Responsibility and Democratic Rule

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation examines whether democratic citizens are responsible for the behavior of their governments. Through careful analysis of the political theory and practice of Henry David Thoreau and Jane Addams, I demonstrate that notions of democracy that are distinctly modern in their emphasis upon plurality and individuality can instill in citizens a sense of responsibility for public life. My analysis also calls attention to several challenges that make ethical democratic citizenship a demanding undertaking. In the final chapters, I construct an account of responsible democratic citizenship that addresses these challenges, drawing upon lessons learned from my discussion of Thoreau and Addams, as well as from more contemporary thinkers. Democratic citizens, I argue, do not fully control the circumstances in which they act, and thus they often become implicated in outcomes to which they have not explicitly consented. If they aspire to be self-ruling, however, they must accept some responsibility for political outcomes that affect their own wellbeing and are affected by their behavior. Furthermore, I argue that citizens are unlikely to recognize and discharge their shared responsibilities unless they cultivate particular attitudes, including curiosity, flexibility, sympathy, humility and courage. These attitudes enable citizens to learn about the problems for which they are responsible and cooperate with others to solve shared problems.

Dedication

To my parents.

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Acknowledgments

While citizens share responsibility for the limitations of their political institutions, I bear full responsibility for any shortcoming in this dissertation. I would, however, like to acknowledge the people who inspired my interest in democratic theory and who guided and encouraged my research.

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1. Introduction

Declarations that democratic norms and institutions are endangered by socio-economic changes and civic apathy have become almost banal. The conclusion that democracy is in a state of moral crisis is often accompanied by calls for increased responsibility on the part of citizens. Democratic norms and institutions can be salvaged, it is argued, if citizens accept responsibility for the institutions and processes in which they participate. Greater responsibility on the part of citizens will both increase the ability of democratic societies to effectively confront challenges such as global warming and prevent public institutions from being dominated by multi-national corporations and political elites. When Barack Obama called for a “new era of responsibility” in his Inaugural Address, he gave voice to a sentiment that has become increasingly common among political theorists and pundits alike.

Those who speak about the need for increased responsibility seem to assume that their audience intuitively understands what is being asked of them. However, the extent to which citizens bear responsibility for political outcomes and how precisely such responsibility should be discharged are by no means clear. Imagine Brenda, a citizen who opposes a war that has been declared by political leaders whose candidacies she vigorously opposed. Does she bear responsibility for the war, and what exactly would accepting such responsibility involve? Is she expected to support the war effort or express her opposition?

The nature of responsible citizenship is often believed to be particularly ambiguous in situations such as Brenda’s, where governments are engaging in behaviors that appear fundamentally wrong to some of their citizens. The nature of responsible citizenship, however, is unclear even in more ordinary situations. Imagine two parents, Jacob and John,

whose children attend the same public high school. Jacob is a professor who is active in the Parent Teacher Organization; his children are in Advanced Placement classes that typically have no more than twenty-five students and are taught by the most enthusiastic and dedicated teachers. John, on the other hand, is a manager at the local grocery store who has never set foot in the high school. His children have been assigned to classes that are intended for students who are not deemed candidates for a college education; these classes typically have closer to forty students and are not given significant priority by either the teachers or the school administration. Moreover, given that it is increasingly difficult for high-school graduates to obtain a job without any additional training, the students who are deemed unsuited for college are not being given an education that adequately prepares them for adult life. In this situation, the extent to which Jacob and John bear responsibility for educational disparities at the high school is unclear. Does Jacob bear responsibility because he is involved in the PTA and frequently lobbies for programs that benefit college-bound children such as his own? Does John bear responsibility because he has made no effort to ensure that his children receive an education that will prepare them for adult life? Should Jacob be expected to consider the needs of children other than his own? Should John be expected to participate in school activities, even though his own limited education makes it difficult for him to command respect from teachers and other parents?

The case of Jacob and John is perplexing in part because the actions of both parents are shaped by broader socio-economic forces that are not in their control. Gabriel, a coalminer from West Virginia poses similar perplexities for those who seek to determine responsibility for political outcomes. Concerned that his financial security and way of life are threatened by regulations that limit the burning of fossil fuels, Gabriel actively opposes the

environmental movement, campaigning against politicians who support environmental regulations, participating in efforts to ban teachers from discussing global warming and frequently writing letters to the editor of his local newspaper about how much the community depends upon the coal industry. Gabriel probably bears some responsibility when, due to the efforts of elected officials from his state, clean air legislation fails to obtain sufficient votes in congress. The extent to which advocates of environmental regulation are justified in blaming Gabriel, however, is less clear. Does Gabriel deserve blame for prioritizing the economic interests of his family and community over the interest of those who are likely to be harmed by air pollution and global warming? And if Gabriel is deserving of blame, is it simply because of his political activities or does his participation in harmful economic practices also warrant condemnation?

This project explores responsible democratic citizenship in hopes of resolving some of these difficult questions. I seek to articulate the circumstances under which citizens can be held accountable for political outcomes. More importantly, I examine how democratic citizens should respond when they find themselves accountable for poor political outcomes and what they should do to avoid being held accountable for poor outcomes in the future.

In what follows, I offer an overview of recent theories of collective responsibility for political outcomes, arguing that none of these theories sufficiently capture the ethical obligations that accompany democratic citizenship. Next, I explain how two prominent American political thinkers and activists – Henry David Thoreau and Jane Addams – can help political theorists analyze the relationship between democracy and responsibility. I conclude with a synopsis of my own theory of democratic shared responsibility, a theory that is significantly influenced by my analysis of Thoreau and Addams.

I. Collective Responsibility and Democracy

In Western moral philosophy, individuals and groups are typically held responsible for outcomes that are causally linked to blameworthy behavior.¹ Traditional notions of moral responsibility, however, are not well equipped to handle outcomes that do not result directly from blameworthy behavior, but rather from the combined actions of multiple individuals and groups. Because political outcomes frequently fall into this category, political philosophers have long been interested in theories of collective or shared responsibility.² This interest is animated not simply by the need to allocate blame and punishment for inefficient and unjust political outcomes, but also by a desire to secure better outcomes in the future. If citizens know that they bear responsibility for political outcomes, it is assumed, they will be more likely to engage in behavior that is conducive to good outcomes.

In recent decades, theoretical inquiry into citizen responsibility has been influenced by Hannah Arendt's famous portrayal of Adolf Eichmann, the S.S. official who was in charge of deporting Jews to the concentration camps and who denied any responsibility for his actions because he had been following orders.³ One of the lessons of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is that the failure of political actors to accept responsibility for the consequences of their behavior can have disastrous consequences. For many readers, the point is not simply that bureaucrats such as Eichmann must accept responsibility for political outcomes, but that ordinary citizens should as well.

¹ Joel Feinberg, "Collective Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 1 (1968), 674.

² In an early and still influential discussion, Joel Feinberg argued that there are several situations where it is appropriate to speak about collective responsibility in the absence of direct liability. First, if membership in a particular group or community is essential to an individual's identity, then actions committed by particular members of the group may generate pride or shame among other members. Second, if members of a group or community engage in the same risky or blameworthy behaviors, then the community as a whole bears some responsibility for harms that result from such behaviors. It seems unfair for a community of drunk-drivers to cast judgment on an individual simply because he had the bad luck to injure somebody. See Feinberg, "Collective Responsibility," 674-688.

³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Books: New York, 1994).

In response to debates about whether ordinary German citizens bear responsibility for the Holocaust, Arendt called for a new kind of responsibility: political responsibility. Political responsibility, as explained by Arendt, differs from both moral and legal responsibility, in that it does not result from blameworthy behavior, but rather from membership in a political community. As members of political communities, individuals are responsible for harms that have been committed by individuals acting on the community's behalf.⁴ Unlike moral or legal responsibility, political responsibility is not accompanied by guilt, shame or punishment, as all of these things are associated with blameworthy behavior. Rather than being accompanied by guilt, shame, or punishment, political responsibility is accompanied by an obligation to remedy harms that have been committed in one's name.

Even many political theorists who share Arendt's intuition that citizens bear some responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions do not believe that her theory of political responsibility adequately captures the responsibilities that accompany citizenship. As Iris Marion Young points out, it is not clear why individuals should bear responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions, but not the behavior of other social collectives in which they participate.⁵ Furthermore, Arendt's suggestion that political membership is the sole criteria that determines political responsibility ignores other factors that might be taken into consideration when determining responsibility for political outcomes. Such factors include the degree to which citizens benefit from the current political system, the capacity of citizens to change the system and the extent to which citizens engage in behaviors that shape political outcomes. Arendt's claim that all citizens are equally responsible for political

⁴ Hannah Arendt. "Collective Responsibility" in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003): 147-159. .

⁵ See Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (2004), 376.

outcomes conflicts with common moral intuitions about the importance of acknowledging individual choices and behaviors. Furthermore, because she ignores the way in which individual behavior shapes political outcomes, she does not offer a theory of responsible citizenship that is likely to encourage behavior that is conducive to better political outcomes.

In response to these problems, political philosophers have proposed a number of alternatives to Arendt's theory of political responsibility. Larry May advocates a theory of shared responsibility, which applies to any outcome that results from the combined interactions of multiple individuals. Shared responsibility, as describe by May, applies to political outcomes, but it is not limited to such outcomes and is not necessarily divided evenly among participants. Fared Abdel-Nour offers another alternative, arguing that individuals should be held responsibility for harms committed by members of a community to which they belong, only if they also take pride in that community's accomplishments. In some of her last essays, Iris Marion Young defended a "social structural account of responsibility" that requires individuals to accept responsibility for outcomes that result from processes in which they participate, regardless of whether those processes are confined to the local, national or international arena. Young's social-structural responsibility is also not distributed evenly among participants, but is determined by "connection, power and privilege."⁶

May, Abdel-Nour and Young offer plausible explanations as to why citizens might bear responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions. There are, however, a number of questions about the nature of responsible *democratic* citizenship that remain

⁶ See Farid Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (2003): 693-719, Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (2004): 365-388, and Young "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice: A Social Connection Model," *Social Philosophy and Policy* (2006), 102-130.

unanswered. Is collective or shared responsibility consistent with or even required by democratic norms? Is the collective responsibility that accompanies democratic citizenship different from the kind that accompanies other types of regimes? How can citizens discharge collective or shared responsibilities in a manner that is consistent with democratic norms?

These are by no means unimportant questions. There is no reason to assume that the responsibilities of citizens are not shaped by the regime in which they live. It is not simply that democratic societies offer their citizens more opportunities to shape political outcomes, but also that democratic ideas about equality, self-rule and moral autonomy should shape how citizens think about their political responsibilities. If responsibility is to be more than a “Sunday concept,” which sounds good when evoked in sermons, speeches and Inaugural Addresses, but leaves listeners without a clear sense of what is being asked of them, then political theorists must make an effort to clarify what accepting collective responsibility for political outcomes entails in particular contexts.⁷

II. Responsibility and Democracy in American Political Thought

In order to gain perspective on the responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship, I turn to two accounts of political ethics that have significantly shaped American political theory and practice: that of Henry David Thoreau and Jane Addams. The contrasts between Thoreau and Addams are familiar to students of American political thought. Whereas Thoreau believed that political and social problems are best addressed by individual acts of dissent and personal projects of moral reform, Addams argued that such problems demand cooperative effort. Whereas Thoreau celebrated figures such as Antigone and John

⁷ In *The Quest for Responsibility: accountability and citizenship in complex organizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Mark Bovens laments that responsibility is often a “Sunday concept,” in that it is frequently evoked in moral sermons, but rarely generates serious moral reflection or transformation (22). Bovens attributes his use of the term “Sunday concept” to Bart Tromp.

Brown who paid the ultimate sacrifice for their principles, Addams insisted that political actors must settle for “the best possible,” as opposed to the “absolute best.”⁸ In what follows, I call attention to the differences between Thoreau and Addams, as they offer two distinct alternatives as to how citizens might accept responsibility for political outcomes. Citizens might, as Thoreau advised, take steps to “wash their hands” of the institutions and processes that contribute to harm. Or they might, as Addams suggested, make some effort to reform unjust institutions even if they get their hands dirty in the process.

Despite such differences, there are a number of important similarities between Thoreau and Addams, and these similarities will also be given significant attention. Thoreau and Addams both insisted that modern democratic societies cannot whole-heartedly embrace ethical theories developed in different contexts, but must create a political ethic that is suited to democratic norms and experiences. And while they were not in complete agreement about the moral purposes that underpin democratic institutions, both thinkers regarded responsibility as one of the principal democratic virtues. Democracy, they believed, allows individuals to make their own choices, rather than having those choices pre-determined by tradition or authority. If individuals are to make their own choices, however, they must accept some responsibility for their own wellbeing and the consequences of their actions, and this means that they must accept some responsibility for the political institutions and processes in which they participate.

Neither Thoreau nor Addams was content to simply theorize about responsible citizenship; they both made an effort to put their ideas about political ethics into practice and their political theorizing is significantly influenced by such efforts. *Walden* and *Twenty Years at Hull House* are autobiographical narratives about two individuals who sought to lead lives

⁸ Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002), 69.

animated by democratic ideals, whose authors hoped that their own life stories would serve as a role-model for other citizens. Though disagreeing about the merits of principled compromise, Thoreau and Addams shared a number of similar intuitions about what responsible democratic citizenship entailed. Both cautioned that democratic citizens cannot accept responsibility for political outcomes by seeking to control each other's behavior. And both worried that the diversity of experiences that exist within democratic societies, as well as the tendency of such societies to experience rapid social change, made it difficult for citizens to recognize and understand the outcomes for which they are responsible.

Given Thoreau's involvement in the transcendentalist movement and Addams's participation in the American pragmatist movement, the existence of significant similarities between these two thinkers should not be surprising.⁹ While the extent to which the political ideas of the transcendentalists and pragmatists are compatible with the liberal tradition is frequently debated, both movements believed in the importance of individual dignity and self-expression. The pragmatists and transcendentalists also shared a number of epistemological assumptions; according to both movements, knowledge is plural, perspectival and experiential. Thus, while Thoreau and Addams offer differing account of both democracy and citizen responsibility, these accounts rest upon a number of shared assumptions.

Jeffrey Stout argues that modern democracy has produced a distinct ethical tradition that "inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to

⁹ One of the best discussions of the relationship between transcendentalism and pragmatism is Cornell West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

respond to certain types of actions, events or persons with admiration, pity or horror.”¹⁰ In what follows, I argue that Thoreau and Addams are participants not simply in an ethical discourse that is vaguely influenced by democratic norms and practices, but in a particular tradition of democratic thought, which views democracy as a means of maximizing individual potential and of allowing individuals to be in some important sense shapers of their own fates. This is a democratic tradition that is morally demanding, but which rejects the view that ethical action consists of conforming to traditional practices and fixed moral standards. Ethical action, at least according to this tradition, requires a willingness to subject received norms and practices to critical examination and to allow one’s moral standards to be shaped by experience.

My analysis of Thoreau and Addams demonstrates that notions of democracy that are distinctly modern in their emphasis upon plurality and individuality are capable of instilling in citizens a sense of responsibility for political outcomes. My analysis also, however, calls attention to several challenges that make responsible democratic citizenship a demanding undertaking. First, there is the challenge that democratic citizens are accountable for problems that their experiences have not fully prepared them to understand. Second, it is not immediately clear that politics is an arena where it is possible to avoid being accountable for harm, given that successful political action almost always demands moral compromise. Finally, there is the difficulty of determining responsibility for problems that result from a combination of individual behaviors and structural processes.

While these challenges complicate responsible action in many situations, they are particularly perplexing in democratic contexts. The expectation that solutions to public problems will reflect the diverse needs and interests of citizens as opposed to particular

¹⁰ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

interests means that democratic citizens must work with others to address shared problems and make an effort to become informed about the experiences and needs of their fellow citizens. Consensual problem solving, however, can make it especially difficult for democratic citizens to avoid participating in processes that they deem harmful. The diversity, size and complexity of contemporary democratic societies make it hard for citizens to recognize each other's needs and interests.

Furthermore, determining responsibility for outcomes that result from a combination of structural processes and individual behaviors is particular tricky in democratic contexts because both the failure to hold individuals accountable for their actions *and* unfair attributions of blame are a threat to democratic norms. On the one hand, the suggestion that individuals bear no responsibility for behaviors that contribute to poor political outcomes is incompatible with the notion of self-rule that underpins the modern democratic tradition; as Thoreau insisted, if individuals aspire to be self-ruling creatures, they must accept some responsibility for behaviors that contribute to poor political outcomes. On the other hand, the notion that adverse political outcomes can be attributed to blameworthy individual behavior often generates unfair attributions of blame that discourage the diversity of life-plans that democracy seeks to encourage.

To some extent, Thoreau and Addams offer insight into how democratic theorists and practitioners might confront the challenges listed above. Both thinkers rightly discouraged their readers from paternalistic projects, while encouraging them to seek out experiences and perspectives that might broaden their understanding of the problems for which they are accountable. Addams's pragmatist political ethics with its emphasis upon flexibility, humility and sympathy is particularly capable of dealing with the challenges mentioned above. A

pragmatist political ethics encourages citizens to recognize limits to their own understanding of public life, avoid hasty attributions of blame and prioritize consensual solutions.

There are nevertheless serious limitations with both theories of responsible democratic citizenship. These limitations are by no means peculiar to Thoreau and Addams, but are commonly found among democratic theorists and activists, many of whom do not share Thoreau and Addams's commitment to pluralism and individual self-expression and whose efforts to resist political injustice and incompetence are therefore far more threatening to democracy than the efforts examined here.

Thoreau placed too much emphasis upon identifying and eliminating blameworthy individual behavior; in doing so, he ignored the fact that many public problems are caused at least partly by structural problems and can only be addressed through collaborative effort. In focusing upon blame, Thoreau also ended up endorsing a political ethic that is likely to unfairly scapegoat individuals or groups and thus threatens the respect for diverse life projects that plays a central role in both Thoreau's political thought and the democratic tradition of which he was a participant. Addams's theory of responsibility, on the other hand, mistakenly assumed that the problems which confront democratic citizens can always be solved through cooperative action. Addams avoided the most serious errors that frequently result from excessive optimism about the ability of diverse citizens to achieve consensual solutions; she was not, in her own life, unwilling to dissent from projects that she considered fundamentally unsound and she did not attempt to punish or ostracize citizens who dissented from projects that she regarded as important. She did not, however, offer a political ethics that calls attention to the fact that consensual solutions may not always be possible or

desirable; nor does she offer her readers much guidance about what to do when consensus cannot be achieved.

In the first two chapters of this study, I articulate the understanding of responsible citizenship defended by Thoreau and Addams respectively. In the third chapter, I explain how Thoreau and Addams shed light upon the promises and potential pitfalls with notions of citizen responsibility that are rooted in a tradition of democratic thought whose approach to political ethics is fruitful and frequently misunderstood. In the final two chapters, I develop a theory of democratic shared responsibility that fulfills these promises, while avoiding the pitfalls. My account of shared responsibility is influenced by theories of collective or shared responsibility that have been articulated by contemporary philosophers and which offer insight into how individuals can be held accountable for complex social processes in a manner that is consistent with democratic norms, a problem that neither Thoreau nor Addams adequately resolves. My theory of democratic shared responsibility, however, remains indebted to Thoreau and Addams's insights into distinctly democratic practices of responsibility.

III. A Theory of Democratic Shared Responsibility

My account of responsible democratic citizenship is particularly indebted to Larry May's theory of shared responsibility. Shared responsibility, as described by May, occupies a middle ground between personal and collective responsibility. As an existentialist, May argues that moral agents can be expected to accept responsibility for behaviors that are in their control; because individuals can exercise some control over behaviors that contribute to political outcomes, they bear responsibility for those outcomes. Responsibility for political outcomes is not however shared evenly among participants, but rather should be allocated

based on the degree to which individuals contribute to the outcome and the degree to which they engaged in blameworthy behavior. I find May helpful because he offers a theory of shared responsibility that emphasizes the importance of individual agency and freedom. In doing so, May offers a theory that does not focus excessively upon blameworthy individual behavior, but which links shared responsibility to individual moral agency. In doing so, he rejects the conclusion that shared responsibilities must always be discharged in a cooperative manner.

In Chapter Four, I defend an account of shared responsibility that is rooted not in existentialist understandings of moral agency, but rather in democratic notions of self-rule. Democratic shared responsibility is, I argue, somewhat different from the more general theory of shared responsibility developed by May. Democratic notions of self-rule require democratic citizens to accept responsibility for outcomes to which they have contributed *and* for outcomes that affect their own well-being. In other words, democratic shared responsibility is not simply about accepting accountability for harms in which one is implicated, it is about making some effort to influence the political processes that affect one's own fate.

Depending upon the circumstances, the responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship can be discharged through cooperative action, personal moral reform or dissent. Regardless of the circumstances, however, democratic citizens must make an effort to ensure that solutions to shared problems reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives that exist within democratic societies and to avoid unfairly blaming political problems on individuals or groups whose lifestyle differs from their own.

More so than May, I am also concerned with explaining how democratic citizens might discharge shared responsibilities in a manner that is consistent with democratic norms. In Chapter Five, I focus specifically on this issue, arguing that responsible democratic citizenship requires interaction among citizens who do not belong to the same familial and social networks, as well as a particular set of attitudes, including curiosity, flexibility, sympathy, humility and courage. These attitudes enable citizens to learn about the problems for which they are responsible and work with others to solve shared problems. My understanding of the attitudes that responsible democratic citizenship requires is influenced by many sources, but is particularly indebted to Addams's pragmatist political ethics. I conclude, however, that responsible democratic citizenship in the twenty-first century calls for even greater humility, patience and willingness to live with moral ambiguity than even she realized.

