What is it Like to be a Deliberative Democrat?

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It has become fashionable these days to talk about "deliberative" models of democracy. Political theorists as diverse as Jürgen Habermas, Joshua Cohen, and Seyla Benhabib have been arguing that within democratic politics, the justification of the political authority vested in any particular policy depends in part on the process by which it was created and enacted.[1] In their recent book, *Democracy and Disagreement*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that moral conflict is inevitable in political discourse, and thus that the legitimacy of any given policy comes from the deliberative process by which that policy was chosen.[2] In *Democratic Education*, Gutmann argued that democracy "is a political *ideal* — of a society whose adult members are, and continue to be, equipped by their education and authorized by political structures to share in ruling."[3] In order to understand what kind of *citizens* are necessary to fulfill this ideal, we must understand what it is that the citizen is required to do in taking up his or her share in ruling. We might refer to these requirements as *the requirements of democratic citizenry*.

While *Democratic Education* concentrates on what Gutmann sees as the democratic constraints on the distribution of education, it leaves open the question of what a citizen needs from that education in order to participate in democratic governing. Specifically, it does not address the issue of "public reason," which is supposed to be the method by which policy questions are to be resolved in a public forum. One way to interpret *Democracy and Disagreement* is to see it as supplying a theory of public deliberation. The goal of this essay is to elucidate the relevant features of the ideals of democratic deliberation, as given in these two works, and to explore the kind of character required to realize that ideal. In particular, I argue that these two works, taken together, entail a twofold demand on the character of the ideal citizen: a capacity for moral reasoning and deliberation, and a commitment to deliberating *morally*.

Basic Principles of Democracy

In *Democratic Education*, Gutmann makes several claims about a democracy's minimum commitments. First, such a society aims at "conscious social reproduction," that is, the society is committed not merely to recreating itself, but doing so with foresight, or awareness of what is being recreated (*DE*, 39). This implies a commitment to arriving at deliberative agreement over matters of public policy. A commitment to *conscious* social reproduction entails an obligation to educate "all educable children to be capable of participating in collectively shaping their society" (*DE*, 39). In addition to developing in students a commitment to democratic ideals, this education should also teach moral reasoning.[4] After all, if I am to deliberate with my fellow citizens about what we ought to do, then I need to have some capacity to make moral arguments. Since the moral character of its citizens and its institutions forms the moral character of a democratic government, education in *character* and *moral reasoning* are both necessary in order to create a democracy.

Next, Gutmann discusses commitments to *nonrepression* and *nondiscrimination*. Nonrepression "prevents the state and any group within it from using education to restrict rational deliberation over competing conceptions of the good life and the good society" (*DE*, 44). In addition, by fostering deliberation over such competing conceptions, nonrepression allows for the development of "those character traits, such as honesty, religious toleration, and mutual respect for persons, that serve as the foundations for rational deliberations of differing ways of life" (*DE*, 44). Nondiscrimination simply means that all educable children ought to be educated. More formally, nondiscrimination "prevents the state, and all groups within it, from denying anyone an educational good on grounds irrelevant to the legitimate social purpose of that good" (*DE*, 45). Together, Gutmann argues, nonrepression and nondiscrimination "simultaneously support deliberative freedom and communal self-determination" (*DE*, 46). These three commitments form the core of her theory of democratic politics.

In sum, the minimum commitments of a democracy are first, open evaluation and criticism of its policies and institutions, as it attempts to recreate itself from one generation to the next. Next, as a condition of the inclusion of all moral visions of the good, an ideal democracy cannot repress deliberations over such visions. Finally, as a condition of the inclusion of all citizens in such deliberations, such a society must not deny any citizen the opportunity to be educated. Accounts of what deliberation requires, what kinds of reasons count, and how deliberation is supposed to be carried out are needed before we can reasonably say that we have an idea of what democratic character is. For this, I will need to turn to *Democracy and Disagreement*.

Arguments in Favor of the Deliberative Ideal

In accepting a commitment to conscious social reproduction, Gutmann's position entails that a democratic government has a strong interest in how its citizens turn out as a result of the educational process. For example, while the liberal state is only committed to educating its citizens to be able to choose between differing visions of the Good, the democratic state is also committed to educating its citizens to be able to make and criticize arguments about the Good in a public forum, *and* to have the kind of dispositions appropriate for doing so.

