

Citizens of an Impossible City

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I. Introduction

The topic of this conference gives us a chance to reconsider some of the most basic of our political concepts. This is a good thing in my view, because I am convinced that current political discussion is in a disordered state, not because we are reaching the wrong kinds of *conclusions* about political questions, but because we have the wrong categories, and are asking the wrong kinds of questions. My consideration of the concept of citizenship and some historical *shifts* in the concept of citizenship will help establish that claim.

I have a few main goals in this paper. First, I want to sketch some important ideas from ancient political thought that are often lost from view in contemporary political discussions. Having these concepts on the table will help us make sense of important aspects of modern life and modern politics.

In order to demonstrate the importance of this topic, I am also going to provide a sense of some of our current conceptions of citizenship and provide some historical and philosophical background for that discussion. I will not be engaged in detailed historical or social analysis. The best term for what I will be doing is “genealogy.”¹ Hopefully what I am trying to do will be clear as I go along, but let me provide a quick description of genealogy. In a genealogy one attempts to provide a suggestive sketch of the origins of certain commonly held ideas and practices. The sketch is not intended to be meticulous history. It is meant to illuminate concepts that we possess

¹ The roots of this notion are to be found in Nietzsche. See his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, as well as other works such as *Beyond Good and Evil*. Both works can be found in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000). For contemporary discussion of the method of genealogy, see Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Chapter 2 is especially relevant. My characterization of genealogy is indebted to Williams’s treatment.

that might go unnoticed, and to illuminate features of those concepts and the role they play in our thinking. I am going to provide a kind of genealogy for contemporary conceptions of citizenship by discussing the classical conception of citizenship, and suggesting certain factors that led to shifts in how we think about citizenship in modernity. My genealogy will certainly draw on discussions in political philosophy on the history of political thought, but my interests lie elsewhere. I want to provide illuminating suggestions about what has shaped our senses of citizenship, and how we should respond in light of that.

The first part of my argument/genealogy requires discussion of classical conceptions of citizenship embodied in such figures as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas.² My view is that these conceptions are fundamentally different than contemporary conceptions for several related reasons.

II. Citizenship and the Common Good in Classical Thought

Our word *citizen* reflects some of the history of the concept, so it makes sense to start there. A citizen is a member of the “city” or “polis” in Greek.³ Political life is life in the city and to be a citizen is to be a participant in the life of the city. Now the city in the ancient world was much different than the modern nation state. Most notably, it was much smaller. And there is a corresponding deep difference between the classical conception of political community and modern conceptions. Those differences yield radically different understandings of citizenship.

² The most important classical texts here are Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Augustine’s *City of God*, and the so-called “Treatise on Law” in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*. See bibliography for information on a standard translation for each work. My interpretation of these figures on these matters is indebted to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. The most relevant works are his *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1999), and “Practical Rationalities as Forms of Social Structure” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 120-135.

³ It is important to keep in mind the etymological connection between “politics” and “citizen” which is obscured in English by the fact that our word ‘politics’ derives from Greek, while our word ‘citizen’ derives from Latin.

The classical conception of political community is tied to the idea that proper political communities are ordered toward a common good. The language of common good involved here is very different than what is often understood by contemporary use of that language. As such, it will be useful to distinguish the notion from these other contemporary notions.

To understand the notion of a common good, we should distinguish between a *shared* good and other kinds of goods. A shared good is something that can be enjoyed by many without having to be divided between them.⁴ Examples of shared goods abound. One example is the excellent performance of a piece of music by a symphony orchestra. Another example would be truth or understanding achieved in inquiry.⁵ These achievements of shared activity do not need to be divvied up in order for all participants to enjoy them. Such an achievement is *one* achievement that can be enjoyed in its fullness by many.

In addition to shared goods, there are also *individual goods*. Consider the example of an orchestra again. Certain members of an excellent orchestra will enjoy a certain degree of fame and reputation. The reputation of one member is not shareable with another the way the achievements of the orchestra are.⁶

Certain individual goods can be *distributed* to any number of people. But such goods are not shared in the above sense. Consider wealth. A pile of money can be “shared” in the sense that different parts of the pile can be distributed to different people. But once a portion is distributed to one, it is unavailable to be distributed to another (while also remaining the possession of the

⁴ My discussion of shared goods is indebted to MacIntyre’s discussion of “goods internal to practices” in chapter 14 of *After Virtue*. Charles Taylor’s essay “Irreducibly Social Goods” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 127-145 is also helpful.

