

Democratic Passions, Despotic Pastimes

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Why would we *want* to live democratically? This concern about the reasons for supporting a democratic society, and the “motivational requirements of democratic education,” is the central focus of David Blacker’s insightful and original essay. Blacker claims that our best reasons fit a model of democratic reasonableness based on Hume. On the whole, I agree — although the naturalism Blacker seems content to inherit from the Scotsman strikes me as an unnecessary and expendable bias — and I welcome his affirmation that democracies cannot live on principles of right alone. What remains intriguingly ambiguous, though, is how passionate are the democratic passions in Blacker’s account supposed to be. Rather than viewing this as a question about the niceties of Hume’s terminology, I find that it points to an important implication of Blacker’s vision of democratic education that I would like to amplify and open up for discussion. If this education aims to cultivate a Humean idea of reasonableness, then it should also take up the task of strengthening the extra-democratic passions by deepening them. It should be unafraid of criticizing, in the name of democracy, our dissipating, consumerist pastimes.

What is democratic reasonableness? Blacker derives this idea from Hume’s account of how reason interacts with the passions. For Hume, the two are not opposed. Reason alone cannot move us to act. Any would-be rational, moral action requires a passion, or several, as motivation and premise; our deliberations may lead us to modify how we would have otherwise expressed these passions, but without the latter, we would have no cause to act, let alone deliberate, at all. Accordingly, Hume replaces the rationalist picture of reason commanding, or even extirpating, the passions with one of reason serving them; in Blacker’s precise terms, reason organizes, specifies, and weights them. “Hume presents a kind of moral-developmental account in which the acquisition of moral virtue requires...the *cultivation* of [the passions], a ‘corrected sympathy,’ leading in the best case to a ‘progress of sentiments.’” With the aid of reason’s guidance, our passions can grow beyond narrow forms of egotism, toward more expansive, altruistic sympathies.

Out of this moral psychology, Blacker ingeniously develops a kind of political psychology, where universal democratic reasonableness plays the same role in society as reason does in the individual, and particular comprehensive conceptions of the good a role analogous to that of the passions. Following this model, we need not insist that democratic citizens recognize democracy as the highest good of them all, or as an idea of right trumping the good altogether. These restrictive demands are akin to those of a purist sect. Rather, we can broaden support for democratic forms of life by viewing them as reasonable ways of organizing, specifying, and weighting our commitments to diverse comprehensive conceptions of the good. Because we are moved by these goods as so many passions, and because we want to pursue them as effectively as possible, free from conflict, we care about living democratically.

This idea of democratic reasonableness illuminates the central aim of democratic education. “It must effect a rendezvous between the relatively thin and narrow political terms of cooperation (that are definitive of reasonableness) and the variously elaborated, thicker conceptions of the good that provide meaning and direction to individuals and their collectivities in a more thoroughgoing manner.” This education should try to persuade citizens that democratic terms of cooperation can enhance, rather than curb or replace, their pursuit of even extra-democratic goods. Conversely, it should try to reassure them that others’ pursuits of different goods, instead of threatening the peace, can in their own way reinforce our common, fertile democracy.

As I remarked at the outset, I find Blacker’s reasoning quite convincing. Indeed, because I have so little to criticize in it, I would like to devote my response mainly to an exploration of one of its suggestive implications. Let me approach this by way of probing a bit more the analogy between the passions and comprehensive conceptions of the good.

The analogy appears straightforward. Setting aside the nuances of Hume’s language, the “passions,” in Blacker’s argument, refer to what moves individuals or loose-knit groups to care about something. Some of these passions might be idiosyncratic, others commonplace; some unconscious, some loudly professed; some animalistic like a craving for meat, others artificial like an allergy to The Spice Girls. Comprehensive conceptions of the good, in comparison, calling for reflection, articulation, and criticism, would be passions that move communities of adherents to care about something with a relatively high degree of devotion and self-consciousness. Some passions are apt to be intense, disruptive, and death-daring. But insofar as comprehensive conceptions of the good are the flags of passions that have been cultivated collectively for generations, we might plausibly claim that they are rooted in the deepest passions of all. The ones that can move mountains.

If the aim of democratic education is to encourage citizens to commit themselves passionately to democracy, then these citizens must first of all be capable of passionate commitments to something. It is in the interests of democratic education, therefore, that citizens develop allegiances to a comprehensive conception of the good. Of course, as Blacker points out, any such conception would have to be compatible with democratic reasonableness. Our educational efforts, however, should not stop with a simple check of such compatibility: we should actively help all citizens learn to love some democratically congruous hypergood.¹

Implied by Blacker’s argument, I am suggesting, is a case for embracing in democratic public education the study of philosophy and theology. Far from driving out considerations of the good as a threat to liberal neutrality, this vision of education acknowledges that without the wells of motivation fed by such considerations, democracies are prone to wither away from apathy. Blacker furnishes us with an insightful political reason to no longer settle for the philosophical philistinism so characteristic of American public school curricula.

The troubling thinness and volatility of the passions we observe around us, however, is not due simply to ignorance. A positive, philosophical and theological

education of our passions can do only so much. We also need to come to grips with the forces that turn the latter away from any such education, and reify them in trivializing forms. Something akin to Rousseau's negative education is necessary in order to protect the passions from their relentlessly denaturing commodification.

To be sure, there can be no question of isolating citizens from all social influence. But if we are serious about cultivating the passions, then at the very least, we should encourage critical discussion of arguably corrupting influences. Are we not wired to a thicket of images designed to captivate our passions with fantasies of ecstatic, endlessly distracting consumption? This consumption invites us to savor sensation without reflection, and to watch or escape into a spectacle without responsibility. Truly and literally self-deconstructing, this consumerism blocks the cultivation of comprehensive conceptions of the good, of self-understanding, and trains us to live for primarily private and punctual satisfactions. Because the latter require little commitment, and so are largely anti-historical, I think of them as fashions of abandoning time to oblivion, as passionless pastimes.

Charles Taylor, echoing Tocqueville, reminds us that devotion to such pastimes is a recipe for "soft despotism."² In a consumerist society whose conceptions of the good are so many advertisements, citizens are bombarded with incentives to withdraw from the communal project of self-government. All the democratic reasonableness in the world will fail to add up to a democratic culture if we are content to let the experts rule, so long as we can get back to the show. Our education, then, should encourage us to discern and address this threat to democratic passions from our fantasies of consumption, and the system that supports them.

I wish I could say that I was confident that an educational program which seriously criticizes ruling class interests has much chance of support today. But this pessimism of the intellect — which after all, can be surprised by the will in a changing conjuncture — does not prevent me from admiring philosophically the vision of liberal democratic education that Blacker has offered us. Extending Hume's account of reason and the passions, Blacker explains how the health of our society may depend on cooperative dialogues between forms of democratic reasonableness and comprehensive conceptions of the good. He suggests that cultivating such dialogues should be a central aim of democratic education. What follows from this, I find, is an important and exciting role for the study of philosophy and theology: these disciplines promise to help citizens cultivate truly comprehensive conceptions of the good that can fuel the passion for democracy. At the same time, citizens need to become more critically aware of how they are systematically drawn away from such cultivation, *Bildung*, by the mechanism and interests of consumerism. Passion or pastime is a choice we should be challenged to confront.

1. I borrow this last term from Charles Taylor. See his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 62-75.

2. See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9-10.