Democracy and Disagreement begins with a brief account of why deliberation is to be preferred to pure proceduralist accounts of theorists like Habermas on one hand, and constitutionalist accounts of those such as Ronald Dworkin on the other. As noted in the introduction, a brief perusal of the literature reveals that Gutmann and Thompson's account does not differ much from the standard views of deliberative democracy. Their argument opens by rejecting the claim that seeking foundational knowledge is the appropriate goal of political decision-making bodies. Thus, democrats are left needing to find a way to "find some basis on which to justify collective decisions here and now in the *absence* of foundational knowledge" (*DD*, 5). Deliberation, they claim, "is the most appropriate way for citizens collectively to resolve their moral disagreements not only about policies, but also about the process by which policies should be adopted" (*DD*, 5).[5] So, in denying recourse to

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foundational knowledge of what is Just, deliberative democrats place the onus on the procedures themselves to ensure just outcomes.

What distinguishes deliberative democracy from the alternatives is the insistence on the moral quality of the *arguing* — not of the arguments — which occurs within democratic politics. Another difference between deliberative democracy and these alternatives is that the latter place either the procedures or constitutional rights beyond the scope of criticism, whereas deliberative democracy provides a standpoint from which each can be criticized. Procedures can be criticized for their failure to respect rights, and rights can be criticized for usurping the place of procedures.

In the absence of agreement over foundational moral knowledge, conflicts are inevitable. Gutmann and Thompson list four specific sources of moral disagreements, each of which they believe indicates that deliberation is an indispensable tool for political decision-making (*DD*, 18-26). Each source corresponds to a reason in favor of deliberation over pure procedural and constitutional models of democracy, and reveals something of the democratic character citizens need in order to resolve moral disagreements.

The first source of moral disagreements is the fact of (moderately) scarce resources. There will be times when resources will have to be distributed unequally, and democratic governments will have to make difficult choices concerning who gets what. Gutmann and Thompson argue that if each claim has been considered on its own merits, then even citizens whose claims have been rejected will be more willing to accept the decision than they would have been had their claims not been considered. Deliberation requires that each perspective be given a chance to voice itself, and entails that citizens be willing and able to weigh the merits of each claim against those of other claims.

Self-interest provides the second source of moral disagreement. In the deliberative forum there will be an initial tendency to favor one's own interests above those of others. However, Gutmann and Thompson argue that "citizens and their representatives are more likely to take a broader view of issues, and to consider the claims of more of their fellow citizens, in a process in which moral arguments are taken seriously than in a process in which assertions of political power prevail" (*DD*, 42). As citizens consider the relative merits of various claims, they will need to consider the claims of others *as having moral weight*, which entails that they be able to reason from other than self-interested moral premises.

A third source of moral disagreement is the problem of incompatible values. Why should we favor the deliberative procedure in such cases? First, "[d]eliberation can clarify the nature of a moral conflict, helping to distinguish among the moral, the amoral, and the immoral, and between compatible and incompatible values" (*DD*, 43). Further, "citizens are more likely to recognize what is morally at stake in a dispute if they employ moral reasoning in trying to resolve it" (*DD*, 43). By forcing us to defend and criticize moral arguments in a public forum, the deliberative process can help to isolate those conflicts which are genuinely about incompatible values, freeing those which are not for deliberative solution. In the case of truly incompatible values, "ongoing deliberation can help citizens better understand the moral

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seriousness of the views they continue to oppose, and better cooperate with their fellow citizens who hold those views" (*DD*, 43). Deliberation thus requires citizens to be able to understand and evaluate moral arguments, analyzing their presuppositions and their logical entailments in order to be able to recognize the incompatibility of some moral claims.

A final source of moral disagreements is an inadequate understanding on the part of one or more of the disputants. Deliberation works better in resolving disagreements based on such misunderstandings than other methods of decision-making in that it leads us to a better understanding of not only our own position, but of the various alternative positions as well. This requires two related attitudes of citizens engaged in the deliberations. First, citizens must not be dogmatic concerning the supposed truth of their own beliefs or their rejection of the beliefs of others. And second, citizens must be willing to flesh out various moral positions, exposing both their strengths and weaknesses.