While this project is focused upon responsible democratic citizenship, it also contributes to broader discussions about the nature of democratic civic virtue. First, I demonstrate that political theorists need not look entirely to ancient, pre-modern or illiberal political traditions for morally demanding accounts of citizenship. Second, I encourage political theorists to re-think common understandings of what democratic civic virtue entails. Because the fates of democratic citizens are intertwined with each other and that of their political institutions, more should be expected of democratic citizens than is often realized by liberal theorists. At the same time, I disagree with those who believe that contemporary democratic societies are in a state of moral crisis due to the unwillingness of democratic citizens to cast judgment upon behaviors that violate accepted norms are not encouraging attitudes that are conducive to ethical citizenship: democratic citizens should not be too hasty

to pass judgment on their fellow citizens, as it is difficult to easily understand people whose experiences are different from one's own, and unhelpful to fixate upon moral failings that do not pose a significant threat to fundamental democratic norms.

2. Thoreau on Heroic Individualism and Responsible Citizenship

The primary goal of this chapter is to articulate Thoreau's vision of what responsible citizenship entails. My examination of Thoreau's political ethics draws heavily upon *Walden* and "Resistance to Civil Government," as well as upon works that are less familiar to political theorists, such as *Cape Cod*, *A Yankee in Canada* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. As Thoreau scholars are increasingly recognizing, many of these less familiar works contain insights that are politically relevant and suggest that Thoreau's political thought is more complicated than often recognized.¹ The Thoreau that emerges from *A Yankee in Canada* is more appreciative of American democracy than the Thoreau of "Resistance to Civil Government." In *Cape Cod*, Thoreau is threatened by nature, which is generally treated as a benign force in *Walden*.

I begin by examining Thoreau's claim that citizens bear responsibility for institutions and causes to which they give their allegiance and therefore are morally obligated to resist political injustice. This intense sense of responsibility, I argue, is rooted in a particular interpretation of democratic norms; the purpose of democracy, Thoreau argued, is to foster a culture conducive to individual self-rule. Self-rule, as envisioned by Thoreau, is a heroic endeavor, in which human beings struggle to ensure that their actions reflect moral principles that they have consciously chosen. Self-ruling individuals must, he believed, accept responsibility for the behavior of institutions to which they give their allegiance because the act of bestowing allegiance is a conscious choice that should reflect personal moral commitments.

¹ Several recent reflections on the relationship between Thoreau's anti-slavery writings and his other works include: Philip Abbot, "Henry David Thoreau, the State of Nature and the Redemption of Liberalism" *Journal of Politics* 47, no. 1 (1985); Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics and the Wild* (London: Sage Publications, 1994); Robert Pepperman Taylor, *America's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

The second half of the chapter examines Thoreau's understanding of self-rule in more detail, demonstrating that Thoreau's political ethics is more complicated than is often assumed. The Thoreauian political actor is neither reckless nor radically subjective, nor lacking a sense of commitment to the welfare of his neighbors or political community. Thoreau valued principled action and regarded some principles as more important than political stability; he did not, however, encourage citizens to completely disregard the consequences of their actions. Furthermore, Thoreau did not envision heroic individuals as existing outside human communities. The heroic individual, Thoreau envisioned, is shaped but not determined by communal norms, and can live peacefully alongside his fellow citizens, particularly if he happens to live in a relatively egalitarian, self-governing community.

I. Responsibility and Self-rule

Though he is often cast as an apolitical figure, Thoreau regarded himself as a citizen of a democratic regime. In "Resistance to Civil Government," he specifically declares that he is speaking "as a citizen."² In "A Yankee in Canada," he describes himself as a citizen of a relatively free society who is curious to learn about less egalitarian cultures. Thoreau believed that the purpose of the democratic project was to create conditions that are conducive to individual freedom. Freedom for Thoreau, however, entailed more than a lack of external constraints. It was about self-rule or in George Kateb's words, "being, to some important degree, a person of one's own creating, making, choosing, rather than being merely a creature or a socially manufactured, conditioned, manipulated thing."³ Negative

² Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," in *The Higher Law*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 64.

³ George Kateb on the notion of freedom espoused by Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. See *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 90.

liberty was valuable only to the extent that it gave individuals room to pursue their own life plans. “What is the value of any political freedom,” Thoreau asked, “but as a means to moral freedom?”⁴ The government can create conditions that are conducive to self-rule, but in order to be truly self-ruling, citizens must make an effort to ensure that their actions are animated by their own goals and convictions.

Like many modern political thinkers, Thoreau assumed that self-rule was accompanied by responsibility. If citizens have the freedom to choose their own life plans, they must accept responsibility for them. Thoreau held citizens responsible for both the consequences of their actions and the principles that motivate those actions. Self-ruling creatures, he believed, must make some effort to reflect upon the principles that animate their actions and therefore should be held accountable for those principles. More controversially, he held citizens responsible for the behavior of the political institutions to which they have given their allegiance.

Thoreau’s claim that citizens are responsible for injustices perpetrated by institutions to which they have given their allegiance is not always obvious to his readers. After all, in Western moral philosophy, individuals are often held responsible only for outcomes that are causally linked to blameworthy actions. Because individual behavior rarely determines political outcomes, the idea that individual citizens bear responsibility for political injustice is not entirely compatible with common Western intuitions about responsibility.⁵

⁴ “Life Without Principle,” in *The Higher Law*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 174.

⁵ See Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Iris Marion Young, “Responsibility and Global Labor Justice,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (2004): 365-388, and “Responsibility and Global Labor Justice: A Social Connection Model,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* (2006), 102-130.

Thoreau held democratic citizens responsible for the behavior of their political institutions in part because he believed that political outcomes result from individual behavior. Governments, particularly ones that derive their legitimacy from the consent of their citizens, find it easier to pursue policy outcomes if their citizens are supportive or at least compliant. “Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform.”⁶ At his most optimistic, Thoreau proclaimed that exemplary individual behavior can compel the state to cease engaging in injustice.⁷

I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name—ay, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.⁸

While his celebration of heroic individuals is sometimes regarded as anti-democratic,⁹ Thoreau’s belief in the power of exemplary moral actors is rooted in democratic sentiments. Political institutions, he insisted, are not natural forces that are unresponsive to human interventions; they are composed of human beings who are amenable to persuasion.¹⁰ Moreover, because most people are basically decent, they can be persuaded to oppose unjust practices. In his discussion of the abolitionist Wendell Phillip’s appearance at the Concord

⁶ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 72,

⁷ Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” in *The Higher Law*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 131.

⁸ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 75.

⁹ See Vincent Buranelli, “The Case Against Thoreau” *Ethics* 67 no. 1 (1957):258-268 and Leigh Jenco, “Thoreau’s Critique of Democracy,” *The Review of Politics* 65, no. 3 (2003): 355-381.

¹⁰ “You do not resist cold and hunger, the winds and the waves, thus obstinately; you quietly submit to a thousand similar necessities. You do not put your head into the fire. But just in proportion as I regard this as not wholly a brute force, but partly a human force, and consider that I have relations to those millions as to so many millions of men, and not of mere brute or inanimate things, I see that appeal is possible, first and instantaneously, from them to the Maker of them, and, secondly from them to themselves.” “Resistance to Civil Government,” 85.

Lyceum, he concluded that “the most interesting fact elicited by these addresses, is the readiness of the people at large, of whatever sect or party, to entertain, with good will and hospitality, the most revolutionary and heretical opinions, when frankly and adequately, and in some sort cheerfully, expressed.”¹¹ Similarly, he concluded that injustices such as slavery and imperialism endure not because Americans are amoral, but because they are unwilling to stand up for their convictions.¹²

By now it should be clear why Thoreau proclaims in “Resistance to Civil Government” that “I do not care to trace the effects of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man or a musket to shoot with – the dollar is innocent – but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance.”¹³ Thoreau was concerned with his allegiance for two reasons. First, in lending the government his allegiance, he makes it easier for the government to carry out its goals without opposition. Second, he believed that morally autonomous beings must recognize that they are capable of choosing where to bestow their allegiance and accept responsibility for their choice. For Thoreau, accepting responsibility for causes and institutions in which one participates was about proving that one is an autonomous moral agent who is capable of choosing her own life plan, rather than a passive creature who allows her behavior to be channeled in directions that conflict with her own goals and commitments. A free being is, he declared, “too high-born to be....useful serving-man and instrument to any sovereign state throughout the world.”¹⁴

¹¹ Thoreau, “Wendell Phillips at the Concord Lyceum,” in *The Higher Law*, 61-2.

¹² “Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.” “Resistance to Civil Government,” 63.

¹³ “Resistance to Civil Government” 84.

¹⁴ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 66.

Very few nineteenth century citizens escaped responsibility for slavery when judged by Thoreau's standards. Voting for abolitionists did not absolve citizens of responsibility for slavery in Thoreau's mind. Nor did participation in other activities that are normally intended to sway public opinion. Citizens who voted for abolitionism and engaged in other ordinary forms of political behavior demonstrated only the most casual commitment to their principles; they risked nothing and were content to leave the outcome to the majority. Thoreau likened voting to "a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it."¹⁵ Moreover, because they allowed themselves to become implicated in causes that violate their fundamental moral convictions, Thoreau did not believe that his neighbors were truly autonomous. The most frustrating aspect of this situation, in Thoreau's mind, was that his neighbors' moral autonomy was not constrained by an oppressive state or ruthless market, but by their own cowardice and complacency. "It is bad to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all is when you are the slave driver of yourself."¹⁶ Much of Thoreau's rage was aimed at those who share his opposition to slavery and yet fail to take action. "How," he demands, "can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely and enjoy it?"¹⁷

Thoreau offers two alternatives to those who want to be relieved of responsibility for the behavior of unjust governments. First, citizens can dedicate themselves to bringing about meaningful reform. John Brown and the abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips are examples of this type of response. He says of Phillips: "We must give Mr. Phillips the credit of being a clean, erect, and what was once called a consistent man. He at least is not responsible for

¹⁵ "Resistance to Civil Government," 69.

¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 110.

¹⁷ "Resistance to Civil Government," 72.

slavery.”¹⁸ Brown and Phillips differ from the majority of politicians and political reformers for whom Thoreau has little respect because they are principled moral actors. Unlike politicians, they do not compromise their principles in order to cater to others’ opinions. Unlike most political reformers, they are prepared to make sacrifices for their convictions, and they are not constantly taking up new issues and abandoning old ones. Brown and Phillips have “a cause” to which they are prepared to devote all of their energy. They are not responsible for injustice because they have done everything in their power to resist it. For those who lack dedication to a single cause, there is a second way to avoid responsibility for injustice. By taking action to demonstrate that they have withdrawn their allegiance from the government, citizens can ensure that they are no longer contributing to injustice.

Thoreau himself chose the second option, as the path followed by Brown and Phillips required too much time and energy. He vigorously defended this path against those who maintain that “washing one’s hands” of evil is insufficient and that citizens have an obligation to seek social or political transformation. “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course,” he wrote, “to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it.”¹⁹ Some people, such as Brown and Phillips, may be called to actively reform society, but many people are not. Society as a whole and individual members are best served when individuals pursue life-plans that are suited to their own unique talents and desires.²⁰ If one has no genius for leadership or charity, active political engagement is non-obligatory and a waste of time that would better be spent on other pursuits. “Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation;

¹⁸ “Wendell Phillips at the Concord Lyceum,” 59.

¹⁹ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 71.

²⁰ “Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is a petty state,” *Walden*, 372.

and I believe that a like but infinitely greater steadfastness elsewhere is all that preserves it.”²¹

Thoreau’s claim that he is not interested in “eradicating” harms is, however, somewhat disingenuous. While Thoreau may not have recognized a moral obligation to participate in reform movements, he believed that a deliberate, whole-hearted pursuit of self-rule would result in significant social and political reform. Most of the problems that plague American society, he believed, result from the refusal of American citizens to cultivate self-rule. If Americans truly valued self-rule, they would not allow themselves to contribute to harmful behaviors. Nor would they unreflectively accept behaviors that are endorsed by society or authority, but would instead consider whether those behaviors are animated by worthwhile goals. Citizens who have learned to trust their own intuitions and capacities would also have more confidence in their ability to experiment with new ways of living, should they find existing ways unacceptable. “Alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear,” and that “it is never too late to give up our prejudices.”²²

Like his friend Emerson, Thoreau believed that lasting social transformation required a series of personal moral transformations.²³ “It is not the worst reason that reform should be a private and individual enterprise that perchance the evil might also be private.”²⁴

Furthermore, Thoreau shared Emerson’s conviction that genuine moral reform does not occur

²¹ *Walden*, 159.

²² *Walden*, 111.

²³ Thoreau discusses reformers in many of his writings, including *Walden*, *A Week* and “Reform and the Reformers.” Thoreau generally expresses admiration for individual reformers, while criticizing reform movements and also defending his choice to pursue other activities. “Reform and the Reformers,” which contains Thoreau’s longest discussion of the problems with reform movements is strikingly similar to Emerson’s “New England Reformers.” For more on Emerson’s own attitudes toward political and social reform, see T. Gregory Garvey, *The Emersonian Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform* (University of Georgia Press, 2001).

²⁴ “Reform and the Reformers,” in *The Higher Law*, ed. Wendell Glick, 183. Thoreau made a similar point in the “Economy” chapter of *Walden*, 159-65.

within the confines of associations and collective movements. Many of the most important things cannot be learned from others. “I have never known advice to be of use but in trivial and transient matters. One may know what another does not, but the utmost kindness cannot impart what is requisite to make the other useful,”²⁵ he explains during a discourse on friendship, which he considered one of the best human relationships. It would be a mistake to interpret this quote to mean that Thoreau considered public lectures and speeches to be completely inconsequential; if Thoreau genuinely believed that words could not persuade, he would not have taken the trouble to write *Walden* or participate in the Concord Lyceum. Instead, I take this statement to mean that while great orators can convince an audience of the immorality of slavery, it is much more difficult to convince them to make the dramatic changes in their own behavior that radical reform would require. Moreover, moral reform requires that individuals make an effort to discover their own individual calling, something that others cannot determine for them. Thoreau’s purpose, as explained in the beginning of *Walden*, is not to tell his readers how to live their lives, but rather to “wake them up” so that they can pursue their own projects, and in doing so, ensure that American democracy lives up to its moral purpose.

II. Heroic Individualism and Democratic Citizenship

Thoreau’s political thought does not easily fit into any of the categories that are commonly recognized by contemporary theorists. Perhaps the only label that can definitively be applied to Thoreau is that of “heroic individualist.”²⁶ The pursuit of a life-plan is for Thoreau a heroic quest; individuals must struggle against mass opinion and moral weakness,

²⁵ *Week*, 283.

²⁶ Nancy Rosenblum describes Thoreau’s political thought as a combination of a Kantian emphasis upon moral imperatives that are endorsed by the individual will and a romantic belief in heroic expressions of personal moral conviction. See Rosenblum, “Thoreau’s Militant Conscience,” *Political Theory* Vol. 9, no 1 (1981): 102.

if they are to pursue projects that are consistent with their own goals and purposes. “Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher of your own streams and oceans,” he instructs his readers. “Explore your own higher latitudes.”²⁷ Avoiding complicity in injustice also requires heroism, as social and political institutions often make it difficult to recognize and resist immoral practices.

It is worth noting that Thoreau did not ask his readers to choose between their integrity and their civic duties, arguing instead that free citizens are morally obligated to defend their own moral autonomy. Tracing the moral basis of the American political system to the Revolutionary War, Thoreau insisted that the American government was created to protect the ability of individuals to live according to principles that they have freely chosen.²⁸ At the same time, he suggested that moral autonomy would be less demanding if the goals of the Revolution had been fully achieved. A truly free state would not attempt to coerce its citizens to become agents of injustice; in such a state, moral autonomy would not require significant sacrifice and citizens would be free to pursue their own projects without interference from the state. In an imperfectly free state like the United States, which continually implicates its citizens in injustice against their will, the preservation of moral autonomy requires great effort on the part of individuals. In such conditions, there is need for “heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and *men*” who “serve the state with their consciences.”²⁹

²⁷ *Walden*, 341.

²⁸ Thoreau did not regard the *Constitution* as offering the moral foundation for American democracy. Like many abolitionists, he regarded the *Constitution* as compromised by its acceptance of slavery. He instead treated the American Revolution – a Revolution fought to protect the right of individuals to obey law to which they have consented – as establishing the moral basis of American government.

²⁹ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 66

Given Thoreau's fascination with heroic individuals, it is not surprising that he is often regarded as a reckless political actor. The Western moral imagination includes several different images of heroism. There is the Homeric hero whose desire for glory and honor often supercedes all other considerations. There is the saint or religious martyr who sacrifices himself for higher principles. And there is the romantic hero whose life is purely an expression of his own inner genius. None of these figures is particularly concerned with the consequences of his actions.

Hannah Arendt famously regarded Thoreau as an irresponsible and radically subjective political actor who is unfit for membership in a political community. In holding himself accountable only to the dictates of his own conscience, Arendt explains, Thoreau rejected any responsibility for obeying communal norms or preserving political stability. While Thoreau's conscience requires that he refrain from harm, it does not dictate any concern for country or for one's fellow citizens; Thoreau did not declare as Jefferson did that "I tremble for my country when I think that God is just."³⁰ Instead, he demanded that "This people shall cease to hold slaves and to make war on Mexico, though it *cost them their existence as a people*."³¹

The Thoreauian individual is prone, Arendt believes, to behave with reckless disregard for his political community.³² She notes Thoreau's proclamation in "Civil Disobedience" that he is "not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of

³⁰ From "Resistance to Civil Government" and quoted by Arendt in "Civil Disobedience" from *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harvest Books, 1972), 61.

³¹ From Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government," 68 and quoted with italics added by Arendt in "Civil Disobedience," 61.

³² Leigh Jenco has recently offered a similar assessment. Jenco rejects the notion that Thoreau regards morality as a clash of incompatible individual consciences, arguing that Thoreau, like most advocates of eighteenth century natural rights, believed that the moral law is written in nature, non-arbitrary and can be understood by all individuals. Yet, Jenco agrees with Arendt that Thoreau undermines both democracy and the rule of law because he insisted on obeying the moral law and not the law of men. See Leigh Kathryn Jenco, "Thoreau's Critique of Democracy."

society,” as he is “not the son of the engineer.”³³ If disobedience leads to civil war, Thoreau did not hold himself responsible, as he did not initiate violence; the state initiated violence against him when it compelled him to support the Fugitive Slave Law. Thoreau accepted responsibility only for the principles and not the consequences of his actions, a dangerous doctrine in a world in which well-intentioned actions can have disastrous outcomes.

Furthermore, Arendt worries that the dictates of conscience, unlike that of law or of a collective movement, are subjective and essentially a matter of individual whim. Conscience says “do not do wrong, because you will not be able to live with yourself afterward,” a problematic mandate because what individuals are willing to live with varies greatly. A politics of conscience would pit the conscience of Martin Luther King who could not live with segregation against the conscience of the Governor of Mississippi who could not live with desegregation.³⁴ Not only is it impossible to settle disputes between consciences in the political arena, but such disputes are likely to destabilize the political sphere.

The rest of this chapter examines Thoreau’s understanding of responsible citizenship in more detail. In general, I agree with recent scholars such as Jane Bennett, Robert Pepperman Taylor and Brian Walker who have concluded that Thoreau’s political ethics are more complicated than Arendt suggests. Thoreau insisted that self-ruling citizens cannot allow themselves to be implicated in causes and processes that violate their core convictions. He did not, however, completely deny responsibility for the consequences of his action, or for the welfare of his neighbors and community. The heroic individual, Thoreau envisioned, is an individual who can live peacefully alongside his fellow citizens, particularly if he happens to live in a relatively egalitarian, self-governing agrarian community.

³³ From Thoreau “Resistance to Civil Government” and also quoted in Arendt’s “Civil Disobedience,” 62.

³⁴ Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” 64.

III. Principled Action and Moral Deliberation

Those who view the Thoreaian individual as a reckless force of nature ignore the fact that his commitment to principled action was accompanied by an emphasis upon deliberate moral calculation. This appreciation for moral deliberation plays a prominent role in Thoreau's efforts to re-interpret the puritan work-ethic. While he was ambivalent about the influences of Puritanism on New England, Thoreau admired the puritan's commitment to higher moral principles, describing John Brown approvingly as a descendant of the puritans. Like Brown, the puritans were "men of simple habits, straightforward, prayerful; not thinking much of rulers who did not fear God, not making many compromises, nor seeking after available candidates."³⁵ Unfortunately, Thoreau's neighbors lacked the conviction of their ancestors, failing to dedicate themselves to any coherent set of principles. They were incapable of remedying this state of affairs because they did not even realize the extent to which they were driven by norms and conventions, as opposed to principles that they have consciously chosen.³⁶ "The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow – one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance."³⁷ In modern society, Thoreau concluded, where there is so much pressure to conform to inauthentic norms and expectations, individuals who want to lead principled lives must deliberately cultivate the capacity to resist societal and institutional pressures that encourage unreflective complacency.³⁸

³⁵ "A Plea for Captain John Brown," from *The Higher Law*, 113.

³⁶ Cavell, *Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 73.

³⁷ "Resistance to Civil Government," 70-1.

³⁸ Perhaps because of renewed interest in virtue ethics, Thoreau's project of self-cultivation has received increased scholarly attention in the past two decades. In his analysis of the "Bean Field" chapter of *Walden*, Brian Walker explains that cultivation is described as both an agricultural practice and an "ethico-political action," in which an individual seeks to "call forth and develop dispositions that align with and embody ethico-political ideals." "Thoreau's Democratic Cultivation," *Political Theory* 29, no. 2 (2001), 159.