⁵ Augustine sketches an argument for God’s existence in *On Free Choice of the Will* that depends on the distinction between shared and individual goods that I am drawing here. He uses truth as an example of a shared good. See Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964).

⁶ The reputation of the orchestra as a whole is another story.

first person). So I distinguish between *distributed* and *shared* goods.⁷ With the shared good of excellent achievement, when one member of an orchestra enjoys that achievement, nothing is lost from the good such that it is unavailable to others.

A common good for a community is a shared good as opposed to a distributed good. Notice that this kind of common good is often inextricably connected to shared practice such as that found in orchestras, sports teams and other crafts. These practices share common goals that can be enjoyed by the whole relevant community. Indeed, the goals cannot be achieved apart from a certain kind of shared *life*. Further, the flourishing of each member within the group cannot be understood apart from the shared activities and achievements of the practice. Indeed, the excellent functioning of the shared life more or less *is* the shared good of the relevant community.

Classical political philosophy often understood political communities to be analogous to such shared communities of practice. The flourishing of political communities was likewise viewed as analogous to the flourishing of a community of practice. Such political communities were defined by the pursuit of shared goods.⁸ The flourishing of individual members could only be understood in terms of the shared life and achievements of the community.

We must distinguish this conception of a common good from other understandings of that idea. In particular, we should distinguish it from the following conception: one might view “promoting the common good” as enabling the enjoyment of *individual goods* by many people in a population. So we might speak of a policy that promises to increase everyone’s wealth as being

⁷ These distinctions rely on MacIntyre’s distinction between goods internal and external to practices that he discusses in chapter 14 of *After Virtue*.

⁸ Thus for Augustine, members of the same commonwealth share the same “objects of love.” See book XIX, chapter 24 of the *City of God*.

in the interests of the common good. This is quite different from the classical conception which is concerned with the shared life of the political community in question.

Citizenship according to the classical conception meant being a member of the shared life of a political community organized by a common good. To be a member in such a community is to have a distinctive role to play in the shared life of that community.

The concept of “membership” is important to my reasoning in this paper. Consider some of the shared activities discussed above—orchestras, sports teams, etc. While there is a shared common *goal* directing these activities, this common goal can only be reached if each member plays his or her *distinctive* role. On a football team, a play works when all the different players complete their distinctive assignments. The unity is found in the distinctive but connected activities of each member. To move to a musical analogy, the unity in view is the unity of singing in *harmony* rather than in unison—different parts coming together to form the richer whole.

C.S. Lewis articulates this notion of membership in his essay by that title.⁹ He discusses the Pauline idea of “membership” in connection with Christians being members of the body of Christ. He writes,

In any book on logic you may see the expression “members of a class.” It must be most emphatically stated that the items or particulars included in a homogeneous class are almost the reverse of what St. Paul meant by members. By members he meant what we should call organs, things essentially different from, and complementary to, one another, things differing not only in structure and function but also in dignity.... A row of identically dressed soldiers set side by side, or a number of citizens listed as voters in a constituency are not members of anything in the Pauline sense.... How true membership in a body differs from inclusion in a collective may be seen in the structure of a family. The grandfather, the parents, the grown-up son, the child, the dog, and the cat are true members (in the organic sense), precisely because they are not members or units of a homogeneous class. They are not interchangeable. Each person is almost a species in

⁹ C.S. Lewis, “Membership” in *The Weight of Glory and other Addresses* (1949; Reprint, New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 158-176.

himself.... If you subtract any one member, you have not simply reduced the family in number; you have inflicted an injury on its structure. Its unity is unity of unlikes, almost of incommensurables.¹⁰

Lewis is contrasting this idea of membership with collectivism on the one hand—where each is taken to be an interchangeable unit of a whole—and individualism on the other. This idea of membership is important to my argument, and I will return to it.

Let me make a final point about the classical conception of political life. The *polis* was conceived as the community not ordered around this or that shared good, but ordered by pursuit of the highest good for human beings. The shared life of an excellent *polis* enabled the shared enjoyment of the human *telos*. Indeed, you could think of the political community as that which organizes the other goods of life, and puts them in their proper place within the best kind of human life.¹¹

It is my contention that the concept of a common good as I have discussed it does not have application in a modern nation state. That is to say, there is no common good that defines the life of the members of a modern nation state. One reason the notion of a common good fails to have application is simply the size of them. It is nearly impossible to conceive of the number of people in a modern nation state having a shared life. But there are deeper problems here.