Each of these four sources of moral disagreement indicates something of the ideal democratic character for a citizen in a deliberative democracy. A willingness to consider *all* legitimate claims as having moral weight is one of the foundational attitudes. Additionally, the ideal deliberative democrat needs the ability to weigh the merits of each claim against its competitors. Thus, deliberation requires citizens to be able to make and to criticize moral arguments. Finally, citizens ought to approach moral disagreements with an attitude of fallibility and a willingness to explore all of the arguments in the search for the best solution.

Conditions of Deliberation

Given the claim that the *quality* of the deliberative process is important for the moral justifiedness of its outcomes, Gutmann and Thompson offer three principles which constitute what they call "conditions of deliberation": reciprocity, publicity, and accountability. The principle of reciprocity concerns the attitudes and abilities of citizens during the process of deliberation. Publicity and accountability refer mostly to the duties of representatives, and so I will not attempt to deal with them here.

Reciprocity is the feature of the deliberative process that requires citizens to bring a specific kind of attitude to the deliberative forum. Its foundation is "the capacity to seek fair terms of social cooperation for their own sake" (*DD*, 52-53). According to the authors, reciprocity requires two things.

First, when citizens make moral claims, they must support them with reasons that are acceptable in principle by others who are also committed to finding fair terms of social cooperation (*DD*, 55). Assuming that we all want to resolve a dispute, it would be illegitimate for me to make any claim which rests on premises which you reject, since this would solve nothing, simply forcing the debate back one level to an argument over the disputed premise. This is related to the claim, made earlier, that citizens need to be able to argue from other than self-interested moral premises. Here, however, the claim is that citizens need to be able to find premises which *could* be accepted by *all* parties to the disagreement, and in a way denies the validity of casting such debates in terms of "my interests" against "your interests." Instead,

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Gutmann and Thompson are arguing that moral disagreement ought to be resolved by finding *mutually agreeable* moral premises from which to argue. Thus, citizens need to be able to determine which premises are legitimate, and which are not, in any given moral debate, by discovering which of them are agreeable to all parties in the discussion, yielding something like Rawls' "overlapping consensus."

Second, "when moral reasoning invokes empirical claims, reciprocity requires that they be consistent with relatively reliable methods of inquiry" (*DD*, 56). Hence, citizens will need to be able to evaluate empirical claims, whether by identifying and consulting appropriate authorities, or by examining the evidence itself. Reciprocity therefore *presupposes* two general skills: a capacity to determine whether or not a moral claim is compatible with the beliefs of others, and an understanding of the general rules for accepting empirical evidence.

While deliberation under the conditions of reciprocity may enable citizens to resolve many of their moral disagreements, some disagreements can persist even in the face of concerted efforts to resolve them. In order to prevent persistent deliberative moral disagreement from degenerating into nondeliberative disagreements, wherein the parties cease to respect one another's position, Gutmann and Thompson propose the principle of *Moral Accommodation*. Reciprocity requires citizens to have a specific set of moral *virtues*.

The principle of moral accommodation demands two sets of attitudes on the part of citizens: Civic Integrity and Civic Magnanimity. Under Civic Integrity, citizens ought to present their positions consistently from one context to the next, in the spirit of political sincerity. They ought also maintain consistency between speech and action. And finally, they should accept the "broader implications of the principles presupposed by [their] moral positions." Under Civic Magnanimity, citizens should acknowledge "that an opponent's position is based on moral principles about which people may reasonably disagree." They should also remain open-minded, maintaining "the possibility that [they] can be convinced of the moral merits of their adversaries' position." And lastly, citizens ought to be disposed to seek an *economy of moral disagreement*, or "the rationale which minimizes rejection of the position they oppose" (*DD*, 81-85). In cases of persistent moral disagreement, then, citizens will need to have a specific kind of moral character, such that a citizen desires to maintain consistency and sincerity, respects opponents' human dignity and worth, and agrees to disagree with them concerning the disputed issue without denigrating them as persons.