At first glance, the self-cultivation encouraged by Thoreau was not radically different from the kind encouraged by the puritans. Authenticity, according to Thoreau, required that citizens cultivate frugality, simplicity, honesty and self-awareness. For Thoreau, however, the goal is not salvation, but moral autonomy. Self-examination is important not to ensure that the self is free from sin, but to ensure that one's actions express one's convictions.³⁹ Simplicity is necessary, not because the love of luxury turns individuals away from God, but because dependence upon luxuries prevents individuals from choosing their own way of life. "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind."⁴⁰ Cultivating honesty is important so that individuals do not allow themselves to be deceived about the nature of their society or their own actions; for example, it is dishonest to call America a "free society" so long as citizens are compelled to support slavery against their wishes.

Individuals must also cultivate clear-sightedness, or the capacity to recognize norms that discourage integrity and authenticity. As Stanley Cavell observes, Thoreau's examination of Walden Pond is a metaphor for inquiry into moral and political life.⁴¹ The pond, which is deep and murky, has often been described as bottomless because men are unwilling to take "the trouble to sound it" or are afraid to investigate it out of fear of "catching cold in their breasts."⁴² Thoreau explained that, with only a little patience and effort, the depth of the pond is calculated quite easily, implying that moral and political insight can be gained just as easily, if individuals are willing to make the effort to seriously examine the state of the society in which they live.

³⁹ For a discussion of the role of self-examination in early New England society, see Sacvan Berkovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

⁴⁰ *Walden*, 115.

⁴¹ Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 74.

⁴² *Walden*, 316.

Frugality or “Yankee shrewdness” plays an especially important role in Thoreau’s ethics. It is difficult, he explained, to live a principled life without economizing.⁴³ Those who are not wealthy must be frugal with their money, in order to maintain their independence. Debtors are not truly free to obey their own laws, as they must labor to fulfill other people’s wishes. Genuine frugality, however, requires more than being careful with one’s money, it means being careful how one spends one’s life. The true cost of a thing is the “life which is required to be exchanged for it,” and by this standard, Thoreau believed that most of his neighbors are paying very dearly for their possessions.

A surveyor who made a living by making precise measurements, Thoreau often likened ethical behavior to proper economizing; the ethical individual recognizes the true costs of immoral behavior and is thus inclined to behave morally. Thoreau had a vaguely defined notion of fundamental laws, which he believed must be respected, regardless of the circumstances; “If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself.”⁴⁴ Even Thoreau’s argument about why individuals should respect the moral law is based upon a calculation of the consequences; a life that lacks integrity is not worth living. “He that would save his life in such a case would lose it.”⁴⁵ When Thoreau raged against politicians and moral authorities for their emphasis upon expediency, he usually did not criticize them for considering consequence, but rather rejected the way in which they evaluate those consequences.⁴⁶ Too often, he believed, expediency is

⁴³ Philip Abbot makes a similar point when he notes that “The Thoreauian critique in *Walden* is then a purification of bourgeois value. Time is important and not to be wasted. But work in society, even careful, simple, honest work, is itself a waste of time.” See *Journal of Politics* 47, no. 1 (1985), 193-4.

⁴⁴ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 68.

⁴⁵ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 68.

⁴⁶ “The expedients of the nations clash with one another, only that which is right is expedient for all.” *A Week*, 134.

equated with the path of least resistance or with narrow self-interest. Rather, actions should be evaluated by whether they further the moral and creative development of human beings.

Thoreau was undeniably moralistic in the criteria he uses to judge outcomes. For Thoreau, a good outcome is one in which all participants obey their own principles. His heroes are usually righteous moral actors, like Antigone, who compromise their goals in order to preserve their integrity, as opposed to tortured figures who sacrifice their convictions to secure what they consider the best outcome. He was particularly critical of those who sacrifice their convictions in order to court public opinion, as one cannot simultaneously listen to public opinion and obey one's own moral voice "What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity – who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority."⁴⁷ Similarly, in a "Plea for John Brown, Thoreau praised Brown for having few followers, implying that this results from an admirable unwillingness to pander to those who are not already sympathetic to the cause.

While Thoreau's heroes are passionate about their convictions, they are not reckless.⁴⁸ They are not motivated by unreflective passions or a desire for glory. Instead, they deliberately consider whether their actions are in service of principles *and* whether those principles are worthwhile ones. They are also not unconcerned with the consequences of their actions. Contra Arendt, Thoreau explicitly rejected the notion that citizens are not obligated to consider whether their actions will result in political instability. All governments inconvenience their citizens, he conceded, and in many cases the benefits of government are

⁴⁷ "Slavery in Massachusetts," 104.

⁴⁸ Thus, I disagree with Nancy Rosenblum's conclusion that Thoreau's "hero is not prudent; he does not calculate consequences or reason. He is not a moral man. Like a force of nature – a meteor, volcano or vital seed – the hero is unselfconscious." *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and The Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard, 1987), 114.

worth such inconveniences.⁴⁹ Indeed, it is a “great evil to make a stir” about minor inconveniences.⁵⁰ Citizens must pay tariffs, even if they disagree with them because the consequences of resistance are more costly than the tariff.⁵¹ It is only when the state participates in fundamental violations of its purpose, when “the friction comes to have its machine and oppression and robbery are organized,” that the survival of the state becomes less important than ending oppression.

There is room for compromise in Thoreau’s political ethics, so long as fundamental principles are not at stake. However, the decision to compromise must result from the individual’s judgment of the circumstances. Compromises that are meant to appease others are incompatible with Thoreau’s insistence that individuals be their own lawgivers.

Thoreau’s emphasis upon living purposefully also means that he has little respect for those who thwart law and custom simply for the fun of it. In the final chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau discusses the French revolutionary Mirabeau, who supposedly decided to commit highway robbery to demonstrate that he had the courage to thwart the laws of society. Thoreau dismisses such behavior as “idle, if not desperate,” as civil disobedience is a matter of obeying one’s own conscience and not about cultivating a reputation for non-conformity. Indeed, individuals who see civil disobedience simply as an act of non-conformity miss Thoreau’s point that individual behavior should be motivated by principles that emanate from the self and not a desire to impress others.⁵²

III. Principled Action Without Moral Purity

⁴⁹ “All machines have their frictions and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil,” “Resistance to Civil Government,” 67.

⁵⁰ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 67.

⁵¹ “Resistance to Civil Government,” 67.

⁵² *Walden*, 343.

As noted earlier, Thoreau encouraged his readers to recognize that they have more opportunities for fulfillment and moral integrity than they realize. At the same time, he insisted that human beings were neither complete masters of their own fates nor capable of moral purity. The pursuit of saint-like perfection or absolute mastery is not only futile, he warned, but a threat to genuine self-expression. Thoreau encouraged his readers to deliberately consider their actions in part because he did not want them to waste their lives striving for relatively unimportant moral improvements, or blame themselves for misfortunes that are not within their control.

Thoreau's sense of moral limitation is related to his understanding of nature. On the one hand, nature has endowed humans with consciences and therefore intends them to make some effort to ensure that their behavior conforms to moral principles.⁵³ On the other hand, nature does not always enable humans to live up to their aspirations or guarantee that they will be presented with ethical options. At times, human beings are presented with clear moral choices, such as the choice to avoid being implicated in slavery. Such clear choices, however, occur in a world that is often morally ambiguous and unresponsive to human efforts.

Particularly in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau stressed that human affairs are determined by luck as well as by deliberate effort. *Cape Cod* begins with Thoreau's recollection of a shipwreck, and the subsequent chapters include multiple references to wrecks, drownings and the difficulty of farming on poor, sandy soil.⁵⁴ In keeping with his tendency to generalize from particular circumstances, Thoreau regarded the experiences of the Cape's inhabitants as a metaphor for the human experience. When human actions are successful in their endeavors, it

⁵³ "I must conclude that Conscience, if that be the name of it, was not given to us for no purpose." *Week*, 134.

⁵⁴ Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8-14.

is always a combination of effort and fate. To some extent, we are all “wreckers contriving that some treasure may be washed up on the beach.”⁵⁵

In *Cape Cod*, Thoreau also notes that nature is not particularly concerned with protecting innocent life. Nature, he believes, always aims at some good, but it is not always the good of particular creatures. “It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good and for the time lamentable shipwrecks may thus contribute a new vegetable to a continent’s store, and prove on the whole a lasting blessing to its inhabitants.”⁵⁶ The fact that death and destruction are sometimes the means by which nature’s purposes are fulfilled does not, however, mean that victims of natural disasters do not experience genuine suffering or that such deaths are not tragic.

As beings whose lives are dictated by the laws of nature, humans cannot achieve complete moral purity because their survival requires the sacrifice of innocent life. After killing and roasting birds for his supper, Thoreau describes the event as “one of the incessant tragedies that Heaven allows.”⁵⁷ Moreover, ceasing to hunt and fish is not sufficient to avoid harming innocent life, as even planting beans requires that Thoreau destroy the weeds and woodchucks that would destroy his crops.

Nature also limits human moral capacities by endowing humans with animal instincts.⁵⁸ Fishing is often the example that Thoreau gives when he discusses how his animal nature limits his spiritual and moral pursuits. Fishing is an unspiritual pastime, according to Thoreau, because it entails killing living things, because the process of gutting and eating fish is unaesthetic and because, for most human beings, it is a substitute for moral activities, such

⁵⁵ *Cape Cod*, 90.

⁵⁶ *Cape Cod*, 113.

⁵⁷ *Week*, 223.

⁵⁸ *Walden*, 260.

as church, family and contemplation. “The apostles” were fishers, he concedes, “but they were of the solemn race of sea-fishers and never went trolling for pickerel on inland streams.”⁵⁹ In *A Week*, Thoreau discusses fishing as a pleasurable activity that most men prefer to church and he does not find anything problematic in this preference.⁶⁰ However, in the “Higher Laws” chapter of *Walden*, fishing is described as a barrier not just to Christian spirituality, but also as a distraction from Thoreau’s philosophic contemplation of nature. All humans have a “wild side” that seeks unspiritual pleasures, like fishing, and which cannot be made completely subordinate to his desire for a life devoted to elevated pursuits.⁶¹ To completely ignore or suppress this “wild side” is to fail to appreciate what it means to be human.

Thoreau’s belief that human beings are not completely moral beings is not an excuse for license, anymore that the inhospitality of Cape Cod is a reason to abandon the settlement. Heaven permits Thoreau to kill weeds and woodchucks in order to eat, but it does not permit human beings to enslave or kill other human beings. Thoreau did, however, worry that the Christianity as practiced in New England embraced an unhelpful quest for moral perfection, forcing humans to deny unspiritual pleasures that are perfectly natural and making it difficult for them to accept the tragic aspects of human existence:

It is not worth the while to let our imperfections distract us always. The conscience really does not and ought not to monopolize the whole of our lives. It is as liable to disease as any other part. I know of some whose consciences, owing undoubtedly to former indulgence have grown as irritable as spoilt children, and at length give them no peace.⁶²

⁵⁹ *Week*, 74.

⁶⁰ *Week*, 74.

⁶¹ *Walden*, 260-70.

⁶² *Week*, 73.

In most cases, the pursuit of moral perfection is inauthentic, since humans are not designed to be completely spiritual creatures. Indeed, obsessing about one's inability to avoid violence or rid oneself of animal appetites can distract humans from pursuing their own life plans. Christ, he concluded, "taught mankind but imperfectly how to live; his thoughts were all directed toward another world. There is another kind of success than his. Even here we have a sort of living to get, and must buffet it somewhat longer."⁶³ Thoreau also worried that overly rigid moral codes often produce people who pursue perfection in relatively little matters, such as avoiding gluttony or observing the Sabbath, and ignore more pressing moral problems, such as the fact that they are implicated in unnecessary cruelty against others.⁶⁴

New England's social reformers, Thoreau worried, have replaced the desire for unattainable personal perfection with a desire for an equally unrealistic social perfection. Perhaps because slavery had been abolished in New England, Thoreau was confident that slavery and other obvious forms of violence against the innocent can be eliminated. He was less confident that social ills such as poverty or ordinary vices like drunkenness are easily remedied:

When I go into a museum, and see the mummies wrapped in their linen bandages, I see that the lives of men began to need reform as long ago as when they walked the earth. I come out into the streets, and meet men who declare that the time is near at hand for the redemption of the race. But as men lived in Thebes, so do they live in Dunstable today.⁶⁵

Having discussed the miserable failure of reform efforts over the course of history, Thoreau added that, "there are secret articles in our treaties with the gods, of more importance than all the rest, which the historian can never know," suggesting that there is

⁶³ *Week*, 73.

⁶⁴ Thoreau seeks a "conscience exercised about large things." *Week*, 73.

⁶⁵ *Week*, 124.

some possibility for improvement in human affairs, though probably not the complete “redemption” envisioned by the most optimistic reformers.⁶⁶

Thoreau’s suspicion about complete redemption stems not simply from his conviction that the majority of humans are unlikely to undertake the moral reforms that redemption would require, but also from his belief that some social and political ills are inevitable in a world where some beings must be sacrificed so that others can flourish. Though condemning violence against Native Americans such as the forced march of the Cherokee, Thoreau believed that the decline of Native American culture was inevitable, as native and settler civilizations are fundamentally incompatible. It is impossible for a civilization that lives primarily by cultivating land and herding livestock to live alongside a civilization that lives by hunting.⁶⁷ One suspects that Thoreau would have applied the chestnut and acorn metaphor from “Resistance to Civil Government” to the relationship between native and settler. “When an acorn and a settler fall side by side,” he writes, “the one does not remain inert to give way to the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and flourish as best they can, till one perchance overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies, and so a man.”⁶⁸ Thoreau did not assume that this is the best outcome for the Native Americans or even for humanity, as he was not always confident that the settler civilization is inherently superior.⁶⁹ He did not, however, regard cultural decline as an injustice comparable

⁶⁶ *Week*, 124.

⁶⁷ In *A Week*, Thoreau notes that even the seemingly innocent action of building a church in New England disrupts the Native American’s lifestyle by driving their game away, 49-52.

⁶⁸ 81.

⁶⁹ While Thoreau describes history as moving from youth to maturity, he does not view history as progressive, in the sense that mankind is improving in all things. “Yet, no era has been wholly dark, nor will we too hastily submit to the historian and congratulate ourselves on a blaze of light....There has always been the same amount of light in the world. *Week*, 157.”

to slavery or militant imperialism that must be resisted at all costs, but rather as an inevitable and unavoidable tragedy.⁷⁰

Such acceptance of moral tragedy complicates the popular image of Thoreau as an absolutist who is preoccupied with moral purity. Individuals who aspire to be self-ruling, Thoreau believed, cannot contribute to practices that violate their most fundamentally convictions, but they need (indeed, they must) not cast aside their own life projects in order to pursue complete moral purity or make their own happiness dependent upon complete social transformation. There is something unhealthy about individuals who are willing to take responsibility for solving all of the problems that plague human societies, as accepting this kind of responsibility is likely to result in needless disappointment. Contrary to the “restless” reformers, who expect humans to live on “anticipation,”⁷¹ Thoreau emphasized that individual happiness does not depend upon achieving a better world than the one in which they live. He advised his readers not to become so fixated upon solving the world’s problems that they fail to find the happiness that is available to them. “What if their [the Reformers’] grievances exist? So do you and I.”⁷²

IV. The Claims of Conscience and Culture

Where do the principles that motivate Thoreau’s heroic individuals come from? Often, it appears as though Thoreau’s principles emerge from unmediated encounters with

⁷⁰ There are different ways to interpret Thoreau’s attitude toward the Native Americans. On the one hand, Robert Pepperman Taylor believes that Thoreau’s recognition of the incompatibility of settler and native cultures means that Thoreau does not exhibit the naïve adolescent morality that is often attributed to him. Thoreau, instead, offers a “hard-boiled and realistic political analysis combined with a notable moral subtlety,” 30. On the other hand, Thoreau’s fascination with the pioneers may be subject to the same critique that Cornell West gives of Emerson. West attributes Emerson’s celebration of the settlement of the West to a belief that all obstacles can be overcome with individual effort and that the only sin is limitation. Emerson fails to fully appreciate or empathize with the inevitable victims of this struggle, West argues, in part because he is unaware of the dark side to the exercise of individual power. See *The American Evasion of Philosophy: a genealogy of pragmatism*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Free Press, 1989).

⁷¹ *Week*, 127.

⁷² *Week*, 126.

nature or through subjective explorations of the depths of the soul. Vincent Buranelli concludes that Thoreau represents “the hoary abomination of the antinomian who anathematizes the law as he finds it, and then lays down his own law and expects other people to obey.”⁷³ On the other hand, Leigh Jenco describes Thoreau as believing in the existence of “higher laws” that should be demonstrably clear to all human beings. The higher law envisioned by Thoreau, Jenco explains, “would not encourage arbitrary justification for any behavior, but instead would present very strict ethical standards that, while accessible only to individuals, nevertheless could be expected to converge much the same way as he observed the laws of nature to do”⁷⁴

Jenco, I think, overstates the extent to which Thoreau believes that nature gives the same laws to all individuals. In *Walden*, Thoreau rejected the notion that “Nature could support but one order of understanding.”⁷⁵ He consistently stressed that each human being has his own project to follow, encouraging individual experiments in living without assuming that the results can be universalized; “it is for us to seek what no other man has found.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Thoreau’s writings do indicate a belief that some moral commandments should be obvious to all citizens. In “Slavery in Massachusetts,” for example, he referred to “laws of humanity” that take priority over the “laws of the State.”⁷⁷ While Thoreau never provided a clear definition of the “laws of humanity,” the fact that slavery and the Mexican War violated these laws suggests that they mandate against harming innocent life.

⁷³ Vincent Buranelli, “The Case Against Thoreau,” 263.

⁷⁴ “Thoreau’s Critique of Democracy,” 361.

⁷⁵ *Walden*, 344.

⁷⁶ *Cape Cod*, 128. In *Walden*, Thoreau also emphasizes that the individual’s pursuit of his own purposes is in accordance with nature. “No man ever followed his genius till it misled him....All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself,” 265.

⁷⁷ Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” in *The Higher Law*, 94.

As an American transcendentalist, Thoreau believed that humanity and nature are both infused with divinity.⁷⁸ Consequently, human beings can recognize moral laws through their experience of nature. George Hotchfield refers to Thoreau as a “transcendental empiricist” because Thoreau insists that by paying attention to the minute empirical details of the natural world, including ant wars, tree-rings, beans, streams and Walden Pond, individuals can gain access to knowledge that transcends the material world.⁷⁹ “*Next* to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. *Next* to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are.”⁸⁰

The truths to be discovered in nature undermine many of the values encouraged by society. Nature does not compromise with itself. The water-lily always expresses the essence of its being; “it is not a *Nymphoea Douglassii*. In it, the sweet and pure and innocent are wholly sundered from the obscene and baleful.”⁸¹ Individuals who make an effort to experience nature will conclude that, contrary to popular opinion, human beings do not require luxuries or social approval in order to be fulfilled. Nature also compels observers to recognize a limit to human power. Many natural wonders result from processes in which human beings have no part. Some of these processes, such as hurricanes, are actually destructive to human health and happiness.

Thoreau’s self is, however, not simply a passive recipient of natural laws, but also participates in their creation.⁸² He insisted that experience does not yield any insight without

⁷⁸ Hochfield, “New England Transcendentalists,” in *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalists*, eds. Philip Gura and Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co), 459.

⁷⁹ Hochfield, 478.

⁸⁰ *Walden*, 204.

⁸¹ “Slavery in Massachusetts,” 108-109.

⁸² *Walden*, 205.

active interpretation.⁸³ “Our circumstances answer to our expectations and the demand of our natures,” “the world is but a canvas to our imagination,” and even the “past is only as heroic as we perceive it.”⁸⁴ At the same time, nature is not a completely blank canvass upon which the self can impose whatever meaning it wills. Thoreau imagined a complex interaction between the self and nature, in which the self gives meaning and purpose to nature, but only after careful observation.⁸⁵ Having observed and chased a loon around Walden Pond, Thoreau reflected upon the wildness, resourcefulness and beauty of nature. Nature offers a rewarding alternative to society, he concluded, as both loon and man are able to amuse themselves in Walden’s waters. Thoreau interpreted the loon’s howl as a triumphant expression of contempt at his efforts to chase him in a rowboat. The howl also served as a reminder that there are beings other than humans who are capable of enjoying nature and taking pleasure in their own powers, powers which exceed Thoreau’s in some areas.⁸⁶ By observing a particular loon, Thoreau was able to derive truths about nature and man’s place within nature; however, he did not assume that the loon will reveal the same truths to all observers. Because each self has its own genius and its own unique set of past experiences, different selves will inevitably respond to nature in somewhat different ways. As he explained in *Cape Cod*, “the traveler and the inhabitant view the shore with very different eyes.” While the traveler and the inhabitant will be struck by the ocean’s power, this power is

⁸³ As J. David Greenstone notes, both the American transcendentalists and pragmatists stressed the need for active interpretation of experience. See Greenstone, “Dorthea Dix and Jane Addams: From Transcendentalism to Pragmatism in American Political Reform, *The Social Service Review* 53, no. 4 (1979); 527-559.

⁸⁴ *Week*, 292.

⁸⁵ According to Jane Bennett, “Nature is neither Thoreau’s product nor the object he discovers; Thoreau neither creates from scratch nor merely records what is there before his recognition of it.” *Thoreau’s Nature*, 61.