As we moved into the modern period, there was a profound shift in basic ways of conceiving the person in relation to political life. Aristotle epitomized the classical conception when he said, “Man is by nature a political animal.”¹² That is to say, it belongs to man’s nature to be a member of a political community with a shared common good. On this view, a person is essentially a person-in-relation to other persons. To understand a person and his good, you must

¹⁰ Lewis, “Membership,” 162-164.

¹¹ This is why it was natural for Augustine to see the church as the *city* of God, ordering all good things toward the shared good of worship and enjoyment of God. Regarding the best *polis* and the highest good for humans, see MacIntyre’s discussion of Aristotle in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

¹² See the *Politics*, I. 1253a2.

understand his place in various communities through which he exercises his capacities, and without which he could not flourish. To be a person is at one and the same time to be a son or daughter, a father or mother, a neighbor, a friend, a colleague. Further the “true self” is not the person abstracted from these relationships. These relationships are not, then, an “imposition” on the true self.

By contrast, in the modern period we see a view of the self arise which denies that the self is essentially social. The self is conceived as *prior* to any social relationships. This conception of the self is an indispensable part of the social contract political theories that arose in the modern era. In these theories, man in the “state of nature” is contrasted with man in society.¹³ This is a direct repudiation of the Aristotelian idea that it is part of the nature of man to exist in society. According to this view, social relations are an imposition on the true pre-social self (unless chosen freely). As Rousseau famously said, “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.”¹⁴ When this view of the self takes root, it yields a very different conception of political society. Political societies are viewed as collections of individuals. The flourishing of these individuals does not essentially involve achieving a shared end with other members of a given political society.

This changing conception of the person did not come about in a vacuum. Changing forms of social and economic life embodied these changing conceptions.¹⁵ In this context, it became

¹³ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). See also John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*, in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, 5th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

¹⁴ Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*, 141.

¹⁵ It is not my concern to understand the causal relationships that were at work. Did changing social forms cause changing conceptions or the other way around? I think it is sensible to say that the causation works in both directions.

possible—even necessary—to conceive of society atomistically as a collection of individuals.¹⁶

So social life was no longer directed toward the pursuit of a common good, even as an ideal. This changing conception profoundly affected notions of citizenship. I will outline that shift in due course. But I want to step back for a moment to discuss some elements of modernity. This will help us think about certain elements of modern life in light of the ideas I have been outlining. This discussion will also suggest how difficult it is within modernity to engage in any form of social life ordered by a common good.

III. Modernity and Fragmentation

I begin by noting a familiar feature of modern life, namely, fragmentation.¹⁷

Compartmentalization would also work to describe it. The idea is that the various parts of our lives are *isolated*. In this situation, it is difficult to see one's life as a whole. Rather, there are different compartments of life that have their own standards associated with them. But it is difficult to bring common standards to bear on each activity, and therefore, onto one's life as a whole. The reality of fragmentation was given magnificent expression in the television show *Seinfeld*. In that show the character of George Costanza laments the “colliding” of his different worlds—the worlds of “relationship George” and “independent George.”

I note that the material conditions of our life contribute to this kind of fragmentation. We live one place, work in another place, and our food comes from other places entirely. Information technology allows us to disconnect from the place where we are so that we can be connected to other places and events. What is relevant is not just the different places involved, but the fact that the lives and rhythms of the different places are not connected in any kind of deep way. The

¹⁶ See MacIntyre, “Practical Rationalities as Forms of Social Structures.”

¹⁷ MacIntyre addresses issues of fragmentation throughout *After Virtue*. See also his “Social Structures and Their Threats to Moral Agency.” *Philosophy*, 74 (1999): 311- 329.

grocery store shopper often does not understand the rhythms and needs of the farms from which his food originated (if indeed the food did originate on a farm in any meaningful sense). Our uses of technology allow us to connect to other places and events, but the connection often comes in fragmented form, and the technology allows us to fragment the places we are in by drawing each person's attention to a separate device.

We should notice two things here. First, the division of the different spheres of life seems to lead to a divided self. It is difficult to see one's life as a whole. Second, while this situation leads to division within the self by isolating the different aspects of a person's life, it also leads to isolation between persons. It is difficult to build a genuinely shared life with others, modeled on the kinds of shared activities discussed above when so many aspects of life are isolated from each other.