Combined, the principles of reciprocity and moral accommodation describe a process of deliberation that requires citizens to have a number of specific attitudes and skills. The principle of reciprocity demands that we find premises from which to argue that are acceptable to all parties to the discussion, and be able to evaluate empirical evidence. The principle of moral accommodation requires that citizens have two groups of character traits. Civic Integrity requires that citizens want to be consistent in word and deed, and to accept the implications of the moral principles that they accept. Civic Magnanimity requires that they treat opponents' positions as reasonable and morally worthy, and that they be willing to accept them given

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adequate argument. Finally, in the face of persistent moral disagreement, citizens should be willing to seek to maximize agreement concerning the position which is ultimately accepted.

The Requirements of Democratic Citizenry

Taken together, the four sources of moral disagreements, the requirements of reciprocity, and the principles of moral accommodation, imply a specific kind of democratic citizen. For the purposes of this essay, the requirements of democratic citizenry can be divided into two categories, "Civic Virtue" and "Civic Intelligence." These categories are not meant to be mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive, but it will be helpful to differentiate characteristics according to whether they are primarily associated with character traits like honesty or friendliness, or with intellectual skills like logical reasoning or the ability to perform mathematical tasks. Combined, these two categories sketch a fairly detailed vision of the ideal deliberative character.

Civic virtue has as its basis some of the standard virtues associated with modern democracies — honesty, toleration, and respect. However, once we have committed ourselves to conscious social reproduction, and to deliberative democracy, we are committed to a number of very specific additional requirements. Again, in order to overcome the problem of disagreement over the distribution of scarce resources, citizens must be disposed to seek out and consider *all* of the relevant perspectives. They need to be willing to see things from a broader perspective than their own, perhaps from the view of the common or social good. We might call someone with these dispositions "broad-minded." In addition, such a person must treat the problems and moral positions of others as *having moral weight*, or as worthy of respect. In the discussion of reciprocity, we saw that respect for others needed to be what Gutmann and Thompson call "appraisal respect," where the parties to the disagreement begin from the assumption that their opponent's position is one over which reasonable people could disagree (*DD*, 376, fn. 30). This kind of respect requires that we see other parties in the debate as having potentially valid and valuable moral positions, and seek to find common ground from there. This leads to another virtue of deliberative democrats: a desire to seek "fair terms of social cooperation" and to seek such terms on moral grounds, not merely for the sake of self-interest (*DD*, 52-53). Deliberative democrats should want to justify their moral positions on terms that *everyone* can accept, not simply those who are like-minded, and with an economy of moral disagreement. Call this virtue "democratic fairness." Thus, citizens need to be broad-minded, respectful, and fair, in order to accord with the principles of deliberative democracy.

While fairness, respect, and broad-mindedness are associated more with attitude than with skill, there are two other virtues that emerge from the authors' discussions which bridge the gap between civic virtues and civic intelligence. Deliberative democrats need to be nondogmatic or *skeptical* about their own beliefs. That is, citizens should be *self-critical* about their own beliefs, willing to change their minds given the right contrary evidence or argument. Deliberative citizens, then, might do well to see themselves as part of a community of moral inquirers, in much the same way that a scientist sees himself or herself as a part of a community

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of inquirers, working together to improve their understanding of the moral world. Skepticism and self-criticism directly involve persons' attitudes toward their understanding of the moral positions they and others hold, and toward the grounds for their beliefs. In order to practice these virtues though, citizens will need certain intellectual capabilities.

As Gutmann argued in *Democratic Education*, citizens need to be able to make choices among various possible good lives. These decisions need to be made by individuals not just on their own, but in concert with others. A democratic society is committed to recreating itself *collectively*. As I have noted, these commitments require that citizens be able to make and criticize moral arguments.

A deliberative democrat, therefore, must have some of the basic tools of argument. She must be able to analyze particular claims, identifying the presuppositions and entailments of those claims. Additionally, she must be able to evaluate empirical evidence, judging both the appropriateness of authorities and the reliability of the evidence itself. In order to criticize the arguments of others, she will need to be able to judge the relevance, plausibility, and sufficiency of given premises to a conclusion. We have also seen that a deliberative democrat has to be broad-minded, disposed to see things from more than just his own perspective — considering all voices and including both individual and collective goods or needs. In order for a citizen to practice this virtue, he must be *able* to perform this shift in perspective. This means that the citizen must be able to formulate moral premises from perspectives not his own. This entails that the citizen be able to work with the belief systems of others, working out the entailments of the basic commitments of those systems in order to determine what others might say in response to a given situation. And, in order to be able to come to deliberative agreement, he will need to be able to identify truly incompatible values as such, and judge the relative weight or merit of those values in the context of the current disagreement.