⁸⁶ *Walden*, 280.

likely to seem more menacing and less awe-inspiring to the inhabitant who battles with the ocean for his existence.⁸⁷

The self that gives meaning to nature is shaped by experience and located within space and time. Readers of *Walden* will notice that Thoreau interprets nature through the lens of his own education and cultural experiences. When watching a battle between red and black ants, Thoreau interpreted the battle using metaphors taken from his own reading. A red ant that rushes to join the battle was either an Achilles, avenging a dead friend, or a young Spartan, instructed by his mother to return home dead or victorious. The black ants were imperialists and the red ants were republicans, but both fight bravely and Thoreau hoped that an injured black soldier would spend the rest of his days in a “Hotel des Invalides.”⁸⁸

The fact that his understanding of nature is shaped by culture was not lost on Thoreau. Thoreau frequently suggested that human art and ideas are shaped by the “spirit” of the era in which they lived. He tended to associate eras with literary figures, such as Shakespeare, Homer or the authors of the Vedas. However, he recognized that his values have been profoundly shaped not just by literature, but also by American cultural and political institutions. During a visit to Canada, Thoreau stressed the difference between Canadian and American culture, explaining how Canadian political and economic institutions failed to encourage the individuality and self-expression that he considered important, though conceding that the Canadians may gain pleasures from communal solidarity that were denied the more individualistic Yankees.⁸⁹ Thoreau was not always content with the influence of

⁸⁷ 126.

⁸⁸ *Walden*, 276.

⁸⁹ “If the Canadian wants energy, perchance he possesses those virtues, social and others, which the Yankee lacks, in which case he cannot be regarded as a poor man.” *Yankee in Canada with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 63. *A Yankee in Canada* is according to Robert Pepperman Taylor Thoreau’s “most patriotic work.” See *America’s Bachelor Uncle*, 68-70.

culture and history, at times expressing resentment about being subject to laws and institutions created by past generations. Even though he believed that America, with its emphasis upon freedom and individuality, is moving with history, whereas Canada and Europe remain rooted in a decaying, feudal past, he worried that American society was inferior to ancient, more heroic cultures.⁹⁰ Reluctantly, however, he concluded that culture cannot be overcome. “Some are dinning in our ears that we Americans, and moderns generally, are intellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients or even the Elizabethan men. But what is the purpose....shall a man go and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies and not be the biggest pygmy that he can?”⁹¹

Thoreau expected the moral principles of his neighbors to converge because they interpret the world through a shared moral framework. Some aspects of this moral framework may be universal, but much is shaped by culture. The “laws of humanity,” which Thoreau believed should be intuitive to the nineteenth century self are not necessarily the same laws that were intuitive to selves that belonged to younger, more virile cultures. That innocent life should be protected was something that should be clear to his neighbors, though it may not necessarily have been clear to members of past cultures. Just as Thoreau regarded hunting as a permissible activity for boys, but not men, he was more tolerant of violence in “youthful” cultures. “There is a period in the history of the individual, as in the history of the race, when hunters make the best men.”⁹² Both adult human beings and mature civilizations have developed a capacity for empathizing with others, Thoreau believed, and are no longer able

⁹⁰ Despite casting Canada as an old, decaying culture, Thoreau usually describes human history as a progression from youth to maturity, with Homer and Chaucer representing youth and Shakespeare exhibiting maturity. For a detailed discussion of Thoreau’s ambivalent attitude toward history see Linck Johnson’s *Thoreau’s Complex Weave* (University of Virginia Press, 1986).

⁹¹ *Walden*, 345.

⁹² *Walden*, 262.

to justify the “wanton murder of any creature who holds its life by the same tenure that” they do.⁹³ In keeping with this statement, Thoreau was generally uncritical of violence in the Homeric world. He was both horrified and fascinated by the violence in eighteenth century New England that he described at length in *A Week*.⁹⁴ When it came to his own time, he was appalled by slavery, the war in Mexico and the Trail of Tears, and he believed that his neighbors should be appalled as well.

All of this suggests that Thoreau did not prioritize the claims of a conscience that is driven purely by its own whims. He believed that individuals are inevitably influenced by the culture in which they live and that this influence is not always corrupting. Thoreau’s emphasis upon personal contemplation was not an invitation to completely reject received norms, but rather an invitation to avoid being completely determined by norms and practices that have not been critically examined. If citizens are to be self-creating, they must make some effort to adopt practices and principles that are consistent with their own moral judgment. Critical examination requires that citizens put both emotional and physical distance between themselves and the community in which they live. Individuals should not be so emotionally invested in their own communal practices that they are unwilling to subject their own way to life to serious moral scrutiny. They must make some time for private contemplation, so that they are able to weigh different ethical options without having to worry about the approval of others. Perhaps most importantly, self-ruling citizens must seek out experiences that are not available within their own daily routines and allow those experiences to shape their moral and political deliberations. There are multiple ways to live and individuals cannot be certain that they have chosen the path that is right for them unless

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ In chapter four of *Thoreau’s Complex Weave*, Linck Johnson explains that Thoreau views eighteenth century New England as representing a mythic and violent past.

they have been exposed to alternatives. Just as Walden Pond is more fully revealed to individuals who observe it from different perspectives and in different seasons, human society is best observed from different perspectives. Citizens will be more capable of critically reflecting upon social norms and practices if they have made an effort to evaluate those practices from multiple points of view.

V. The Importance of Multiple Perspectives

Throughout his books and essays, Thoreau showed his readers how exposing themselves to a variety of perspectives and seeking out new experiences would enable them to broaden their understanding. Thoreau's account of his retreat to *Walden* demonstrated how seeking out points of view not found within one's own community and daily routine can improve moral and political judgment. Of course, Thoreau never completely left Concord and New England behind. He traveled frequently to the village while residing at Walden and his contemplations were often shaped by the ideals and needs of New England. By removing himself from the economic activities of the village, Thoreau discovered how little of what is valued by society is necessary for his own flourishing. He also gained a sense of what is lost when humans view nature only as a resource to be appropriated. To consider the effect of agricultural practices upon wild apples, as Thoreau did, was to discover a moral awareness not commonly found in nineteenth century New England society.

History and literature also provided Thoreau with opportunities for self-discovery and social reflection.⁹⁵ While Thoreau was not interested in re-creating past cultures, he believed that literature from other eras could help put his one era in perspective. Ancient literature offers a reminder that not only is it possible for humans to live differently than they do in

⁹⁵ Robert Pepperman Taylor first called my attention to the fact that literature and nature play similar roles in Thoreau's political ethics. See *America's Bachelor Uncle* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 86-89.

New England, but that other societies have surpassed New England in certain areas.⁹⁶ Truly great works of literature can also, Thoreau believed, capture universal aspects of the human experience. The story of Antigone, for example, calls attention to a reoccurring political problem – the fact that governments often demand that citizens violate their consciences.⁹⁷ Because the human imagination is significantly shaped by history, language and culture, however, even the greatest works of literature only offer brief moments of transcendence, or “glimpses of terra firma, as though by shipwrecked mariners” that enable humans to access truly universal experiences and aspirations.⁹⁸ Literature may speak to individuals from different ages and places, but it generally does to in different ways. “Virgil’s poetry serves a very different use to me than it did to his contemporaries.”⁹⁹

More recent history can also help citizens put their own society in perspective. Thoreau’s investigation of primary sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries challenged his neighbors’ understanding of their own history. The history of New England is more complicated than the triumphant and reassuring tale of heroic white settlers who conquered a savage and inferior people. Both settlers and natives, Thoreau concluded, exhibited bravery, excessive cruelty and charity. Moreover, pastoral nineteenth-century New England was less removed from bloodshed than its inhabitants realize. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River*, Thoreau tells the story of how Hannah Durston and her nephew scalped the Indians who killed her son and took her captive. Later in the book, he notes that his neighbors currently eat apples from the tree where Indians bashed in the head of Hannah Durston’s infant son. Thoreau frequently laments that his neighbors lack the vigor

⁹⁶ “Yet, no era has been wholly dark, nor will we too hastily submit to the historian and congratulate ourselves on a blaze of light,” *A Week*, 113.

⁹⁷ *Week*, 134-5.

⁹⁸ *Week*, 99.

⁹⁹ *Week*, 90.

of previous generations; yet, the story of Hannah Durston suggests that the vigor and spirit of adventure that lead previous generations to conquer a new world and resist British tyranny also made them more tolerant of cruelty. Despite his appreciation for the ideals of the American Revolution and his admiration for the revolutionaries, Thoreau was not under any illusion that American history is morally unambiguous. Like ancient literature, history can broaden our understanding of the diversity of life plans that are available to human beings; it can also remind them that few ways of life are wholly innocent or unambiguous.

A final and often overlooked means by which Thoreau sought to acquaint himself with alternative perspectives is through travel to other regions, including Canada, Maine and Cape Cod. When he traveled to Cape Cod, Thoreau encountered an unfamiliar environment of poor soil and treacherous seas,¹⁰⁰ forcing him to confront the fact that nature, which is portrayed as a source of inspiration and adventure in *Walden*, often thwarts human aspirations. In *Walden*, Thoreau frequently boasts of his insight; he has measured the depths of Walden Pond, understood the loon's howl and perfected the art of catching perch. In *Cape Cod*, Thoreau lacks such confidence; he attempts to find a pattern in the waves and fails, he is unsure whether he has eaten a poisoned mollusk and he cannot interpret the signal of a passing ship. Thoreau recognized that the inhabitants of Cape Cod have a better understanding of how to deal with the environment than he does; they know what plants can be grown in the poor soil and are prepared for the unpredictable moods of the Atlantic Ocean. However, Thoreau was not always impressed by the local people's knowledge of their environment; he calls attention to the Wellfleet oysterman's ignorance of the oyster's life cycle, he doubts that the ocean is as full of sharks as the locals claim, and considers it

¹⁰⁰ Given that Cape Cod is currently a popular vacation destination, it seems hard to believe that it was known as a particularly treacherous place for ships in the nineteenth century.

unfortunate that the locals insist upon curing their fish, rather than eating them fresh.

Traveling to Cape Cod encouraged Thoreau to consider the limitations of human insight more fully than he does elsewhere, while at the same time demonstrating that there is still much that can be learned by those who make an effort to view their society from multiple perspectives.

VI. Can Anybody be a Heroic Individual?

Thus far, I have argued that the Thoreauian individual is neither reckless nor radically subjective. None of this means, however, that the Thoreauian individual embraces democracy. Heroic understandings of politics often seem unsuited to democratic regimes; after all, in democratic regimes the majority is expected to participate and heroes are usually in short supply. Thoreau, however, was enough of a democrat to be concerned about whether his fellow citizens are capable of sharing his pursuit of principled and purposeful living. He emphasized that one does not need to be well-born or well-educated to achieve individual distinction and moral autonomy. Nor does individual distinction require public approval. While Thoreau regarded George Washington as an admirable individual, he sought to recast individual distinction, as something that does not require military glory or popular acclaim. Artists, philosophers, poets, farmers and sailors can achieve distinction, as they conquer the human mind and the natural world. Distinction certainly did not require wealth; one of the main points of *Walden* was that human needs can be fulfilled in a way that does not prevent the development of the human spirit. Thoreau was, however, unsure as to whether all human beings are constituted so that they are capable of the principled existence that moral autonomy requires. His observation in *A Week* that “cheap must be the material out of which

so many men are made,” implies that there are barriers to human excellence other than wealth.¹⁰¹

Through observing his fellow citizens, Thoreau concluded that they vary in their capacity to achieve independence and integrity. He did encounter a number of people whom he regarded as having the potential for moral improvement. Such people include “children who come a-berrying, railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fishermen and hunters, poets and philosophers, all honest pilgrims, who came out of the woods for freedom’s sake and really left the village behind.”¹⁰² After talking to a Canadian woodcutter about a number of “political reforms of the day,” Thoreau concluded that “there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life, however permanently humble and illiterate, who take their own view always, or do not pretend to see at all; who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and muddy.”¹⁰³

Thoreau found some of his neighbors to be utterly incapable of the qualities he sought. In the “Baker Farm” chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau described taking shelter in the shack of John Field, an Irish immigrant who is “an honest, hard-working, but shiftless man.”¹⁰⁴ Thoreau felt sorry for Field and his wife. Both worked very hard to barely survive and have been badly-treated in their old and new countries. Thoreau tried to talk to Field “as if he were a philosopher, or desired to be one.” Philosophy, for Thoreau, teaches humans how to live and he believed that his experiment at Walden could benefit somebody like Field. Rather than “bogging” all day to buy luxuries like coffee, tea and meat, Field and his family can forgo unnecessary items. In so doing, they will have the time to build a cleaner, warmer

¹⁰¹ *Week*, 339.

¹⁰² *Walden*, 218.

¹⁰³ *Walden*, 216.

¹⁰⁴ *Walden*, 256.

shelter and leisure to enjoy the wonders of nature. More importantly, by freeing themselves from luxuries that are produced by slave labor, the Fields can free themselves from accountability for injustice. Not surprisingly, the Fields are not receptive to Thoreau's advice. The problem, Thoreau concluded, is that the Fields lack the capacity for independent thought and were incapable of envisioning a life for themselves that is better than the one society has delegated to them. Having been raised to believe that "bogging" is an acceptable pastime and that securing coffee and meat is the purpose of life, the Fields were unwilling to contemplate other paths and as a result, they work very hard to live wretchedly. They "take life bravely after their fashion," but "they fight at an overwhelming disadvantage — living, John Field, alas! without arithmetic, and failing so."¹⁰⁵ While some might praise Field for overcoming adversity and improving the economic circumstances of himself and his family, Field is a failure in Thoreau's eyes, as he did not truly calculate the costs of his labor and consider whether it is worth the meager rewards it brings.

Given that Thoreau often encouraged his readers to find their own paths, the confidence with which Thoreau instructed Field may seem surprising. However, as explained earlier, Thoreau believed that individuals are unlikely to follow their own paths unless they cultivate virtues, such as simplicity, clear-sightedness, and frugality, all of which Thoreau finds lacking in Field. Thoreau's lack of interest in Field's opinion of the situation is also completely consistent with his political ethics, which is neither deliberative nor dialogical. Thoreau did not encourage his readers to wrestle with the experiences and perspectives of other people. Moral judgment, for Thoreau, is improved by personal contemplation, not dialogue. Thoreau described the Field house and family in detail, but does not seem interested in hearing their opinions on the situation, preferring to observe and come to his

¹⁰⁵ *Walden*, 260.

own conclusions. Field is like the loon in Walden Pond, a source of inspiration for Thoreau's moral and political ruminations, but not entitled to any input into those ruminations.

To some extent, Thoreau's account of Field reflects an anti-Irish sentiment that was prominent in nineteenth century New England.¹⁰⁶ In concluding that "the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe,"¹⁰⁷ Thoreau implied that the Irish are particularly lacking in the qualities he seeks. Still, with the exception of dirtiness, the qualities that Thoreau criticized in Field are the qualities that he criticized in all of his neighbors; a failure of imagination, independence, creativity and, most importantly, responsibility. Both Irish immigrants and Thoreau's neighbors spend their lives contributing to the reproduction of a culture that robs them of their integrity and independence. They are both victims of their culture, but they also contribute to their own and others' victimization. The vast majority of both groups, Thoreau believed, are unfulfilled; perhaps the Irish experience more physical suffering, but the middle class citizens of Concord experience a lack of spiritual fulfillment. In both cases, individual moral reform is the primary solution that Thoreau offers; yet, Thoreau clearly does not believe that all individuals are likely to engage in such reform. While insisting that the purpose of democracy is to provide circumstances conducive to individual distinction and genuine moral autonomy, Thoreau suggested that relatively few individuals will be capable of realizing these purposes.

It is worth noting, however, that Thoreau does not always despair of his fellow citizens because they fall short of his high moral standards. Most of the people that Thoreau meets in his travels fall short of excellence; yet he often finds them to be harmless, colorful and in possession of at least some of the traits he admires. The ancient oysterman whom

¹⁰⁶ Helen Lojek argues that anti-Irish sentiment is widespread throughout Thoreau's work in "Thoreau's Bog People," *New England Quarterly* 67:2 (1994).

¹⁰⁷ *Walden*, 260.

Thoreau stays with in *Cape Cod* is described as parochial and ignorant, but also as friendly, independent and not entirely lacking in admirable qualities. The oysterman shared Thoreau's interest in the natural world, having an intimate acquaintance with apples, oysters and ponds. To some extent, he also shares Thoreau's faith in his own judgment, insisting upon interpreting the *Bible* for himself.¹⁰⁸ None of this suggests that the average man is capable of living heroically, responsibly and purposefully. It does, however, indicate that most people can cultivate some of the qualities that Thoreau valued and explains why Thoreau believed that most of his fellow citizens have sufficient virtue to be persuaded of the evil of slavery, to preserve political institutions that are "good in many respects" and perhaps carry out some moral improvements.¹⁰⁹

VII. The Hero as Neighbor

Thoreau's conclusion that many of his acquaintances possess at least some admirable qualities may also be why he believed that those who seek to live purposefully can learn from and take pleasure in the company of those who are incapable of such projects. Though shunning politics, social movements and commercial life, Thoreau was not willing to completely separate himself from the community of Concord. As explained below, Thoreau's condemnations of collective effort and public responsibilities did not apply to neighborly effort or local civic activity.

Thoreau conceded that national and state political institutions are necessary for mutual protection, but his expectations of these institutions were relatively modest. His tendency to liken national and state institutions to machines was indicative of his belief that large political entities discourage individuals from cultivating the qualities he admires:

¹⁰⁸ *Cape Cod*, 66-78.

¹⁰⁹ "Resistance to Civil Government," 86.

simplicity, independence, authenticity, courage and creativity. These qualities are consistent with the American emphasis upon freedom, but they are not and probably cannot be embodied in state and national political institutions that do not allow face-to-face interactions between participants.

Human beings, Thoreau explained, are not designed to feel compassion for people, with whom they do not have any personal relationship. While witnessing the aftermath of a shipwreck, he observed that neither he nor the onlookers was distraught enough by the sight to cease going about their business. He attributed his lack of sympathy to the fact that he lacked any personal connection to the victims. “I saw that corpses might be multiplied as on the field of battle, till they no longer affected us in any degree, as exceptions to the common lot of humanity. Take all the graveyards together, they are always the majority. It is the individual and private that demands our sympathy.”¹¹⁰ Sympathy, according to Thoreau, requires intimacy. While in Cape Cod, Thoreau was also horrified to discover that the “shelters” built to protect shipwrecked sailors could not keep a human being alive during even a minor hurricane. The problem with charity provided to anonymous recipients is that there is usually a great distance between provider and recipient, and as a result, only a “cold charity” is offered which is not motivated by compassion, but rather a desire to do good, and which consequently fails to recognize what the recipient actually needs.

Thoreau’s discussion of Concord, however, implied that villages can avoid some of these problems, even if few of their members live deliberately in the manner he advocates. Relationships among neighbors were not, according to Thoreau, elevated moral endeavors. “Only lovers know the value and magnanimity of truth, while traders prize a cheap honesty,

¹¹⁰ *Cape Cod*, 9.

and neighbors and acquaintances a cheap civility.”¹¹¹ Friends seek truth together and recognize inner beauty in each other. Neighbors, on the other hand, do not necessarily cultivate relationships with each other out of a sense of mutual admiration or spiritual kinship. They perform tasks that require collective effort, such as building roads, putting out burning buildings, educating children and catching wild hogs that threaten crops. They also assist each other, with the expectation that favors will be reciprocated; if I help when my neighbor’s house is on fire, then I can expect my neighbor to help me when my house is on fire.

Despite emphasizing that there are forms of human fellowship more elevated than relations among neighbors, Thoreau did not regard neighborly relationships as unimportant. Neighborliness is a reoccurring theme in *Walden* and Thoreau often described neighborly interactions in positive terms.¹¹² He began building his shelter by borrowing an axe, stating that “perhaps it is the most generous course thus, to permit your fellow man to have an interest in your enterprise.”¹¹³ He constructed the frame of the house with acquaintances “to improve so good an occasion from neighborliness.”¹¹⁴ While residing at Walden, Thoreau travels to the village to hear the latest news, goes fishing with John Field and entertained villagers in his house. Some of Thoreau’s readers are tempted to view Thoreau’s dependence upon his neighbors for building materials, company and assistance as hypocritical, given that Thoreau appears to preach complete independence. However, Thoreau did not aspire to be Robinson Crusoe, relying upon only his physical and mental prowess for his survival. The independence that interested Thoreau was moral and spiritual— he wanted individuals to be

¹¹¹ *A Week*, 267.

¹¹² See “Independence,” in Taylor’s *America’s Bachelor Uncle*.

¹¹³ *Walden*, 135.

¹¹⁴ *Walden*, 138.

capable of obeying their own laws and following their own geniuses. Thoreau viewed collective movements, large institutions and commercial enterprises as a threat to this kind of independence, but believed that reciprocal relationships among neighbors are not inevitably a threat to moral autonomy. Neighbors know each other well enough to recognize each other's needs. Likewise, local political associations are sufficiently small to allow the voices of individuals to be heard; all of Concord was aware of Thoreau's dispute with the tax collector. It is for these reasons, that Thoreau viewed the village or small-town as the ideal political unit. While denying any general responsibility for the wellbeing of humanity in general, he recognized some responsibility for the wellbeing of his neighbors. In "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau noted that he had "never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject."¹¹⁵ As if to illustrate this point, upon being released from prison, Thoreau proceeded to join a huckleberry party.

Thoreau's ideal village is a community of citizens who cheerfully assist each other in times of need and depend upon each other for certain collective goods, but who do not impose excessive obligations upon each other. Among the collective goods that the village provides are security, infrastructure, and fellowship. Perhaps most surprising is Thoreau's desire for the village to take a greater role in public education. "Why should we leave it to Harper & Brothers or Redding & Co. to select our reading....To act collectively is in keeping with the spirit of our institutions....New England can hire all of the wise men of the world to come and teach her...instead of noblemen, let us have villages of noble men."¹¹⁶ In arguing that collective action can help achieve a village of "noble men," Thoreau retreated somewhat from his claim that reform is inherently an individual project, suggesting that citizens who

¹¹⁵ "Resistance to Civil Government," 84.