Our mode of life in modernity makes it difficult to build and sustain shared forms of activity directed to common flourishing. And there is a concomitant conception of human flourishing and human life that increases the difficulty in conceiving and forming such shared forms of life. Under this conception, we view the good atomistically and individualistically. By an atomistic view of the good, I mean a view that sees human happiness as something that can be broken into "units" such that happiness is a function of the quantity of such units that one possesses. Most versions of utilitarianism involve atomistic views of the good. The most well-known version of utilitarianism¹⁸ holds that the good for a person is the sum of pleasure over pain in their lives. Clearly here we are talking about pleasure within experiences, and pleasure is

¹⁸ This view is called "hedonic utilitarianism."

typically (though not always) viewed as a divisible quantity that can be added to or taken away, bit by bit.¹⁹

This view of the good allows us to see happiness as a possibility even if our different activities are isolated from each other and do not form a coherent whole. After all, as long as one is accumulating happiness units in each area, the result of adding them together could be a happy life.

The atomistic view of human flourishing fits with an individualistic view of flourishing. An individualistic view of flourishing is not the view that we should be *selfish* to be happy. But it is a way of viewing the human good as *isolated* from the flourishing of others. Just as on an atomistic view the different parts of life can be understood *independently* as contributors to happiness, so on an individualistic view, can one's flourishing be understood independently of the flourishing of others.

Fragmentation presents another impediment to shared activity. If the parts of life do not add up to an ordered whole, then how does one organize the various parts of one's life and one's various commitments? Since there are no good criteria for ordering the different aspects of life, this seems to be left to an act of arbitrary will.²⁰ There is a lot to say on this point, but here I simply note that excellence in the kind of shared practices I have discussed typically requires a person to *subordinate* his or her will to the standards of excellence for that practice.²¹ So the fragmented conditions of modern life require us to assert our arbitrary will, while practices require us to subordinate our will to standards that we do not choose. There is at least a tension here that I think is difficult to resolve in actual practice.

¹⁹ See the position outlined in Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (1907; Reprint, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).

²⁰ I am moving quite fast here. For a fuller discussion of arbitrary will and its sources, see chs. 3-5 of *After Virtue*.

²¹ See chapter 14 of *After Virtue* for a fuller discussion of this topic.

IV. Citizenship in Modernity

With these ideas about modernity in place, we can turn to a discussion of how changing conceptions of the person in modernity affect the theory and practice of citizenship. It is helpful to understand this shift in connection with liberal democracies and liberal political theory.

According to influential understandings of liberal democracies, liberal democracies organize political life in a way that is independent of substantive conceptions of the good life for human beings.²² No conception of a common good, therefore, orders political life. Liberal democracies seek to remain neutral on questions of the good life. None of this is to say that it is impossible in the modern world to participate in activities with a shared common good. Indeed, my argument depends on the possibility of forming shared ways of life ordered by a common good, and concerned with human flourishing, and doing so in the *midst* of a wider culture that is resistant to such forms of life.

I contend that when the concept of citizenship is detached from its connection to a common good, the concept and exercise of citizenship becomes impoverished. I will try to bear this out by sketching and discussing two conceptions of citizenship in a liberal democracy. One conception is prevalent on the left and the other is prevalent on the right. I will suggest ways that these conceptions of citizenship can be an impediment to the formation of local bonds that are necessary to share a genuine common good.

The first conception, which is prominent on the left, is a conception of citizenship as commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy. Importantly, these ideals are connected to liberal democracies being neutral about the good. So it involves a commitment to keep the public square free of substantive commitments about the good.

²² The classic statement of this commitment is to be found in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

The second conception of citizenship I want to discuss is one that is more prominent on the political right. I shall give it the name “patriotism,” but I do not mean to thereby criticize anything that might be called ‘patriotism.’ I have a specific set of ideas in mind. I use the term ‘patriotism’ to highlight how this conception is connected in an American context to a certain understanding of preserving and upholding the ideals, institutions and practices that have sustained the American experiment (In that respect it bears some similarities to the previously discussed conception.). I am interested in this kind of commitment, especially when it involves commitment to the ideals of individual success and prosperity, and trust in the institutions of market capitalism to enable such prosperity.