To summarize, the ideal deliberative democracy operates according to several specific principles, and following those principles requires that citizens have a number of interrelated skills and attitudes. Entering into deliberations, citizens need to be seeking something like "the best solution" rather than advancing their own interests exclusively. This means that they need to subject each suggested position to scrutiny. An ideal citizen desires to explore as many options as possible, to insure that all voices are heard, as well as to have the best chance to find the ideal solution. In order to secure the quality of the deliberations, citizens will need to treat one another with respect, and to take each others' positions seriously. So that the deliberations have the best chance of identifying the best solution, the citizens will need to be skilled at moral reasoning. What we see here is that the ideal citizen must have strong reasoning skills and a virtuous character if the deliberations which go on in the ideal deliberative democracy are to have the moral quality, and hence justifiedness, which Gutmann and Thompson are seeking.

The Road Ahead: From Ideal Theory to Social Institutions

In the preceding pages I have attempted to draw out the characteristics of an ideal citizen in Gutmann and Thompson's ideal deliberative democracy. However,

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significant questions arise if we accept this picture. What kind of social institutions are necessary in order for this ideal to be realized? How much of the burden for creating ideal citizens ought to be placed on the society's specifically *educational* institutions? Such questions are clearly beyond the scope of this essay, but answers to them would be necessary for anyone attempting to create a deliberative democracy.

In a broad sense, obviously, the ideal institutions in a deliberative democracy would have to be such that they encourage the kinds of deliberation and inquiry that Gutmann and Thompson are endorsing. Certainly any governmental agency ought to promote communal, public deliberation and inquiry as its method of maintenance and improvement of public policy. For such agencies represent the public, and as such are subject to Gutmann and Thompson's arguments concerning the behavior and accountability of public officials. However, this raises an obvious and important question: Are private institutions ultimately compatible with a commitment to deliberative democracy? That is, given that the broader social context plays a large role in the development and habits of citizens, to what extent can a deliberative democracy allow private control of the economic sphere? Does the government need to regulate the way private businesses are run, in order to protect the ideals of deliberation? More generally, what is the government required or permitted to do in order to ensure the maintenance of a sufficiently deliberative population? These are particularly troubling questions, and are at the heart of ongoing conflicts over the role and scope of government.

In addition to questions about the role of government, there are also questions concerning the role of educational institutions in "reproducing" deliberative citizens. At what stage of education should these ideals be taught? Which ideals are the province of formal schooling, and which the province of the family or society at large?

Finally, in order to decide questions about the role of schooling, we would need to discover a curriculum appropriate for developing the right skills and values for citizens of a deliberative democracy. However, this would require that we have an understanding of how educational and other social institutions *combine* to form the character of individuals, something which has yet to be completely clarified. What is clear, however, is that *if* the moral legitimacy of public policy depends on the deliberations of citizens, and the quality of those deliberations depends on the abilities and attitudes of those deliberating, then it is imperative for the moral standing of such a democracy that the conditions necessary for the development of those attitudes and abilities be identified. Gutmann and Thompson's book gives us a thorough account of what the ideal deliberations ought to look like, and I have attempted to describe what the ideal citizen would need to be in order to participate in such deliberations. The next step is to investigate the roles that various public and private institutions would play in a deliberative democracy, the constraints which the ideal of deliberative democracy would place on those institutions, and how we could get there from here.

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1. See, for example, Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" in *The Good Polity*, ed. Alan Hamilton and Philip Petit (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 1989); Seyla Benhabib, "Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy," *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 26-52; and Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 1-10.

2. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1996). This book will be cited as *DD* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), preface, xi. This book will be cited as *DE* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Of course, it should be added that education should not be *limited* to teaching moral reasoning — other forms of reasoning such as economic or political reasoning should be goals as well. For without the capacity to reason about these things, one may engage in moral reasoning without having some kinds of premises crucial to determining what policies we as a society ought to follow.

5. Compare Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," 21: "Free deliberation among equals is the basis of legitimacy."

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