¹¹⁶ *Walden*, 187.

know each other and are not overly involved in each other's affairs can pursue collectively the kind of education that permits them to undertake their own projects of moral reform..¹¹⁷

Thoreau deserves, I think, to be included in the tradition of American political thought that values small, agrarian communities as uniquely capable of achieving virtue and independence. Like Wendell Berry, a contemporary participant in this tradition, Thoreau is drawn to small, agrarian communities because he believed that responsibility begins at home. Instead of despairing about conditions in other parts of the world, individuals should focus upon their own actions and the actions of one's local community. Not only is individual action more likely to be effective on the local level, but local political institutions are less threatening to individual moral autonomy.

Conclusion

Thoreau believed that democratic citizens must accept responsibility for the causes and institutions to which they give their allegiance because the act of bestowing allegiance is both a conscious choice and a reflection of personal moral commitments. Individuals who give their allegiance to institutions that violate their core convictions, he argued, have failed to cultivate the moral autonomy that democratic institutions were designed to promote. Thoreau's account of moral autonomy and personal responsibility can be used to justify radical and even militant political behavior in some situations. On the whole, however, Thoreau is not the reckless and radically subjective political actor envisioned by Arendt.

¹¹⁷ My discussion of Thoreau's account of neighborliness is similar to Jenco's. Jenco argues that neighborliness is Thoreau's alternative to conventional politics. Thoreau, Jenco explains, seeks to de-politicize public life, replacing legal and impersonal relationships between individuals and institutions into relationships between two individual consciences. See Jenco, "Thoreau's Case Against Democracy." However, it is worth noting that while Thoreau wants to limit the scope of the state, he does not want to abolish it altogether. Moreover, he even approves of collective action on the local level; efforts such as the Lyceum movement and the village schools were cooperative endeavors, rather than the meeting of individual consciences that Jenco describes. Finally, while Thoreau's vision of neighborliness is not political in the sense that it is unrelated to membership in political institutions, it is political in the sense that it is compatible with the basic values that Thoreau associates with the American Revolution; consent, self-reliance and autonomy.

First, Thoreau cautioned against unreflective expressions of moral commitment, particularly in situations where the real motive is excitement or honor, as opposed to principle. Second, Thoreau recognized that individuals are embedded in communities. They have obligations to their neighbors and their moral commitments are inevitably shaped by their cultural and political institutions. Finally, Thoreau's political project was animated by democratic sentiments. His intense sense of responsibility for the institutions in which he is implicated is rooted in a commitment to individual self-rule. And despite his suspicion about the ability of the masses to undertake projects of moral reform, Thoreau moral intuitions are in many ways egalitarian; Thoreau's fellow citizens may not be capable of pursuing the heroic excellence that he believed democracy was intended to secure, but they are nevertheless basically decent and to some extent capable and deserving of self-rule. Essentially, the principles to which Thoreau was most firmly committed are generally ones to which democratic societies are the most firmly committed. Consequently, Thoreau's political subversion was usually done on behalf of democratic norms. Thoreau did justify political violence in some situations, but violence is only one of several forms of resistance that Thoreau permitted, and he seemed to reserve violence for the most extreme rights violations, such as slavery.

The fact that Thoreau is not the reckless and radically subjective political actor envisioned by Arendt does not inevitably make him an ideal democratic citizen. Indeed, in the next chapter, I explore Addams's account of responsible citizenship which emerged out of her dissatisfaction with nineteenth century notions of heroic individualism. Many of her criticisms of romantic individualism can justly be applied to Thoreau. His emphasis upon principled moral commitment means that the Thoreauian political actor will generally shun the collective action required to solve the problems that confront industrial democratic

societies, and prevent him from being an effective political actor should he chose to participate. Moreover, his insistence upon trusting his own judgments and experiences will make it difficult for him to grasp the complex problems that industrial societies face. At the same time, as I will explain in later chapters, there are aspects of Thoreau's political thought that are worth salvaging, particularly his insistence that self-ruling individuals must accept some responsibility for processes in which they participate and his recognition that political judgment is often improved when citizens make an effort to view their society from multiple perspectives.

3. Jane Addams on Evolving Responsibilities in Industrial Democracies

The nation into which Jane Addams was born in Cedarville, Illinois in 1860, two years prior to Thoreau's death from tuberculosis, was headed toward a period of rapid industrialization that would make Thoreau's vision of agrarian communities of self-reliant individuals increasingly untenable. Raised by a successful Republican businessman, Addams was not taught to view the railroads or the federal government with suspicion. Instead, John Addams taught his daughter that government and business could work together to promote economic development and that successful citizens like himself had an obligation to ensure that economic and political institutions served the needs of the whole community.¹ John Addams's experience in the Illinois state legislature, which he left after becoming disgusted with the wheeling and dealing of reconstruction politics, taught his daughter to be wary of political actors who sought only their own personal gain. At the same time, John Addams encouraged his daughter to appreciate principled political compromise, emphasizing that the only responsible approach to slavery was the one adopted by his fellow Illinois state senator, Abraham Lincoln, who sought to stop the spread of slavery while also preserving the union.

While Addams may have been born into a country that would rapidly become unrecognizable to Thoreau, much of the literature and philosophy that shaped Addams's youth would have been familiar to him. Like many educated people in her generation, Addams admired the American transcendentalists, attributing her lack of interest in the evangelical Christianity that was encouraged at Rockford Seminary to an "early reading of

¹ Victoria Bissel Brown writes that "it is regrettable that Jane Addams, writing her autobiography in 1909, did not point to Henry Clay and the family legacy of stewardship, harmony and principled compromise in describing her father's political orientation. If she had, the world might have gained a better understanding of Jane Addams's own political lineage." See *The Education of Jane Addams* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 20.

Emerson.”² Addams supplemented her coursework at Rockford with Carlyle, Goethe and Wordsworth, all of whom had influenced the young Thoreau. According to Victoria Brown, Addams’s letters and school essays suggest that the young Addams shared Thoreau’s sympathy with Carlyle’s heroic individualism. Heroism for Addams, however, was never simply about self-perfection.³ The young Addams envisioned heroic individuals as exemplary moral leaders who, like her father, dedicated their lives to promoting the common good. Ironically, Addams would spend much of her adult life refuting exactly this notion of citizenship. The adult Addams concluded that because all citizens affect and are affected by political outcomes, responsibility for the successful functioning of political institutions belongs to all citizens, not just exemplary moral leaders. Furthermore, she insisted that the problems of industrial democracies are too complex to be recognized and resolved without the participation of citizens who have experienced different aspects of the political and economic system.

Addams was not a systematic thinker who argued deductively from a set of well-defined assumptions. Most of her books are collections of essays in which she reflects upon her own experiences and ideas gathered from her extensive reading.⁴ However, her essays and books offer a fairly consistent argument about why citizens share responsibility for their political institutions and what exactly discharging this responsibility might entail. This chapter outlines that argument.

² Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1942), 50.

³ As Victoria Bissel Brown explains, “the social and aesthetic movements these men had launched were more than fifty years old when Jane Addams was at Rockford, but in her parochial setting, German romanticism and Victorian idealism were positively avant-garde,” 82-3.

⁴ Addams was often vague about the extent to which her books were shaped by other people’s ideas. She sometimes neglected to cite theorists who have clearly influenced her; more frequently, however, she puts phrases in quotes but does not identify the original source. According to Katherine Joslin, Addams, to the dismay of her editor Richard Ely, seems to have feared that extensive footnotes and lengthy discussions of specific philosophers would prevent her books from reaching a mass audience. See Joslin, *Jane Addams: A Writer’s Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 79.

In keeping with her belief that theory should be shaped by practice, much of Addams's arguments about citizen responsibility are contained in her reflections on important events in her life and the life of the nation. Like Thoreau's narrative about his life at Walden, Addams's recollections of her life were intended to advocate a particular vision of what it means to lead an ethical life. Like Thoreau, she emphasized and embellished particular experiences in order to support her vision. In this chapter, I am generally less interested in discussing the accuracy of Addams's recollections than with examining what message she wanted her readers to take away from her recollections. My interpretation of Addams is, however, influenced by recent biographers such as Victoria Brown and Louis Knight who suggest that Addams may have downplayed the extent to which her political ideals differed from that of her father in her autobiography. The idea that Addams's political ethics was significantly shaped by her experiences in Chicago's nineteenth ward is central to my reading of Addams; I view Addams as a thinker who believed that the moral understandings of both individuals and cultures must evolve as circumstances change.⁵ Brown and Knight offers compelling evidence that Addams's ideas about the importance of moral evolution was rooted in her own experiences, as her ideas changed significantly after she graduated from Rockford Seminary. There is also, however, evidence in Addams's own texts that she acknowledged that her childhood experiences in small-town Illinois and

⁵ Addams was influenced by her father in many ways; her tendency to seek consensus and settle for the "best possible" were encouraged by John Addams's example. At the same time, as Victoria Brown notes in *The Education of Jane Addams*, John Addams embodied the ideal of the industrious, self-made man; he moved West with money he borrowed from his father-in-law and eventually ended up one the most prosperous men in northern Illinois. As an adult, Jane concluded that this ideal was of limited usefulness. Moreover, John Addams was committed to "civic stewardship," or the idea that prosperous members of society had an obligation to use their wealth and knowledge to benefit the community. Brown notes that Jane's seminary essays reflect her father's commitment to civic stewardship. In several of these essays, Jane sought heroic leaders who can teach virtue and wisdom to the masses. Jane's extensive reading during her twenties and her experience in Chicago seems to have changed her mind on these matters, though her biography contains no discussion of a significant shift in her political thought. Brown suspects that Jane overstates the role her father played in shaping her political convictions in *Twenty Years* so as to make her own ideas seem less radical and to demonstrate her willingness to respect male authority figures.

seminary education had not fully prepared her for life in industrial Chicago, and that her belief in the experiential and plural nature of political knowledge was, in fact, rooted in her own experiences.

The first third of the chapter explains how nineteenth century ideas about cooperation and the American pragmatist movement in philosophy influenced Addams' political ethics. Addams, I argue, believed that both democratic ideals and changing economic conditions demanded that contemporary Americans accept greater responsibility for political outcomes and each other's welfare than previous generations had done. The second third of the chapter explores Addams's ideas about how citizens would accept greater responsibility for public life, focusing particular attention upon the "social" approach to ethics that Addams regarded as essential to democratic flourishing. Addams believed that cultivating "social ethics" would enable citizens to recognize and fulfill the numerous responsibilities that she associated with democratic citizenship. Her theory of social ethics could also, however, be used to defend her decision to participate in public life against those who claimed that it was impossible to maintain one's integrity while functioning within modern political and economic institutions. Addams's response to such critiques was that participation in imperfect institutions only looks like a lack of integrity to those whose ethical frameworks have not been developed in a democratic context.

In the concluding sections of the chapter, I discuss the similarities and differences between Addams's political ethics and that of two contemporary political frameworks with which she has sometimes been associated: the egalitarian liberalism most frequently associated with John Rawls and the social feminist position articulated by Jean Elshtain. While Addams is sometimes portrayed as the champion of a liberal welfare state that found

its most complete philosophic justification in the works of Rawls, I argue that her concern with civic virtue and responsibility differentiates her from egalitarian liberals whose primary concern is distributive justice. Indeed, in her recent intellectual biography, Elshtain offers an insightful analysis of the contrast between Addams and contemporary egalitarian liberals. Elshtain, however, portrays Addams as the embodiment of the social feminist ethical framework that she has long advocated, a framework that is not entirely compatible with Addams's own political ideals. In comparing Addams's political ethics to that of Rawls and Elshtain, I both differentiate my interpretation of Addams from prominent alternatives, and more fully articulate Addams's distinctive approach to democratic citizenship, an approach that does not fit easily into contemporary political frameworks.

I. Cooperation and Democracy

In the nineteenth century, prominent Anglo-American social and political reformers sought to apply cooperative practices to economic, political, and daily life.⁶ Such efforts had a significant influence upon Addams's political thought.⁷ Addams believed that cooperation had intrinsic value and that human beings had evolved to take pleasure from working with others. Along with many reformers of her era, Addams regarded social solidarity as consistent with Christian ideals. Though Addams was baptized as an adult, she never accepted the divinity of Christ. Instead, she found in the teachings of Christ, which she insisted were not meant to be taken as rigid dogmas, confirmation of her belief that human

⁶ Louise W. Knight, "Jane Addams's Theory of Cooperation," from *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, eds. Marilyn Fischer, Carol Nackenoff and Wendy Chmielewski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 65.

⁷ As Louise Knight explains, Addams advocated two different kinds of cooperative action. First, she advocated cooperative action among citizens who are working together to achieve common objectives. Major decisions at Hull House were subject to vote by the residents, and efforts were made to give some decision-making power to those who partook in Hull House services. Second, Addams advocated cooperation among groups of citizens who have different agendas, but might be able to find common ground on a particular area.

fulfillment requires human fellowship.⁸ As Victoria Bissel Brown explains, “Addams believed that kindness and cooperation were ‘primordial’ and that Jesus set about to remind people of the goodness of their own nature, not to rescue them from the clutches of an enemy nature.”⁹

While she believed that social cooperation was required by Christian ideals and consistent with enduring social sentiments, Addams also argued that democratic ideals and institutions demanded greater social cooperation than previous forms of social organization. The democratic commitment to human equality, she explained, is incompatible with hierarchical relationships of domination and subordination, and instead requires cooperative effort among equals. Furthermore, democracy creates conditions in which cooperation is particularly essential to human flourishing, as democratic institutions make individuals dependent upon the will of their fellow citizens, rather than the whims of elites. Democratic societies cannot prosper unless ordinary citizens exercise their political rights and duties in a responsible manner. In a democracy, Addams warned, “it will be impossible to establish a higher political life than the people themselves crave.”¹⁰ Ensuring that resources such as education, which enable citizens to appreciate their political rights and fulfill their civic duties, are universally available is thus in the interest of all citizens.

In *Newer Ideals of Peace*, Addams argued that the majority of the urban poor were not “calloused and cynical,” but rather felt compelled to assist their neighbors and participate

⁸ Christopher Lasch writes that “it is commonplace to say that progressivism represented another outcropping of the old New England moralism. Such observations are quite misleading, however, unless coupled with the observation that the old moralism now existed in a theological void.” Lasch notes that Addams herself considered the settlement to be a revolt against the Puritans that substituted works for “dogmas.” See “Jane Addams: The College Women and the Family Claim” in *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

⁹ Victoria Bissel Brown, “The Sermon of the Deed: Jane Addams’s Spiritual Evolution,” from *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, 36.

¹⁰ Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1942), 116.

in political reform movements both to “avoid crushing the little folk” and to save themselves from “death by crushing.”¹¹ Many urban residents, she argued, understood the ethical obligations that accompany democratic citizenship. The fates of democratic citizens are intertwined not simply with that of their family and neighbors, but with that of their fellow citizens. Democracy is distinct from other forms of social organization because it generates relationships of mutual dependency among people who do not belong to the same familial and communal networks.

By suggesting that democracy is possible in industrial Chicago, Addams implicitly rejected the tradition in American political thought that celebrates small agrarian communities as uniquely capable of producing virtuous and free citizens. The citizens of small farming communities are uniquely virtuous, it is argued, because they are able to play a meaningful role in public institutions and because self-sufficient farmers are shielded from the vanity, greed and dependence upon others that accompanies commercial activity.¹² In contrast to advocates of agrarian life like Jefferson and Thoreau, Addams did not equate civic virtue with economic self-sufficiency. According to Addams, industrialization and democratization are potentially re-enforcing processes in that both generate relationships of mutual dependency. Just as universal suffrage gives us a stake in the welfare of our fellow citizens, the division of labor in a capitalist economy generates shared interests among diverse groups of people. Dependence can be beneficial, Addams believed, in that it can generate a greater sense of equality and fellowship among citizens; however, this is only

¹¹ Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 13.

¹² According to Jefferson, “Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.” “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 217.

possible when dependence is mutual and when it is accompanied by a sense of shared responsibility. Thus, she was hesitant to describe her life's work as philanthropy, as she worried that this generated an image of Hull House residents as selfless souls who administered to those incapable of taking care of themselves. She preferred to think of Hull House as working with its neighbors to solve shared problems. Some of these neighbors were incapable of taking care of themselves. Most, however, were working people who could generally put food on the table, but who could benefit from increased educational and recreational opportunities, healthier living conditions and fairer terms of employment.¹³

Her belief that democracy required collective political action made Addams sympathetic to the demands of trade unionists. Addams and Hull House residents, such as Florence Kelley, were particularly supportive of women trade unionists. The Hull-House affiliated "Jane Club" enabled working-women to pool resources and provided support to each other during strikes. The social cooperation envisioned by Addams was not, however, entirely compatible with the socialism preached by many early twentieth century trade unionists. Addams refused to accept that capitalists and workers had fundamentally antagonistic interests, arguing that each had an interest in each other's wellbeing. As will be revealed over the course of this chapter, Addams drew many lessons about democratic ethics from the tragic events of the Pullman strike. One lesson was that capitalists, indeed all citizens, have a personal interest in ensuring that hours and wages are fair, as they have a stake in avoiding industrial conflicts that cripple economic and social life.

Capitalists have a material interest in the welfare of their fellow citizens, but they and other elites also have a "subjective" or spiritual interest, Addams explained, as all human

¹³ See in particular "The Objective Necessity for a Social Settlement," *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 61.

beings possess an “impulse to aid in the race progress.”¹⁴ Having struggled to survive in hostile environments for thousands of years, humans are instinctually driven to provide for the basic needs of themselves and others. Elites who are fortunate enough to have escaped the “struggle for existence,” often sense that they have failed to sufficiently develop important human capacities. Consequently, many elites feel unfulfilled and isolated from the majority of men and women who are engaged in productive labor. Thus, in taking steps to provide for the welfare of their fellow citizens, elites are able to fulfill needs of their own.

This emphasis upon the importance of productive labor reflects Addams’s skepticism that humans can be satisfied by a life devoted purely to aesthetic or intellectual pursuits. This was a sentiment she shared with Thoreau, who also argued that humans benefit from a balance of mental and physical stimulation and who took great satisfaction in his capacity to fulfill his own needs. Addams differed from Thoreau, however, in that she believed that fulfillment requires laboring with and for others. She suspected that the young people she encountered while on vacation in Switzerland, who “could climb peaks so inaccessible that the feats received honorable mention in alpine Journals,” were not truly happy. She distinguished, however, between “the hard-working men and women who were taking a vacation,” and the “leisured young people to whom this period was the most serious of the year, and filled with the most strenuous exertion. They did not, of course, thoroughly enjoy it, for we are too complicated to be content with mere exercise. Civilization has bound us too closely with our brethren for any one of us to be long happy in the cultivation of mere individual force.”¹⁵

¹⁴ *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 125.

¹⁵ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 43.

Because humans naturally long to be part of something bigger than themselves, they should not, Addams believed, find the responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship to be particularly onerous. Life at Hull House provided support for the idea that interaction with others can result in mutual affection. Having helped organize a social event for Italian immigrants in her neighborhood, a member of the Hull House women's club told Addams that she was "ashamed of the way I have always talked about 'dagos,' they are quite like other people."¹⁶ The pleasures of collective action, Addams assumed, provided adequate compensation for the modern American's inability to be the law unto himself that was envisioned by nineteenth century romantic individualists.

II. Pragmatism and Democracy

In addition to being influenced by the cooperative movement, Addams embraced and even influenced the pragmatist movement in American philosophy. In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, she detected a "premature pragmatism" in her boarding school essays,¹⁷ and there are direct and indirect references to prominent pragmatists in her works.¹⁸ Moreover, William James and Dewey regarded Addams as a kindred spirit and Dewey frequently credited Addams with influencing his own intellectual development.¹⁹

The pragmatists are perhaps best known for their commitment to experimentalism, or their belief that knowledge is acquired through practice. However, pragmatists share a

¹⁶ *Twenty Years*, 359.

¹⁷ Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1942), 58.

¹⁸ Addams cites Dewey in *Twenty Years at Hull House* (p. 236), in *Newer Ideals of Peace* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2007: p. 93), and the *Second Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York, Macmillan Company, 1930: p. 413), and William James in *Newer Ideals of Peace* (p. 16). The "recognized ethical lecturer," whom Addams quotes at length in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002: p. 119) is quite likely Dewey. The "moralists" in *Newer Ideals* who claim that "it is not so much by the teaching of moral therms that virtue is to be promoted as by the direct expression of social sentiments and by the cultivation of practical habits" almost certainly include Dewey and James (p. 8).

¹⁹ Addams's influence on Dewey is documented at length by Charlotte Haddock Seigfried in *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), particularly on pages 73-8.

number of other core commitments, including fallibilism, humanism, pluralism and empiricism.²⁰ They are fallibilists, in that they believe that knowledge claims are contingent upon existing information and subject to revision. They are humanists, in that they believe that knowledge claims should be evaluated by whether they serve human ends. They are pluralists, who are committed to the idea that human beings pursue multiple goods and that human experience can be interpreted in multiple ways. Finally, they are empiricists in the sense that they believe that human subjects are constituted by their experiences.²¹ It is worth emphasizing, however, that the pragmatists do not believe that human subjects are the passive recipients of sense-impressions, but rather view human knowledge as the product of active interpretation of experience. Moreover, while the pragmatists recognize that individuals rely upon culturally mediated concepts and ideas to interpret their experiences, they believe that humans are capable of re-evaluating concepts and ideas that no longer seem to be helpful in dealing with human experience.