My contention is that both of these commitments play the *role* of a concept of citizenship for many, without being able to provide what a true conception of citizenship rooted in a notion of a shared common good can provide.

What I am interested in here is not any and every attempt to defend these values and commitments. I am interested in cases where these commitments play the role of providing one’s sense of citizenship—when they define one’s commitment to one’s political community, and understanding of the flourishing of that community and its members.

Both of these senses of citizenship underwrite a sense of belonging to the American nation state. This might seem odd to say about the political right, since the political right is committed to smaller government, and (at least when it comes to markets, entitlements, etc.) government getting out of the way of most areas of life. But there is on the right a strong sense of identification with the American nation state as a political society founded on ideals of limited government. And certainly much of the political energy of the right is devoted to national policy, even if what they advocate is aimed at the reduction of the size and reach of government. And

note the importance to this political identity of defending the free market. This is not commitment to specific kinds of local bonds of membership that I argue are necessary for human flourishing. Quite to the contrary, it is commitment to sustaining a mode of human social life that does not require such bonds of membership to work.²³

These commitments can play some of the role of a sense of citizenship because they allow proponents to take up common cause. It seems likely that shared commitment to these respective ideals can sustain certain kinds of cooperative activity. For example, certain forms of political activism can be based upon shared commitment to ideals outlined in these two conceptions. Some of the commitments I have outlined can motivate concern for marginalized groups, and therefore, motivate certain kinds of shared charitable work.

Although these conceptions allow proponents to take up common cause, the conceptions of citizenship themselves are not rooted in participating in or upholding any shared form of life. Each conception involves a commitment to ideals of social life that are predicated on the idea that social life in a liberal democracy will not be ordered by a common good. Now it makes sense in the modern context that conceptions of citizenship, connected as they typically are to political communities, would lack reference to a shared common good. After all, I have already argued that such goods do not define modern political communities. My worry about such conceptions is that they serve as a distraction from forming the kinds shared commitments, bonds, and ways of life in local contexts that *do* allow for pursuit of robust common goods. Since I assume that pursuit of such goods is essential to human flourishing, we should be concerned

²³ Again, none of this is to criticize market interactions, but it is to note that commitment to free markets is *not* as such a commitment to shared forms of activity and shared bonds of membership. One could argue that free markets allow such bonds to form better than interventionist policies, but commitment to the free market as such is not commitment to such local bonds of membership.

about commitments that might impede such activity, especially given how difficult it is to establish such shared activity in the modern world.

What is my concern with the above commitments playing the role of a concept of citizenship for people? Both conceptions uphold values that are at bottom individualist. What is being upheld are various kinds of autonomy granted in a liberal democracy to pursue one's good as one sees fit, and to develop one's own conception of the good. These commitments are commitments to resist the public imposition of notions of the good life.

Furthermore, defending these commitments tends to lead us to speak about human beings in a way that denies that "man is by nature a political animal." So on the right, a favorite mantra is that "society is nothing but a collection of individuals." On the left, there is a tendency to speak of the person in existentialist terms as an autonomous determiner of value for themselves. So it is easy to slip from the idea that the state should stay out of certain areas as a matter of its competence to defending that idea on the basis of an individualist or existentialist view of the person.

This is not to say that anyone that defends any of these values is some kind of crude individualist. I am interested in the particular case when these commitments play the role of providing one's sense of *citizenship*. The issue here is that this sense of citizenship is not appropriately tied to a sense of *membership* in C.S. Lewis's sense. One's sense of loyalty and belonging to one's political community is not tied to a sense of the indispensable and distinctive role one plays in pursuing a shared life.

V. Citizenship and Membership

I turn to Lewis once again to help articulate my worry about this situation. Because of my assessment of the modern nation state and modern liberal democracies as not being ordered by

the pursuit of a common good, I share Lewis's assessment of what our attitude toward democratic political structures should be. Lewis writes,

Equality is for me in the same position as clothes. It is a result of the Fall and the remedy for it.... Any attempt...to reintroduce the old authorities on the political level is for me as foolish as it would be to take off our clothes. The Nazi and the nudist make the same mistake. But it is the naked body, still there beneath the clothes of each one of us, which really lives. It is the hierarchical world, still alive and (very properly) hidden behind a façade of equal citizenship which is our real concern.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not...belittling the value of this egalitarian fiction which is our only defence against one another's cruelty.... But the function of equality is purely protective. It is medicine, not food....

