. It is time consuming too. The *polis* is the locus political activity of any group—governmental, institutional, clubs, and associations. It is the school, library, ward, town, city board, neighborhood association, student/faculty senate, and any club or organization to which we belong. The greater are number of diverse communities in a city, the greater are the opportunities to participate in the political process. But political citizenship likewise needs a strong participatory incentive structure in the halls and structures of government.³⁷ Citizens must have the opportunity to participate in their city’s political processes, even if it is only a public hearing.

Civic Infrastructures and Book VII of Aristotle’s *Politics*

What all three civic dimensions have in common is the need for particular places and contexts to become well working and fully actualized. Our social instincts are hard wired, but they depend on good quality social-public experiences and contexts to turn them on and to develop them. If left to chance some of these necessary structures will likely arise on their own, but it has been the contention of civic philosophers throughout the ages that a good civic life requires civic infrastructures, and that these infrastructures require planning, design, and implementation. Book Seven of Aristotle’s *Politics* is a good example of this work. Aristotle is very specific about what is needed in the city,

³⁷ Thomas Jefferson referred to the New England Townships, and their town meetings, as “the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man” (In Matthews, 83).

right down to water supply, common meals, and the arrangement of houses and streets. More modern examples include a number of American cities that have begun their renewal by opening up their waterfront, building walkways, greenways, gazebos, and band shells, closing off streets to motorized traffic, or creating festivals and framers' markets.³⁸ They are all examples of middle-sized civic structures for middle-sized civic creatures that require a strong commitment from all levels of government—but particularly local and regional governments—as well as corporations, schools and universities, and churches to take a central role in promoting citizenship and the infrastructures and contexts necessary to practice citizenship.³⁹

These infrastructures are critical, cannot be left to chance, and cannot be neglected for too long lest they require a complete re-creation.⁴⁰ What's needed are quantitative metrics for observing civic infrastructures, assessing their “structural” integrity, identifying what types are most urgently needed, and calculating their economic costs versus their social benefits.⁴¹

Active and engaged citizenship in democratic societies has never been optional. Nor can it be avoided by individuals who want a full and good life. The United States has been able to make citizenship optional by offering instead a life of personal choice that is

³⁸ See, for example, *The New Civic Art: Elements of Town Planning* by Adres Duany, et. al. (forthcoming), and *Place Making: Developing Town Centers, Main Streets, and Urban Villages* by Charles C. Bohl and Gary Cusumano, Urban Land Institute, 2002.)

³⁹ See Luther and Wall's *Clues to Rural Community Survival* for an example.

⁴⁰ An example of what happens when infrastructure is ignored appears in a recent report by the American Society of Civil Engineers, that estimates the cost of rebuilding America's roads, bridges and buildings at estimated \$1.6 trillion. (<http://www.asce.org/reportcard/>). It would be an interesting assignment to calculate the economic costs of rebuilding America's civic infrastructures or the social costs of letting it crumble. We need an American Society of **Civic Engineers**.

⁴¹ Some of this work is already being done. See http://www.ncl.org/publications/descriptions/civic_index_measuring.html for the National Civic League's Civic Index for an example. But imagine a new discipline—Civic Life— an interdisciplinary mix of philosophy, ecology, psychology, politics, and economics (I'm probably missing a few disciplines) that could keep a cadre of graduate students busy for quite awhile. Or imagine offices of Civic Life in state and county governments.

largely material and consumptive and by assuming that such a life would provide a good substitute for a life divided between private and public self. This experiment has failed both in terms of making people happy, and because the geological inheritance on which it is premised has been exhausted. 3-D civics is a renewed call to consider again the value that civic life can bring to individuals. It would also offer a non-materialistic and non-consumptive option for human happiness, thereby potentially decreasing America's ecological footprint.

We can wait for conditions that are likely to re-activate our civic, social instincts (and hope that these conditions don't instead activate are more aggressive instincts), or we can start the process of provisioning civic infrastructures now for a post-carbon world and thereby be better able to offer powerful and positive alternatives to the consumptive, stressful, indebted and tired lives we have been living.

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