As a pragmatist, Addams believed that morality was contextual in both an empirical and a normative sense. From empirical observation, it seemed clear to her that humans acquire virtues and ethical standards in particular social and historical contexts. For example, she explained that intense solidarity among ethnic groups made sense when humans lived in tribal societies. It seemed equally clear to Addams that ethical standards and virtues that emerge in one context cannot un-problematically be applied to other contexts. Hence, inherited moral standards and practices must be revised as circumstances change, and

²⁰This paragraph is influenced by Charlotte Haddock Seigfried's summary of John Stuhr's influential definition of American pragmatism. See Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism*, 7-8, and Stuhr, ed. *Classical American Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4-11.

²¹ My account of the pragmatists' approach to empiricism is influenced by J. David Greenstone, "Dorthea Dix and Jane Addams: From Transcendentalism to Pragmatism in American Political Reform," *The Social Service Review* 53, no. 4 (1979):527-559.

revisions should only be accepted after they are tested by human experience. An unwillingness to revise out-dated standards is, Addams believed, a significant problem in a society that is experiencing rapid social and economic change:

The constant cry that our institutions are in danger betrays a spiritual waste, not due to our infidelity to national ideals, but arising from the fact that we fail to enlarge those ideals in accord with our faithful experiences of life. Our political machinery developed for quite other conditions, has not been readjusted and adapted to the successive changes resulting from our development. The clamor for the town meeting, for the colonial and early century ideals of government is in itself significant, for we are apt to cling to the past through a very paucity of ideas.²²

The “colonial and early century ideals of government” that Addams considered problematic include the eighteenth century idea of “natural rights” that was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.²³ Like many progressive reformers, Addams worried that insistence upon the sanctity of individual property rights prevented economic regulations that were essential not only to individual well-being, but to the survival of democratic institutions. Without a strong public education system and restrictions of child labor, it is unlikely that future generations of voters will be able to appreciate the value of self-government. However, Addams’s critique of natural rights extended beyond a critique of property rights. Eighteenth century natural rights theorists were naïve, she believed, to assume that they could base a system of government upon a set of rights that men are endowed with in the state of nature. Such theorists lacked the “modern evolutionary conception of the slowly advancing race, whose rights are not ‘inalienable,’ but hard-won in the tragic processes of experience.”²⁴ In other words, nature does not endow human beings with inalienable rights that can be fully delineated at a given moment in time; rather, rights

²² *Newer Ideals of Peace*, 25.

²³ In *Newer Ideals of Peace*, Addams argued that the Founders relied upon “eighteenth-century ideals” that are inadequate to contemporary circumstances. She singled out Jefferson, perhaps unfairly given Jefferson’s republican sympathies, as a “representative” of an outdated and undemocratic ideology. See *Newer Ideals*, 20-2.

²⁴ *Newer Ideals*, 21.

are a set of entitlements that appear essential to human flourishing and dignity in a particular historical moment. This does not, however, mean that rights are entirely arbitrary. Addams believed that some approaches to human rights were more compatible with human experience than others. For example, she thought that a strong case could be made that workers in the early-twentieth century were entitled to fair wages and safe working conditions. Without fair wages and safe working conditions, workers cannot provide for their families or be active members of their communities, and are essentially unable to perform the activities that give human life meaning and dignity. However, Addams also recognized that in a democratic society, revising commonly held understandings of rights requires persuasion and political struggle.

The founder's fixation upon natural rights was, according to Addams, related to their ambivalence about democracy; refusing to trust the judgment of the people, the founders hoped to set up a government that could not easily be altered by popular whim. What the founders did not realize is that all human societies, and particularly democratic ones, are in a constant state of flux. Future generations would be confronted by problems that cannot be solved by solutions that are sanctioned by tradition, but rather require solutions rooted in human experience. The experiences of most citizens, however, are too limited to enable them to fully understand complex political and social problems; complex and unpredictable problems such as urban poverty and industrial exploitation can only be solved through cooperative effort. For Addams, as for Dewey, pragmatist understandings about the contingent, plural and experiential nature of political knowledge demonstrated why the problems that confront democratic polities require greater social cooperation and political participation.

III. Democracy and Shared Responsibility

Whereas many democratic theorists and citizens doubt that individuals can be held responsible for outcomes that they do not fully control, Addams did not hesitate to hold citizens responsible for political outcomes. Democratic citizens inevitably affect and are affected by political outcomes, and therefore cannot credibly claim to be uninvolved. Like Thoreau, Addams recognized that the actions and inactions of individual citizens contribute to political outcomes and she encouraged her readers to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions. When speaking about political corruption in turn of the century Chicago, Addams concluded that “We are all involved...and as members of the community stand indicted.” However, she also stressed that democratic citizens have a personal stake in the behavior of their political institutions. “The penalty of democracy is that we are bound to move forward or retrograde together. None of us can stand aside; our feet are mired in the same soil and our lungs breathe the same air.”²⁵

Addams’s discussions of civic responsibility usually appealed to both her reader’s self-interest and to their sense that contributing to injustice is morally wrong. Consumers, she argued, who purchase the fruits of sweatshop labor are contributing to economic exploitation and utilizing products that might be harmful to their own health. Similarly, she believed that the residents of Chicago must take action against forced prostitution because as voters and taxpayers, they have contributed to a political system that continually refused to enforce laws against sexual slavery, and because as residents of the city they are potential victims of the professional criminals that are sustained by the sex trade. To some extent, Addams’s efforts to show how industrial problems threatened the wellbeing of her readers were part of a political strategy designed to persuade the middle-classes to support

²⁵ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 112.

Progressive reforms. Such efforts also, however, reflected Addams's conviction that the fates of democratic citizens are intertwined. In a democratic society, the demands that are often associated with personal responsibility – that individuals accept responsibility for their own wellbeing and the consequences of their actions – cannot be fulfilled unless citizens accept some responsibility for public life.

Addams warned that the firm insistence upon personal responsibility that enabled America to flourish as a pioneer society must be supplemented by a greater sense of shared responsibility if America was to flourish as an industrial democracy. Rather than accepting responsibility only for their own actions and wellbeing, democratic citizens must accept some responsibility for the wellbeing of their fellow citizens; and, rather than simply tending their own gardens, democratic citizens must work together to ensure that their public institutions function in a just and effective manner. To some extent, Addams believed that the American fixation upon personal responsibility resulted from a failure to fully appreciate the way in which democratic citizens are inevitably implicated in and affected by the behavior of their political institutions. In keeping with her pragmatist moral intuitions, however, Addams also cast increased shared responsibility as an adaptation to changing circumstances.

Industrialization and urbanization placed greater limits upon the ability of individuals to support themselves through their own virtue and effort. In small agrarian communities it may have been possible for individuals to fulfill their needs primarily through their own efforts, with assistance from family, friends and neighbors. The complex division of labor that occurs within large industrial institutions, however, means that few individuals are capable of fulfilling their own needs or of directly negotiating with those who do. The result is a system in which individuals have little control over their fates. The factory worker has no

interaction with the factory owner who determines his wages and hours and the factory owner's capacity to set wages and hours is limited by larger market forces. Even factory owners who care about the wellbeing of their workers, either from a sense of decency or a desire to prevent industrial conflict, are unlikely to know their workers well enough to understand how to help them. Finally, consumers also suffer from their lack of control over the production process, as they can neither ensure that the products they consume were produced in an ethical manner nor ensure that those products are safe to consume.

Significant threats to human wellbeing, Addams believed, put democracy in danger, as starving, uneducated people who lack the ability to enjoy the rights and privileges of citizenship cannot be expected to respect the rights and privileges of others. Addams believed that there is a need for increased government intervention in economic and social life. There was also, however, a need for a greater sense of responsibility on the part of citizens. As citizens come to rely more upon the government, they must also accept greater responsibility for its behavior, both to avoid being implicated in political injustice and to secure their own wellbeing. Furthermore, in an age the economic and political lives of individuals are increasingly intertwined, citizens must accept greater responsibility for each other's wellbeing.

This critique of personal responsibility did not constitute a full-scale attack on liberal individualism. Addams, like Dewey, had respect for certain aspects of liberal individualism. She valued individual self-expression and moral judgment, frequently citing John Stuart Mill in her account of her dissent from World War I, and making an effort to ensure that the free exchange of ideas was tolerated at Hull House.²⁶ Moreover, she believed that all individuals

²⁶ Unlike other Settlement Houses, Hull House did not seek to convert its neighbors to Christianity. Addams was frequently criticized for allowing people with radical political beliefs to participate in Hull House activities.

deserve some input into their own fates and should accept some responsibility for their own actions. She insisted, however, that the citizens of industrial democratic societies could not accept responsibility for their own wellbeing or the consequences of their actions without accepting some responsibility for the wellbeing of others and the institutions in which they participate.

IV. Civic Housekeeping and Shared Responsibility

Addams's critique of conventional understandings of responsibility was also not limited to the rugged individualism that is often considered to define the American character. Perhaps because she was attuned to women's experiences, Addams recognized that complete individual self-reliance had never been widely practiced; all human beings are dependent upon others at various points during their lives and most people, particularly women, find themselves in the role of caregiver for family, friends and neighbors. Addams's mother, Sarah had been an active member of the Cederville community, housing the books for the town library and raising money for a meetinghouse.²⁷

The political and economic circumstances that make it difficult for workers to secure their own wellbeing and avoid being implicated in harm also make it difficult for mothers to secure the wellbeing of their own children in a manner that does not contribute to economic exploitation. Moreover, the spontaneous civic cooperation that occurred in small farming communities is less easily achieved in larger towns and cities, particularly if they are segregated by economic status and ethnic group. Whereas Sarah Addams had taken care of sick neighbors in her small pioneer town – Sarah actually died several days after collapsing

The Working People's Social Science Club met at Hull House during the 1890's and its members debated the merits of capitalism and socialism.

²⁷ Brown, *Education of Jane Addams*, 19. Sarah Addams died when Jane was three years old from complications during pregnancy.

while helping to deliver a neighbor's baby – the better off members of larger towns and cities are often unaware of the needs of other members of their community.

The same social forces that required a change in American understandings of responsibility, she concluded, mandated a change in gender roles. Moreover, just as individuals can no longer pursue their own wellbeing without taking an active civic role, women cannot fulfill their familial and neighborly responsibility without also playing some part in public life.

As society grows more complicated, it is necessary that woman shall extend her sense of responsibility to many things outside of her own home if she would continue to preserve the home in its entirety....A woman's simplest duty, one would say, is to keep her house clean and wholesome and to feed her children properly. Yet if she lives in a tenement house, as so many of my neighbors do, she cannot fulfill these simple obligations by her own efforts because she is utterly dependent upon the city administration for the conditions which render decent living possible. Her basement will not be dry, her stairways will not be fireproof, her house will not be provided with sufficient windows to give light and air, nor will it be equipped with sanitary plumbing, unless the Public Works Department sends inspectors who constantly insist that these elementary decencies be provided.²⁸

In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams tells the story of a “self-sacrificing” widow who lived near Hull House. The widow refused to participate in any of the efforts to improve living standards in her community and Addams hints that this refusal stemmed from the widow's desire to hold herself apart from her Italian neighbors. Whereas her neighbors lived in poverty and squalor, the widow was able to send two daughters to Eastern colleges and keep her own house spotless. Unfortunately, the widow's efforts could not keep typhoid out of the water supply that she shared with her Italian neighbors and thus she could not prevent one daughter from dying of typhoid fever while at home for her summer holiday. The

²⁸ Addams, “Why Women Should Vote (1915),” Modern History Sourcebook <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1915janeaddams-vote.html>. Jean Elshtain's *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* called my attention to this pamphlet, 167.

widow's tragedy illustrates, Addams believed, the extent to which familial duties, such as protecting and educating children, can no longer be successful without collective effort.²⁹

In holding the widow partly responsible for the quality of her drinking water, Addams implied that accountability for public services such as drinking water and proper housing codes rests with all citizens and not simply with male citizens or those from the middle and upper classes. However, the public role of middle and upper class women was particularly close to Addams's heart. When she spoke about a leisure class that could benefit from public service, she often had middle-class women in mind. Due to newfound affluence and their capacity to buy ready-made goods, an increasing number of women were able to lead lives of almost complete leisure. Addams's step-mother, Anna Halderman Addams was, according to her grand-daughter, never seen to do "anything more useful with her hands than adjust objects in a room, care for her flowers and strum a guitar while she sang the ballads of Moore and Burns."³⁰ Women of Halderman's generation might be content with such lives, Addams speculated, because they had typically obtained a life of leisure after industrious youths and because they had never been encouraged to expect a public role for themselves. However, their college-educated daughters, having been schooled in the value of democracy, feel called to do something useful in the world. Addams attributed the prominence of "hysteria" and "neurasthenia" among college-educated women of her generation to the lack of opportunities for these women to find productive outlets for their capacities. The college educated woman, "looks into the world, longing that some demand be made upon her powers."³¹

²⁹ Elshtain also mentions this anecdote while discussing Addams's argument that women need to enter public life in order to meet their familial duties.

³⁰ Glorio Diliberto, *A Useful Woman*, (New York: Scribner, 1999), 45.

³¹ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 41.

Addams was herself diagnosed with “neurasthenia” after her college graduation and while the exact nature of her disease is unclear, it seems to have been at least partly psychological in nature, almost certainly exacerbated by Addams’s dissatisfaction with medical school and unhappiness about the death of her beloved father. Upon the advice of doctors, Addams spent the next eight years resting, traveling and taking care of her family, none of which, if her autobiography is to be believed, completely banished her depression. Drawing upon this experience, Addams emphasized in *Democracy and Social Ethics* that education, travel, and rest are insufficient to satisfy young women. Simply being useful to her family is also no longer enough, as the college woman longs to participate in the democratic life she has been trained to appreciate. Moreover, in many middle and upper class families there is little use for the young women’s energies, as she is not called upon to be anything other than a source of charm and amusement. “What she [the college graduate] needs is simple, health-giving activity, which, involving the use of all her faculties, shall be a response to all the claims which she so keenly feels.”

Fortunately for the restless college graduate, there is a need for her in public life. Industrialization, while giving many women the leisure for public service, also creates, Addams explained, the need for “civic housekeeping” or public institutions that promote the interests of children and others who cannot take care of themselves. It makes sense that women, who have traditionally fulfilled the role of caretakers, should participate in these institutions both to protect the interests of their families and to satisfy their desire to take part in democratic life:

The very multifariousness and complexity of a city government demands the help of minds accustomed to detail and a variety of work, to a sense of obligation for the health and welfare of young children, and to a responsibility for the cleanliness and comfort of others. Because all of these things have traditionally been in the hands of

women, if they take no part in them now, they are not only missing the education which the natural participation in civic life would bring to them, but they are losing what they have always had.”³²

V. Shared Responsibility and Social Ethics

Addams considered a broad range of activities to be consistent with the kind of social cooperation that democracy requires. Collective efforts to reform political institutions, such as attending public meetings, organizing petitions and protests, and educating other voters, were important forms of democratic cooperation. She emphasized that political life cannot be completely separated from economic and social life, particularly in democratic societies. Universal manhood suffrage means that the quality of political institutions depends not simply upon the temperament and character of elites, but upon the temperament and character of the whole society. If the majority of voters are allowed to grow up in poverty and ignorance, they are unlikely to exercise good judgment in public life. Ensuring that political institutions function effectively may require citizens to engage in activities such as education and childcare that are not traditionally associated with public life.³³ Addams viewed her life at Hull House as contributing to the flourishing of American democracy, not simply because Hull House residents were involved in traditional political activities such as opposing a corrupt alderman’s re-election and holding public offices, such as garbage inspector, but because the residents of Hull House worked with their neighbors to obtain the resources that would allow them to contribute to public life.

To twenty-first century readers, Addams’s emphasis upon shared responsibility and civic cooperation may not seem particularly radical. Calls for increased political and civic

³² *Newer Ideals of Peace*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 102.

³³ “In a democratic country nothing can be permanently achieved save through the masses of the people; it will be impossible to establish a higher political life than the people themselves crave.” From “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” in *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, ed. Christopher Lasch (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, INC, 1965), 32.

engagement are common in American political theory and public life, and typically such calls are accompanied by nostalgia for “golden ages” of civic cooperation, when Americans lived in smaller communities, shared certain moral commitments and were more likely to be raised within nuclear families. For Addams, however, democratic cooperation was not about recreating older forms of human community or preserving traditional moral values. Democratic cooperation, she believed, required a radical change in American norms and practices.

In the introduction to *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams lamented that Americans continue to adhere to an “individual morality,” as opposed to the “social morality” that the industrial-democratic age demands.³⁴ A precise definition of “individual morality” is not provided. The behaviors that Addams criticized in subsequent chapters of the book indicate that Addams associated “individual morality” with moral actors who prioritize the dictates of their own consciences and who are fixated upon individual achievements. Addams seems to have regarded Thomas Carlyle as the prophet of individual morality.³⁵ However, her target in *Democracy and Social Ethics* was not simply heroic individuals who pursue their own moral vision, but also moral actors who are overly reliant upon principles that are rooted in their own communal experiences and upbringing.

One problem with “individual morality,” Addams explained, is that it can result in controlling and authoritarian behavior, even in individuals who are initially well intentioned. George Pullman is Addams’s favorite example of this. Pullman was a successful industrialist

³⁴ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 6.

³⁵ In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams discusses reading *Heroes and Hero Worship* after having attended a small community gathering in her hometown and suddenly discovering that “its sonorous sentences and exaltation of the man ‘who can’ suddenly ceased to be convincing,” 36. In *Bread and Peace in Time of War* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1945), she writes that “all of the study of modern social science is but a revelation of the fallacy of such a point of view, a discrediting of the Carlyle contention that the people must be led into the ways of righteousness by the experience, acumen and virtues of the great man,” 65.

and respected philanthropist, who built a company town that was intended to provide for the physical and spiritual well-being of his workers. In addition to providing clean and safe housing, the company town provided its citizens with a moral education; homes were inspected to ensure that they were clean and only speakers deemed constructive by the company were permitted. Pullman's experiment produced the most violent industrial incident in American history, when Pullman's workers went on strike because the company lowered wages in response to the economic crisis of 1893, but did not reduce rents or utility rates.

The relationship between Pullman and his workers was not one of mutual dependence; instead, Pullman sought to make his workers dependent upon him. In an essay on the Pullman Strike, Addams compared Pullman to King Lear. Lear and Pullman both pride themselves for having gone beyond the call of duty in providing for the needs of others and they expect their largess to be rewarded by gratitude. Pullman and Lear may be concerned about others, but they also take pleasure in their capacity to shape the world according to their own designs. Because they are convinced that they know what is good for others, they use their beneficence to control the recipients of their largess, failing to realize that many people dislike being helped in this way. Just as Cordelia resented the fact that Lear's gift of land was intended to solicit a pledge of affection, Pullman's workers resented the fact that Pullman used his philanthropy to ensure that they would behave in ways he deemed acceptable. This kind of moral heroism is, Addams believed, self-aggrandizing and infused with a desire for power and control. It is also likely to be ineffective in democratic societies. Pullman's workers are particularly resentful because as citizens of a democratic society, they expect to have some input into their own futures. Lear and Pullman represent an

older, feudal form of morality that may have always been problematic, but which is especially unsuited to a democratic age.

The second problem with “individual morality,” according to Addams, is that it results from a misunderstanding about the nature of political and moral knowledge. In assuming that he understands the needs of his workers, Pullman assumes that these needs can be recognized in advance, either because they can be derived from a generalizable theory or because Pullman himself possess some kind of special moral insight. It is, however, impossible to know what people need without consulting them, as needs vary from individual to individual, and can change with different circumstances.

This is the problem faced by the “dainty clad charity visitor” described at the beginning of *Democracy and Social Ethics*. The charity visitor is a “young college educated women, well bred and open minded,” and she visits a poor family with the intention of instilling in them the virtues, such as self-reliance, thrift, hardwork and temperance, that she has been taught are the key to economic and moral health.³⁶ Because she is more perceptive than Pullman, the charity worker is soon led to question her mission. Not only does she wonder whether she is really equipped to teach thrift when she has never wanted for money, but she soon realizes that her ideals are not easily applied in practice.

Self-reliance can be destructive, she learns, when it is pursued at the expense of other goods, such as fraternity, health, and leisure. In encouraging her family to save money, the charity worker may be preventing them from other worthy endeavors, such as providing wholesome entertainment to their children or helping others who are even worse off. A woman who misses a job interview that has been scheduled by the charity worker to care for a sick neighbor may not be practicing self-reliance, but it seems unwise to discourage

³⁶ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 16.

admirable behavior that makes industrial neighborhoods a better place for all residents.³⁷

Furthermore, for many families, economic self-reliance requires pulling children out of school and putting them to work. Most of these children will end up in low skilled and physically demanding jobs, and will find that their earnings diminish greatly after early-adulthood. Early labor also encourages child abuse, as parents conclude that harsh treatment is necessary to ensure that children will turn over their wages at the end of the week.³⁸

The charity worker, who one suspects is modeled after the young Addams, is perhaps misguided to emphasize sobriety, frugality and handwork completely at the expense of other virtues, such as generosity. The problem is not just with the charity workers' principles, but also with her conviction that she can help the poor by instilling in them the virtues she was taught in her youth. The charity worker fails to realize that it is unhelpful to insist upon a rigid application of principles without examining whether those principles bring about the desired result in real-life situations and without considering whether those principles are suited to particular contexts.

Addams's critique of the charity worker reflects pragmatist ideas about the experimental and plural nature of ethics. She criticized the charity worker for rigidly applying a set of theories, as opposed to developing and modifying her theories through her experience in the industrial neighborhood. Furthermore, the charity worker failed to consider that her principles may not be intuitive to those who have had different life experiences. More so than Dewey and James, Addams was impressed by the extent to which class and ethnic differences shape how individuals interpret their experiences.³⁹ Even the experience of

³⁷ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 14.