Equality is a quantitative term and therefore love often knows nothing of it. Authority exercised with humility and obedience accepted with delight are the very lines along which our spirits live.... As democracy becomes more complete in the outer world and opportunities for reverence are successively removed, the refreshment, the cleansing, and invigorating returns to inequality, which the Church offers us, become more and more necessary.²⁴

Lewis's comment about equality—it is medicine, not food—is apt for thinking about the commitments I have outlined. Note Lewis's point that our status as politically equal does not define what we are as social beings. He wrote, "It is the hierarchical world, still alive and (very properly) hidden behind a façade of equal citizenship which is our real concern." Humans as social beings need to be *members* of communities seeking significant human goods, rather than simply interchangeable social units in either the collectivist or democratic/egalitarian sense. While we can appreciate the benefits of political equality, our social energies and imagination need to be directed to forms of social life that *do not* mirror this political equality. Similarly, while we might appreciate the benefits of autonomy and economic freedom in a pluralistic society, we should not strongly *identify* with these political goods in the sense that they define our sense of who we are and where we belong, and what sorts of goods we are trying to uphold. We should treat these goods as medicine, not food.

²⁴ Lewis, "Membership," 169-171.

So the first point is that our concerns regarding social life and social commitments should be focused someplace other than politics (in the modern sense of ‘politics’). But there is a further point. Lewis alludes to a phenomenon that we should note. He talks about democracy becoming “more complete in the outer world” and opportunities for “reverence” being gradually removed. Lewis is making a quite plausible presumption here. He is noticing that categories that define our political life can come to define other interactions. This is troublesome when those political categories are useful fictions (as Lewis thinks about the category of equality). So we might think it is important for governments to remain somewhat neutral about views of the good life, and thus, to tolerate a wide range of forms of life. Such stances of tolerance, however, can come to serve as a standard for all social relationships, so that *any* criticism of a way of life can be viewed as inappropriate because it is trying to impose a standard of the good. Lewis thinks that the political categories of democracy serve as a poor basis for thinking about social life more generally, and I agree. So we must be wary of anything that promotes the dominance of these political categories within social life. My suggestion is that these modern conceptions of citizenship can do just that by esteeming political goods such as tolerance, autonomy and free enterprise above their proper place and by having those goods define one’s sense of political membership. When this happens, it hides from view the possibility and importance of other modes of interaction.

My contention is that modern nation states do not provide an adequate social backdrop for a conception of citizenship. They cannot underwrite a sense of citizenship involving the rich idea of ‘membership’ that Lewis outlines and that is an essential aspect of classical conceptions of citizenship. I have suggested that conceptions of citizenship tied to the nation state can distract us from forming such bonds of membership, and can cloud our understanding of the importance

of such bonds, which are essential to human flourishing. I have further suggested that both the political right and left are prone to develop a sense of citizenship tied to the nation state. Finally, a variety of features of modern life make it difficult to form significant local bonds of membership.

In response to this situation, it is important to be able to conceive of forms of “political” membership that are not tied to the nation state. While we may appreciate some of the benefits of the nation state, our sense of membership has to be focused elsewhere. In my view we have to take seriously Alasdair MacIntyre’s suggestions at the end of his classic work *After Virtue*. At the end of diagnosing modern fragmentation and impoverished moral understanding, and attempting to revive a classical Aristotelian conception of human life, he offers the following assessment:

It is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another; and among the most misleading of such parallels are those which have been drawn between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages. Nonetheless certain parallels are there. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the continuation of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond our frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.²⁵

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.

It would be impossible to unravel everything going on in this quote. I only register my view that engaging in the kind of construction of local forms of community that MacIntyre recommends would require a redirection of our energies away from what we now view as “political.” We might not come to view political activities as irrelevant to such construction, but we would be less identified and invested in the politics of the nation state. We would instead be invested in building and sustaining local ways of life that, as MacIntyre says, can “sustain civility and the intellectual and moral life.” We would be aware of the ways that modernity makes it difficult to form such bonds, whichever side is winning the political battles. This awareness should decrease our confidence in the importance of the political debates of the nation state.

One final comment. I have noted how difficult it is to form shared ways of life in modernity. I have suggested that such shared activity is the locus of true citizenship. If that is so, then ironically, being a true citizen means living as a kind of stranger and alien in the modern world.

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