³⁸ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 18; 21-5.

³⁹ Addams understood, Charlotte Haddock Seigfried explains, that "experiences do not just happen but are had by someone in particular." "Principled Compromises," in *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, 50.

getting dressed in shaped by social position. The charity visitor, who has always felt secure in her social status can afford to dress shabbily without having her status or character judged by her friends. Having been taught to value simplicity, she may even dismiss the concern for appearances displayed by working class women as vulgar. However, working class women move in circles where their status is judged largely by their clothing and in which shabbiness can lead to social exclusion; thus the working class woman's desire for nice clothing may be less frivolous than it first appears to the charity worker.⁴⁰ The "safest platitude may be challenged," the charity visitor discovers, by those who have had different experiences.⁴¹ The charity visitor has also been taught to view the saloon as a source of moral depravity, whereas the head of the household whom she visits regards the saloon as one of the few places where he is treated kindly, and perceives the saloon keeper as more consistent and less judgmental with his assistance than the charity visitor.⁴²

In fact, the charity visitor often strikes the family as anything but charitable. The family is unable to comprehend the visitor's intentions, since her purported motives do not seem to conform to her actions. The poor family would give extra food or clothing to a neighbor in need without asking questions to determine whether the assistance was deserved. They do not understand why somebody who clearly has money to spare and who claims to have charitable motives is cautious about bestowing gifts to those in need.⁴³ It is difficult for the charity worker to exert so much effort helping others, whom she suspects are going to complain about her when she has left. The "social ethics" that Addams advocated as a

⁴⁰ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 20-1.

⁴¹ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 18.

⁴² *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 19.

⁴³ "It is not the aid that they are accustomed to receiving from their neighbors and they do not understand why the impulse which drives people to be 'good to the poor' should be so severely supervised." *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 15.

replacement for “individual morality” was developed in response to the perplexities faced by Pullman and the charity worker. This new approach to ethics would, she hoped, enable citizens to respond to new experiences with an open mind and work with those who have had different experiences.

Social ethics entailed learning how to develop one’s principles experimentally and to modify one’s principles if they are unsuited to the circumstances. “It is not so much by the teaching of moral theorems that virtue is to be promoted as by the direct expressions of social sentiments and by the cultivation of practical habits.”⁴⁴ Of course, if we are at all perceptive, it is likely that our convictions are not completely at odds with our own experiences. The charity worker’s faith in self-reliance was shaped by the experience of her own family, which had prospered through the initiative of its members. However, she mistakenly derived universal principles from relatively limited experiences, a mistake that is likely to become a greater threat to social cooperation as American society becomes more diverse. In order to avoid this mistake, citizens must put themselves in situations where those convictions will be challenged.

We are under a moral obligation in choosing our experiences, since the result of those experiences will determine our understanding of life...if we grow contemptuous of our fellows, and consciously limit our intercourse to certain kinds of people whom we have previously decided to respect, we not only tremendously circumscribe our range of life, but limit the scope of our ethics.⁴⁵

There is little point in seeking out new experiences and befriending people outside one’s normal social network, if one is unwilling to allow one’s convictions to be challenged. Thus, social ethics is not simply about pursuing diverse experiences, but about learning to interpret new experiences in a particular manner. Rather than assuming that new experiences will

⁴⁴ *Newer Ideals of Peace*, 8.

⁴⁵ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 8.

confirm prior assumptions, citizens must be willing to allow their beliefs to be challenged. This requires that citizens cultivate a certain degree of humility toward their own beliefs and learn how to “sympathetically interpret the motives and ideals of those who have acquired rules of conduct in experiences widely different” from their own.⁴⁶

Addams’s response to the rumor that Hull House was keeping a Devil Baby is one example of what sympathetic interpretation might look like in practice. Though annoyed by the constant inquiries and stream of would-be-spectators, Addams confessed to being intrigued by the elderly women who seemed so desperate to believe in the existence of the Devil Baby. She attributed the women’s fascination with the Devil Baby to a complex set of motivations. Proof of the supernatural would enable many of these women to assert their relevance to younger generations. For women “accustomed to sit at home and to hear the younger members of the family speak of affairs quite outside their own experiences, sometimes in a language they do not understand, and at best in quick glancing phrases which they cannot follow,” the story of the Devil Baby was empowering because it “put into their hands the sort of material with which they were accustomed to deal.”⁴⁷ In addition to vindicating their belief in the supernatural, the Devil Baby vindicated their moral intuitions. In most accounts, the Devil Baby is born to an innocent woman as the result of a crime committed by her husband and proceeds to terrorize the guilty man; in some versions of the story, an atheist husband tears up a holy picture, in others a husband declares that he would rather have a devil than a seventh daughter. That the husband would receive cosmic punishment for violating traditional moral norms confirms the truth of the women’s moral intuitions, while reassuring them that men who commit crimes against women and children

⁴⁶ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 98.

⁴⁷ Addams, *The Long Road of Women’s Memory* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002), 10.

will receive divine judgment. Addams notes that many of the women who were particularly insistent upon seeing the Devil Baby were themselves the victims of abusive and negligent fathers, husbands and children.

This discussion of the Devil Baby suggests that sympathetic interpretation does not require endorsing other's beliefs or even accepting their self-understanding of their beliefs, as it is unlikely that the women would have explained their fascination with the supernatural in the same manner that Addams does. What sympathetic interpretation means, however, is attempting to understand why others come to the conclusions that they do and not immediately assuming that people who reach conclusions that are different from our own are foolish or ill-intentioned. Often, conclusions that seem unproductive or silly in one context may appear reasonable in others; for many of the elderly women in Addams's neighborhood, warnings about divine punishment was one of the most effective means of persuading children and husbands to fulfill their familial obligations. Moreover, there may be something of political value in ideas that we find to be on the whole silly and misguided. There are political and moral lessons to be learned, Addams believed, from the women who came to Hull House in search of a Devil Baby. Conversations with these women revealed that the elderly want to be listened to by younger generations and that our moral theories give us relatively few tools to address the specific needs of the elderly. Many of her readers might also conclude that these conversations suggest the need for greater efforts to prevent domestic abuse, though Addams herself does not draw this conclusion.

Sympathetic understanding is possible, Addams believed, because even though citizens have dissimilar life experiences and different moral convictions, they share certain instincts and needs. Heavily influenced by her reading of Darwin, Addams believed that

shared instincts and needs result from evolutionary processes. Human beings, like all animals, require food, clothing and shelter and instinctively avoid pain. However, the fact that human beings have evolved to live in highly complex societies means that they have developed a particular set of instincts and needs. As creatures who have functioned within communities for thousands of years, humans have highly developed social passions; they naturally dread loneliness, and long, not only for companionship, but to feel as though they are contributing to something greater than themselves. Hence, the elderly women's desire to demonstrate their relevance to future generations. Likewise, human children have a desire for amusement, and excitement because playing games and seeking new experiences enables children to learn about the complicated civilization into which they have been born.⁴⁸ Often, she explains, we would do well to follow our instincts; parents who obey their initial impulse to comfort children who are afraid of the dark show greater sensitivity to the needs of children than those who ignore this impulse because they think that children will learn self-respect if they learn to face their fears.⁴⁹

Addams did not recognize a strict separation between instincts and reason, as she assumed that humans could, to some extent, rationally reflect upon their instincts. That children who do not receive comfort and reassurance from their parents are at greater risk for anxiety disorders was, Addams believed, confirmed by modern science. Thus, the instinct to comfort crying children is clearly a useful one. Not all instincts are of enduring value; for example, the instinct to prefer members of one's own family or clan is less useful now that human beings have ceased to live in tribal communities. Fortunately, according to Addams, human instincts and needs are malleable, in that humans can learn to disobey or give less

⁴⁸ Merle Curti has an excellent discussion of the influence of Darwinism on Addams's view of human nature in "Jane Addams on Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 2 (1961): 240-53.

⁴⁹ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 32.

weight to instincts that have ceased to be useful. Instincts are also malleable in that they can be expressed in different ways. This means that recognizing that human beings share certain instincts and needs does not eliminate disagreement about how to meet particular needs or express particular instincts. For example, while Addams agreed with her neighbors that saloons fulfilled important needs for companionship, excitement and entertainment, she believed that there were better ways to secure these things. She hoped, however, that a recognition of shared needs and instincts would make it easier for citizens to empathize with people who do not share their opinions. One can disapprove of saloons, without assuming that the people who frequent them do so for purely sinful or frivolous reasons. Acknowledging that people who take positions that we find silly or misguided are not utterly depraved or completely irrational facilitates collective actions, as it is easier to work with people whom we respect.

In some cases, however, empathy can prevent civic solidarity, when efforts to understand other people's choices or opinions violate their own self-understandings. President Obama's explanation that rural voters "cling to their guns and religion" because they have been let down by government was an attempt at empathy that ended up offending the voters with whom he sought to empathize. Not only did this statement dismiss values that are important to many voters, but it also implied that such voters are too foolish to even recognize their own needs.

To some extent this problem is unavoidable, as it is often impossible to understand people in their own terms; Addams could not have understood a woman who came to visit the Devil Baby as having inherited "second sight." The understanding of human nature that animates Addams's political thought, however, generally discouraged overly-simplistic and

condescending assessments of other's behaviors. Addams recognized that there are many paths to human flourishing, and she believed that in most cases human flourishing requires a variety of different goods, including fellowship, intellectual stimulation, beauty and a sense of purpose. For both these reasons, she objected to the argument that religious concerns prevent people from recognizing their "real" interests. Most people want their lives to have a purpose that transcends their particular physical being, she argued, and thus religion fills a very real need for many people. In a brief reflection on the Scopes trial, she explained that the concerns of the opponents of evolution are not completely irrational, as evolution threatens convictions that were central to their way of life. The "so-called narrowminded men" of Tennessee, she argued, deserved a public hearing, particularly since they are not necessarily any narrower minded than their critics, who assume that human beings are driven only by material concerns.⁵⁰

While rejecting the idea that material needs are the only true human needs, Addams also had little sympathy for those who dismiss desires that are neither spiritual nor intellectual. For somebody like Thoreau, who prioritized individual projects of self discovery and expression, concern for physical objects is a foolish distraction. In the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, he explains that most furniture is a burden, as it is neither necessary for survival or self-exploration. Addams, however, sympathizes with an elderly woman who clings to a battered chest of drawers while officials try to drag her to the County Infirmary. To the old woman, the chest of drawers is a memento of her productive years. Those who dismiss her attachment to the chest as frivolous or assume that the time she spent making her home attractive to herself and others was wasted have, in Addams's opinion, a very narrow understanding of what human fulfillment entails. This is not to say that Addams regarded all

⁵⁰ *Second Twenty Years at Hull House*, 382.

desires as legitimate; the desire to dominate others, for example, is not one that deserves affirmation. She nevertheless suggests that social critics who conclude that most of their fellow citizens lead lives that are purposeless, foolish or corrupt might come to a different conclusion if they learned to empathize with others.

As her disagreement with her neighbors about the value of saloons suggests, Addams did not assume that practicing humility and empathy will erase all differences of opinion. Even if we make an effort to empathize with those who have different experiences and backgrounds, it is unlikely that we will ever reach complete agreement with them. We must, she insisted, learn to cooperate with those who disagree with us.⁵¹ The political and social problems of modern industrial societies must be tackled collectively, as they are too big to be resolved by individuals. Without cooperation, burnout is almost inevitable. The “care-worn and overworked philanthropist” is a familiar phenomenon because reformers tax their “individual will beyond the normal limits,” and in doing so lose their “clue to the situation among a bewildering number of cases.”⁵²

Furthermore, those who are unable to work with others are likely to be ineffective for the same reasons that Pullman and the charity worker are ineffective. Helping people is difficult if they do not consent to your help. Likewise, sustainable solutions to collective problems require broad public support. “Public parks and improvements, intended for the common use, are after all only safe in the hands of the public itself.”⁵³ Because Pullman developed his model town without the consent and input of its residents, the residents lacked

⁵¹ Addams described herself as by “nature” inclined toward compromise and opposed to fanaticism. Her biographers tend to agree with this assessment, noting that as a child she served as peacemaker between her father and stepmother and that as a teen-ager she cultivated diplomacy to prevent her own religious doubts from causing conflict with her friends and teachers at Rockford Seminary.

⁵² *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 78-9.

⁵³ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 69.

any affection for Pullman's experiment and there was little protest when the court declared the model town "incompatible with American ideals" after his death.⁵⁴ Moreover, when the charity worker and Pullman fail in their effort to help others, they fail to secure their own wellbeing as well, as their fates are inevitably intertwined with that of their fellow citizens.

It is worth noting that Addams advocated cooperation for many of the same reasons that Thoreau avoided participation in reform movements. Like Thoreau, Addams acknowledged that political and economic institutions are resistant to reform because the individuals who participate in those institutions cannot be convinced to change their behavior. She also shared Thoreau's concern that a lifetime dedicated to unachievable goals often leaves reformers unfulfilled. However, in advocating cooperation as a solution to these problems, Addams made concessions that Thoreau finds unacceptable. She was willing to let go of the idea that individuals are the primary agents of social and political change. "We must demand that the individual shall be willing to lose the sense of personal achievement, and shall be content to realize his activity only in connection with the activity of many."⁵⁵ Addams was also more willing than Thoreau to accept outcomes that fell short of her aspirations.

For Addams, compromise is not simply the best means of achieving one's objectives; it has genuine ethical dimensions. Compromise helps individuals avoid the dogmatic attachment to one's personal moral convictions that she finds so problematic. In advocating "social ethics," Addams linked political and philosophic pragmatism. Recognizing that knowledge is based in experience, Addams explained, means acknowledging that individual

⁵⁴ Addams shared Dewey's conviction that "democratic ends demand democratic methods for their realization." See *John Dewey The Political Writings*, Eds Debra Moris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 205.

⁵⁵ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 120.

knowledge is inherently limited, since individuals have a limited experience of the whole. Because individual knowledge is limited, it is better to seek gradual change and do so in a consensual manner that incorporates the experiences of multiple individuals.

Compromise even has ethical dimensions when we cannot see the merit in others' opinions. In compromising, citizens express their respect for other people and the democratic process, cultivating relationships of mutuality, as opposed to relationships of domination and subordination. Lincoln's willingness to compromise over slavery, Addams argued, signified his faith in the democratic process and confidence that his fellow citizens would eventually abolish slavery without being compelled to do so.⁵⁶ Rather than imposing his views on others, Lincoln sought to preserve a system in which the people's views could be heard; "he was content merely to dig the channels through which the moral life of his countrymen might flow."⁵⁷

VI. Tolstoy's Challenge

Addams's faith that Americans would eventually have abolished slavery without war suggests an example of her evolutionary optimism. She was confident that humanity is evolving toward higher moral standards, and that the substitution of "social ethics" for "individual morality" constitutes a significant advance in human relations. Particularly in her pre-World War I writings, she even goes so far as to suggest that this advance is irreversible and inevitable; that fellowship and cooperation will eventually replace conflict and competition as the mode of human interaction valued by society. The faith that humanity was

⁵⁶ Louis Menand explains in *The Metaphysical Club* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) that the Civil War was an importance experience for many American pragmatists, particularly William James and Oliver Wendell Holmes, who concluded that the war demonstrated the gruesome costs of political inflexibility.

⁵⁷ Addams initially uses this quote to describe Lincoln in *Twenty Years at Hull House* (39), attributing it to philosopher Edward Caird. She uses a similar quote in *Peace and Bread in Time of War*, saying of Woodrow Wilson that he failed to "offer himself as a willing instrument to carry out the people's desires. He certainly did not dig the channels through which their purposes might flow" (65).

gradually progressing, however, was combined with a belief that perfection is unachievable. The fight against injustice, oppression, intolerance and poverty never ends, though it may shift to new arenas as particular problems are recognized and remedied. Moreover, in an imperfect world, the means by which genuine goods are achieved are inevitably imperfect. Cooperation is desirable, but flawed, as it requires political actors to settle for the “feasible right,” and they will often be rewarded with the “sickening sense of having compromised” with their “best convictions.”

Addams was often accused of failing to live up to her convictions, most famously by Leo Tolstoy. Addams made an effort to visit Tolstoy during a European vacation because she had been inspired by a number of his ideas, including his rejection of violence and his conviction that all human beings have an obligation to engage in activities that fulfill basic human needs. Furthermore, after her first seven years at Hull House, she sympathized with Tolstoy’s inability to provide relief to the poor in Moscow that he describes at length in *What Then Must We Do*. Tolstoy’s dilemma appears similar to that of Addams’s charity worker. Having lived a pampered life, he finds it difficult to help people with whom he is unable to relate, as he does not know the people well enough to determine who needs charity. Nor is it even clear that the poor can benefit from his assistance; Tolstoy had planned to give money to the poor, but soon discovers that few of the people he meets can benefit from money alone. He also feels shame that he would be perceived as benevolent for giving away money that he has not earned through his own work.⁵⁸

A Russian aristocrat who has not been raised in a democratic society and is accustomed to being waited upon by dozens of servants is likely to find an even greater

⁵⁸ I was made aware of the similarities between Addams’s semi-biographical account of the bewildered charity visitor and Tolstoy’s account of his own attempt at charity by reading Katherine Joslin’s *Jane Addams, A Writer’s Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 63.

distance between himself and the urban poor than the daughter of a prosperous mid-Western businessmen. Though offering similar accounts of the difficulties with helping others, Tolstoy and Addams have different impressions of the urban classes. In *What Then Must We Do*, the urban classes are described as either self-sufficient and not in need of help, or so broken by poverty, vice and disease that they are beyond assistance. Addams, on the other hand, believed that the relatively self-sufficient members of the working classes can benefit from the education and entertainment that the settlement offers, and she concluded that very few people are so broken that they cannot be helped in some way. After five years of caring for an elderly opium and alcohol addict, Addams admitted that she is still “far from a model old woman,” but drinks significantly less and is able to make quilts that she “sells and gives away with the greatest delight.”⁵⁹ Perhaps because of these differences, Tolstoy’s solution to the difficulties of philanthropy is different from Addams’s. Whereas Addams advocated living among and cooperating with the urban poor, Tolstoy decided to leave the city and emulate the lifestyle of the Russian peasant, concluding that “my first and unquestionable business was to procure my own food, clothing, heating, and dwelling, and in doing this to serve others, because since the beginning of the world this has been the first and surest obligation of any man.”⁶⁰

Addams seems to have journeyed to Russia with the intention of comparing her experiences with Tolstoy’s, to learn whether his solution resolved the difficulties of philanthropy better than hers. She may have taken Tolstoy’s criticism of those who separate theory and practice to indicate that he shared her desire to learn from other’s experiences.⁶¹ Rather than learning from Addams, however, Tolstoy was interested in promoting his own

⁵⁹ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 30.

⁶⁰ Tolstoy, *What Then Must We Do*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Hartland: Green Books, 1991), 200.

⁶¹ Joslin, *A Writer’s Life*, 63.

teachings. In her autobiography, she recalled that he pulled on one of her sleeves and informed her “there was enough stuff on one arm to make a frock for a small girl,” and asked me directly if I did not find “such a dress” a “barrier to the people.”⁶² For Tolstoy, Addams’s clothing does not simply set her apart from those she is trying to help, it suggested that she is implicated in the social processes that generate deprivation, a point he drives home when he asks her how she manages to feed and shelter herself in the city. When told that her income comes from rent payments on land that she has inherited from her father, he was unimpressed. “So you are an absentee landlord?” he replied. “Do you think you will help the people more by adding yourself to the crowded city than you would by tilling your own soil?”⁶³

This encounter suggests that Tolstoy had only a vague understanding of industrial America. The working people of Chicago typically use at least as much material in their clothing as Addams did. “Nothing would more effectively separate me from ‘the people,’ ” Addams responded, “than a cotton blouse following the simple lines of the human form.” Moreover, because there are so many different ethnic groups in Chicago, it is difficult to identify a single way of life that corresponds with that of “the people.” If she had wished to emulate Tolstoy in dressing like a peasant, “it would have been hard to choose which peasant among the thirty-six nationalities we had present in our ward.”⁶⁴ Even Tolstoy’s accusation that she is an “absentee landlord” suggests that he is unable to distinguish between the Russian aristocracy and upper-middle class America.

However, the disagreement between Tolstoy and Addams cannot simply be attributed to the Russian aristocrat’s lack of familiarity with industrial Chicago. The difference runs

⁶² *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 268.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

deeper as Tolstoy and Addams are working from different moral frameworks; indeed, they prioritized different kinds of responsibility. Like Thoreau, Tolstoy sought to avoid culpability for harm.⁶⁵ Addams, on the other hand, recognized a duty to contribute to the public welfare, even if she gets her hands dirty in the process.⁶⁶

Tolstoy insisted that it is impossible to help humanity as long as one remains implicated in the processes that contribute to human deprivation; “before doing good I must myself stand aside from evil, in conditions where one may cease to do evil.”⁶⁷ Modern political and economic institutions are too corrupt to permit genuine reform, as the entire system is premised upon the morally bankrupt idea that the majority of men must engage in physical labor so that a privileged few can lead lives of pleasure and intellectual refinement.⁶⁸ The only way to lead an ethical life, Tolstoy concluded, is to withdraw from the system and lead a life that is in keeping with the natural law. In ceasing to be part of the problem, Tolstoy argues, individuals become part of the solution. One individual dissenter will not transform economic relations anymore than one laborer can haul a barge upstream; however, if “one or two men will haul, and seeing them a third, and so the best people will

⁶⁵ Despite a number of similarities and the fact that Tolstoy cites Thoreau approvingly in several essays, Clarence Manning warns against too easily assimilating the two writers. For Tolstoy, the purpose of withdrawing from political society is to do Christ’s work, whereas Thoreau is more interested in the pursuit of individual genius and communion with nature. See “Thoreau and Tolstoy,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1943): 234-243.

⁶⁶ In some ways, this resembles the disagreement between moderates and moralists that Ruth Grant identifies in *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Ethics of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). With his emphasis upon preserving the purity of his principles, Tolstoy exemplifies Grant’s moralist. Addams’s understanding of political compromise differs somewhat from Grant’s moderate. Grant’s moderate is willing to compromise her principles because she recognizes that this is sometimes required to achieve a just outcome. The need to achieve a just outcome is only one of several reasons why Addams advocates compromise; Addams also believes that moral agents benefit from listening to other’s opinions and that democratic norms require citizens to demonstrate respect for each other.

⁶⁷ *What Then Must We Do*, 60.

⁶⁸ Though many of his readers, including Addams, might distinguish between the political economic and political institutions of czarist Russia and the more democratic and economically developed institutions of America, Tolstoy does not recognize any significant moral distinctions between the two systems.

join up until the matter moves and goes along as of itself.”⁶⁹ Whom Tolstoy means by the “best people” is not exactly clear, though I suspect he does not mean the majority of the urban poor whom he concluded were beyond assistance, similar to the way Thoreau concluded that the Irish are beyond assistance. The similarities between Thoreau and Tolstoy are striking here, in that both assume that political and social reform begins with individual reform. Reform is only possible, they argue, if enough individuals experience moral conversions that enable them to radically alter their way of life and cease contributing to the reproduction of corrupt institutions. Both suggest that there are serious limits in our ability to convince or compel others to make such changes; the best we can do is to set a good example and hope that some will follow.

Addams, in contrast, rejected the notion that one can stand aside from evil, as most people and actions contain some mixture of good and evil. Participating in urban economic and political institutions is likely to implicate individuals in harm, but leaving those institutions to the helpless and unscrupulous also makes individuals responsible for harm. Though leaving the city and undertaking a project of personal moral reform brought serenity to Tolstoy and lent him an air of nobility, Addams concluded that the cost of serenity and nobility is too high. Pursuing individual perfection may even be selfish if it distracts us from helping others. In an anecdote that is likely more illustrative than factual, she explained that after her visit to Tolstoy, she had initially resolved to limit her dependence upon the service of others by baking her own bread in the Hull House kitchen every morning. Upon her return to Chicago, however, this resolution seemed “utterly preposterous.” “The half dozen people invariably waiting to see me after breakfast, the piles of letters to be opened and answered,

⁶⁹ *What Then*, 222.

the demand of actual and pressing human wants, - were these all to be pushed aside and asked to wait while I saved my soul by two hours' work at baking bread?"⁷⁰

Addams did not share Tolstoy's entirely bleak view of modern life. At the same time, she did not dispute Tolstoy's point that there is something potentially corrupting about not providing for one's own needs. As noted earlier, she was sympathetic to Tolstoy's belief in the value of productive labor, arguing that human beings have a natural desire to contribute to the struggle for existence and that those who do not fully participate in this struggle may not ever be capable of perfect solidarity with those who labor. Given her knowledge of the conditions in industrial factories, it is likely that she also had reservations about utilizing goods that were the product of human suffering. What Addams does dispute is the idea that one can achieve a state of complete innocence. She also rejects Tolstoy's assumption that an ethical life is simply a matter of recognizing the path to righteousness and continuing to haul oneself along that path. Those who expect the right course of action to "dazzle us by its radiant shining" are often blind to the moral hazards in their own choices, concluding falsely that they are on the side of truth and those who disagree are evil. Finally, she rejected his claim that elites can ever truly share the experiences of "the people." The experiences of "the people" are so diverse that it would be impossible to choose whom to emulate. Moreover, it is impossible to experience the world as others do. A wealthy woman can never experience the world in the way that the working girl does. Even if she gives away all her possessions, she still possesses the security that her family will help in a crisis and her perception of the world remains filtered through her education. Instead of trying to understand others by attempting to superficially recreate their experiences, Addams preferred to understand people by listening to and working with them.

⁷⁰ *Twenty Years*, 277.

Though she had been attracted to Tolstoy's maxim that theory cannot be separated from practice, Addams discovered that Tolstoy interpreted this maxim to mean that individuals have a moral obligation to put truth into practice. Tolstoy recognized the problems that confront Pullman and the charity worker – that it is difficult to recognize what others need and even harder to compel them to change unproductive behavior – but his solution is premised upon the same assumptions that Addams criticized in Pullman and the charity worker. He believed that an honest examination of the root causes of social and political problems, a careful reading of the Gospels and a willingness to be inspired by the simple goodness of the Russian peasant reveal the steps that are necessary to lead an ethical life. Having found the proper path, Tolstoy believes that he is now in a position to instruct others. Tolstoy's philosophy, Addams concluded, is "more logical than life warrants." We do not live in a world in which a rigid application of principles, even the ones that Tolstoy derives from the Gospels, can ensure an ethical outcome. This faith in his own moral code also makes it difficult for Tolstoy to learn from those who have different experiences in the manner that Addams deems necessary for collective action. "It seemed to me that he made too great a distinction between the use of physical force and that moral energy which can override another's differences and scruples with equal ruthlessness."⁷¹

This ruthlessness is not uncommon, Addams believed, among those who believe that morality entails remaining true to the dictates of their conscience. Excessive confidence in one's convictions often breeds self-righteousness. Moreover, the art of persuasion often appears morally suspect to the champions of the individual conscience, as they worry that the desire to secure other people's good opinion often discourages individuals from consulting their own moral sensibilities. Champions of the individual conscience may be particularly

⁷¹ Ibid., 273.

concerned about persuasion in democratic societies, where it is necessary to persuade the majority of men, most of whom fall short of moral excellence. Many reformers fall “victim to that curious feeling so often possessed by the good man, that the righteous do not need to be agreeable, that their goodness alone is sufficient, and that they can leave the arts and wiles of securing popular favor to the self-seeking.”⁷²

When explaining why public officials in Chicago’s nineteenth ward failed to provide even basic public services, such as garbage collection, Addams blamed both self-righteous reformers and self-interested politicians. Recognizing that the selling of votes is a perversion of democracy and that the Alderman who benefits from this practice is a corrupt official who uses public services for his own personal profit, the reformers traveled to the nineteenth ward to lecture their members on the value of democracy. Finding that the residents are not interested in their ideals, the reformers conclude that the people cannot be trusted with the vote. In doing so, however, reformers failed to make any meaningful improvements and they miss the purpose of democracy.

If the reformers had been less convinced of their own righteousness, they might have considered that the people’s support for the Alderman stems at least partly from democratic sentiments. The voters, Addams explains, have affection for the Alderman because they perceive him as generous. Unlike most charity organizations, the Alderman helps his constituents without judgment and without lengthy investigation as to whether they deserve help. He bails their children out of jail, ensures that the policemen will look the other way if a saloon closes late and does not condemn men for ordinary vices, such as wanting more than their fair share of free Christmas turkeys. Unlike the reformer, the Alderman makes an effort to recognize and meet the needs of the poor and working classes; rather than lecturing them

⁷² *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 118.

about the virtues of democracy, he spares his supporters the indignity of a publicly financed funeral.

Addams believed that the Alderman was a threat to the public good, but she also recognized a democratic quality in the Alderman, in that he treated his constituents like equals. Political reformers could benefit from understanding that the passions to which the Alderman appeals are not necessarily corrupt ones. It would be easier for the reformers to persuade the residents of the ninth ward to stop selling their votes, if instead of talking about the sanctity of democracy, they emphasized that a more efficient government could better fulfill their needs; not only could a more efficient government provide turkeys at Christmas, it could build playgrounds for children and ensure reliable garbage collection. The reformers would also be more persuasive if they learned to judge less harshly those who did not live up to their own high moral standards. Many of the sins the reformers see in others are relatively harmless. Other sins, such as gambling, may be harmful, but are not always committed willingly.

While the above critique was aimed at American political reformers, one suspects that Addams would also have applied it to Tolstoy, whose unwillingness to compromise his principles or his expectations of others made it difficult for him to understand or work with others. Perhaps to demonstrate her lack of moral rigidity, Addams ended her discussion of Tolstoy with an account of her visit to a colony in Arkansas that sought to live a life that they took to be completely in keeping with Christian teachings. The members of the colony lived so miserably that the “only ones willing to face it were those sustained by a conviction of its righteousness.” Even the neighborhood paupers preferred to live in the poorhouse than receive the meager food that the colonists grew and ate. There is something admirable,

Addams admitted, in this willingness to sacrifice ordinary comforts in order to live according to higher principles. “It seemed by a mere incident that this group should have lost sight of the facts of life in their earnest endeavor to put to the test the things of the spirit.”⁷³ Yet, while the willingness to live by one’s convictions is admirable, such behavior has tremendous costs. For Addams, the cost of moral rigidity is not simply ineffectiveness, but a failure to participate in and appreciate democratic life.

VII. Limits to Cooperation

Her warnings about the dangers of moral rigidity do not mean that Addams advocated compromise in all situations. Nor does it mean that she was always willing to compromise in her own life. According to biographer Louise Knight, Addams rarely refused to work with people she found distasteful, but she did occasionally decline to participate in collective endeavors when she found the outcome distasteful. For example, she resigned from a relief committee during the 1893 economic crisis because the committee recommended paying less than a minimum wage to street cleaners, which Addams feared would drive down wages throughout the city. On the other hand, Addams participated in the 1912 convention of the Progressive Party, despite her strenuous objection to their refusal to seat African American delegates from southern states.

Knight finds no consistent pattern to explain how the situations in which Addams refused to cooperate differ from the situations in which she did.⁷⁴ It seems safe to assume that Addams was unwilling to participate in projects that clearly did more harm than good, but it is unclear how she decided whether an outcome did more harm than good; how did she decide that depressing wages was worse than providing income for the impoverished, or that

⁷³ *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 279.

⁷⁴ Knight, “Jane Addams’s Theory of Cooperation,” in *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, 74-77.

the benefits of the progressive movement made segregation tolerable? In keeping with her emphasis upon moral flexibility, Addams never provides a set of guidelines as to when compromise might not be warranted. Her defense of her refusal to support World War One, however, reveal some of her thoughts on the matter.

Given her reputation for political pragmatism, Addams's complete rejection of war was surprising even to some of her friends. After all, many of those who share her conviction that moral rigidity is undesirable in politics do so because politics is a realm where violence is necessary. However, for Addams, moral rigidity was problematic because it prevented collective problem solving, and often led to violence, which she regarded as the ultimate failure of democratic methods. War, she argued, is essentially moral heroism on a grand scale, in which nations use force to impose their view of the world on others, preferring destruction to compromise. Bitter about Wilson's reversal on American involvement in the war, Addams accused him of attempting to force his will upon others. Wilson was so determined to see his fourteen points implemented that he entered the war so as to ensure that he would be able to dictate the terms of the peace. Though Addams supported the fourteen points, she rejected the idea that they could be implemented through violence and considered Wilson's failure to execute his platform even after winning the war to be proof of her point that meaningful reform requires consent, not force.

Because war results from behaviors that are antithetical to democracy, Addams explained, democracies who engage in warfare are incapable of functioning effectively. When political leaders regard compromise as cowardly or ineffective, citizens are likely to come to the same conclusion. Moreover, the suppression of dissent that almost always accompanies war discourages the free expression and mutual understanding that is necessary

for effective collective decision-making. The suppression of dissent was something that Addams witnessed firsthand during World War One, as many of the immigrant communities that Hull House served were subject to harassment and imprisonment during the Red Scare.

Her belief that war destroys democratic practices is likely one of the reasons why Addams was unyielding in her opposition to militarism, while she made concessions to other institutions that she opposed, such as segregation and she approved of Lincoln's willingness to compromise over slavery. The difference between slavery and war, for Addams, is that the first could eventually have been abolished through democratic means and the second threatened to undermine the process by which evils such as segregation are best resolved. Addams appreciated Lincoln primarily for his willingness to compromise in order to avoid war. Lincoln recognized, she believed, that although democratic progress is slow and imperfect, democracies are still more capable of moral progress than other kinds of regimes.

Addams's concern about the importance of minority opinions brings us to her second reason for opposing the war. When describing what motivated her own opposition to the war, Addams explained that she was particularly driven by a sense that the anti-war position was completely left out of public discourse. Because there were so few pacifists, and because supporters of the war were disinclined to listen to other positions, Addams concluded that pacifists must present firm convictions in order to be heard:

My temperament and habit had always kept me rather in the middle of the road; in politics as in social reform I had been for the 'best possible.' But now I was pushed far toward the left on the subject of the war and I became gradually convinced that in order to make the position of the pacifist clear it was perhaps necessary that a small number of us should be forced into an unequivocal position.⁷⁵

Addams had never envisioned social ethics as requiring a suppression of individuality. Like Dewey, she considered the free expression of ideas conducive to effective

⁷⁵ *Peace and Bread*, 133.

problem solving, and argued that “moral changes in human affairs may begin with the differing group or individual.”⁷⁶ Hull House gained notoriety long before the war as a place where radical opinions were tolerated. When Addams criticized “individual morality,” it is not the capacity of individuals to voice their principles that she challenges, but rather the idea that individuals should act upon those principles without consulting others.

While Addams’s defense of individuality is consistent with her previous work, *World War One* seems to have broadened her understanding of the merits of group solidarity. In *Peace and Bread in Time of War*, Addams discussed the advantages of being able to identify with a likeminded group of people, who strengthened her resolve to take an unpopular position. “The consciousness of spiritual alienation was lost only in moments of comradeship with the likeminded, which may explain the tendency of the pacifist in war time to seek his intellectual kin.”⁷⁷ This is an unusual statement, as Addams usually encouraged the opposite kind of behavior.⁷⁸ However, Addams concluded that group solidarity can be important to those who dissent from an overwhelming and hostile majority. The extent to which Addams identified herself with a movement is illustrated by the constant use of the term “we” in *Peace and Bread*, and by her claim in the introduction that the book may give insight into not just her own experiences, but the experiences of likeminded people.

As Addams’s longing for her “intellectual kin” suggests, World War One was a difficult time for her personally. She was vilified by numerous newspapers and disinvited from several organizations, including the Daughters of the American Revolution. After years of receiving mostly favorable attention, she was unprepared for the hostility with which her

⁷⁶ *Peace and Bread*, 141.

⁷⁷ *Peace and Bread*, 144.

⁷⁸ In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams criticizes socialists for their tendency to equate fellowship with an “identity of creed,” 187.

opposition to the war was received. This experience leads her to the surprising conclusion that unless one believes that remaining true to one's convictions is a virtue, dissenting from popular opinion is almost impossible.

It therefore came about that ability to hold out against mass suggestion, to honestly differ from the convictions and enthusiasms of one's best friends did in moments of crisis come to depend upon the categorical belief that a man's primary allegiance is to his vision of the truth and that he is under an obligation to affirm it.⁷⁹

This statement is surprising, given Addams's warnings about the dangers of ethical frameworks that place too much weight upon the individual conscience. However, I think that the phrase "in moments of crisis" is significant here. It is important to stand up for one's convictions, she argues, if one concludes that compromise is likely to do more harm than good, particularly when opposing perspectives are not being articulated. However, in emphasizing that individuals can only grasp their own "vision of the truth," Addams also denied dissenters the comfort of certainty.

Earlier, I noted that Addams admitted that social ethics could be frustrating because they require political actors to compromise their principles. A second source of frustration is the fact that individuals who find themselves in a situation in which cooperation is impossible are denied the satisfaction of being certain that they are doing the right thing. This is particularly difficult because dissent often has negative social and political repercussions. Addams's opposition to the war made it more difficult for her to pursue other important objectives.⁸⁰ Moreover, dissent required her to sacrifice genuine goods, such as fellowship and cooperation. Finally, in voicing opinions that most of her fellow citizens deemed traitorous, Addams feared that she had put herself in a position where the temptation to seek solace in one's own moral righteousness would become overwhelming. The pacifist in time

⁷⁹ *Peace and Bread*, 151.

⁸⁰ *Peace and Bread*, 142.

of war, Addams complains, “finds it possible to travel from the mire of self-pity straight to the barren hills of self-righteousness and to hate himself equally in both places.”⁸¹

Addams wanted to be certain that these negative consequences of dissenting from the war did not outweigh the benefits. However, she concluded that her desire for certainty could not be fulfilled. “The fact that we were no longer living in a period of dogma,” she explains, means that pacifists are “in no position to announce our sense of security.”⁸² The pragmatist requirement that principles be subject to the test of experience makes certainty impossible, since past results do not necessarily predict the future. It is particularly difficult to be confident in one’s opinions when one is unable to submit them to serious challenge from other people, which it was impossible for pacifists to do during the war because few were willing to take their ideas seriously.⁸³

Dissent may be necessary, Addams concedes, but it is a morally perilous position, as dissenters can easily fall victim to behaviors that threaten democratic life.⁸⁴ She does not describe dissent as the triumphant action of an individual expressing his autonomy from corrupt institutions and mass opinion. For Addams, dissent is an inherently tortured experience, as dissenters face public disapproval without being able to take consolation from the knowledge that truth is on their side. Not only is it impossible to tell whether one’s convictions are true, but it is not always easy to determine whether one’s convictions are based upon a fair evaluation of available evidence. While Addams could defend her

⁸¹ *Peace and Bread*, 139.

⁸² *Peace and Bread*, 150.

⁸³ *Peace and Bread*, 140.

⁸⁴ According to Robert Pepperman Taylor, “when Addams found herself in a political position where she dissented, standing outside the acceptable parameters of political debate, she had the strength of character to do so. She viewed this act, however, as morally dangerous, almost debilitating. It is remarkable to note the degree to which Addams attempted to maintain her connection with the political community during this time.” See “Jane Addams: ‘A Modern Lear,’ ” From *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt: The Legacy of Progressive Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 77.

opposition to the war with “historic and scientific tests,” she was not always certain as to whether she was interpreting experience in light of a pre-determined moral framework, as opposed to allowing her principles to be shaped by new experiences. She was afraid that she had fallen victim to “fanaticism, of preferring a consistency of theory to the conscientious recognition of the social situation.”⁸⁵

While such doubt may be uncomfortable, it is necessary to avoid the problems with moral self-reliance. Excessive confidence in one’s convictions is problematic, even in times of crisis, as those who are supremely confident in their beliefs are more likely to succumb to the temptation to impose their view upon others. Self-righteousness can also become habitual, preventing individuals from treating others with respect and learning from new experiences in the future. Addams believed this is what happened to Pullman. He had become so used to thinking of himself as a noble and indulgent philanthropist that he had lost the faculty by which he might perceive himself in the wrong.⁸⁶

Perhaps because she was uncertain as to whether she had succeed in avoiding self-righteousness, Addams did not provide a detailed account of how she believes self-righteousness can be avoided, other than the account she offers of her own behavior, feelings and motivation. She accepted the possibility that her unequivocal rejection of violence was unjustified. In contrast to Thoreau, she refrains from privileging the position of those who are unwilling to be moved by mass opinion. Non-cooperation may be necessary in some situations, but finding oneself unwilling to cooperate does not automatically signify moral superiority. Important innovations may come from individual deviation, but the capacity to

⁸⁵ *Peace and Bread*, 142.

⁸⁶ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 45.

be influenced by others and work together is also an essential part of democratic practice.⁸⁷

Whereas Thoreau criticized American soldiers for sacrificing their individuality to a cause that is not their own,⁸⁸ Addams believed that the willingness of young Americans to work and sacrifice together for a cause greater than themselves is commendable, though she wishes that this dedication had been in service to a different cause. “Youth’s response to the appeal made to their self-sacrifice, to their patriotism, to their sense of duty, to their high-hearted hopes for the future, could only stir one’s admiration, and we should have been dull indeed had we failed to be moved by this most moving spectacle in the world.”⁸⁹

Finally, Addams attempts to maintain her belief in the integrity and good intentions of her fellow citizens. While Addams sought support from likeminded people during the war, she strives to avoid casting those on the other side as villains. She continued to practice sympathetic interpretation, seeking to understand the motives of her opponents and conceding that many on the pro-war side had admirable motives, such as the defense and spread of democracy. She even attempted to empathize with President Wilson, explaining that it is particularly difficult for those who are intellectually talented and who have genuinely good ideas to avoid imposing them in an undemocratic manner.⁹⁰ In seeking to understand others positions, Addams follows her own advice from several decades earlier that “it is necessary to know of the lives of our contemporaries, not only in order to believe in their integrity, which is after all the first beginning of social morality, but in order to attain to any mental or moral integrity for ourselves or any such hope for society.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ *Peace and Bread*, 151.

⁸⁸ “The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailors, constables, posse comitatus etc.” Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” 66.

⁸⁹ *Peace and Bread*, 137.

⁹⁰ *Peace and Bread*, 67.

⁹¹ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 79.

VIII. Social Ethics, Shared Responsibility and Social Feminism

Addams does not fit neatly into any contemporary political framework; she is neither an egalitarian liberal, nor a communitarian, nor a radical democrat, but she shares some affinity with each. As I explain below, Addams also shared some affinity with the social feminist framework articulated by Jean Elshtain; those who find in Addams the embodiment of social feminism, however, ignore how Addams's understanding of social ethics and shared responsibility is shaped by democratic and pragmatist understandings.

The failure of contemporary political institutions and ideologies to appreciate the dignity and needs of particular individuals is a prominent theme in Elshtain's work. Elshtain believes that individual dignity is threatened by economic and political institutions that are driven by power and efficiency rather than appreciation for the worth of individual human beings. Individual dignity is also threatened by ideologies that attempt to organize human society according to a pre-determined plan, without paying attention to the diverse wishes of individual human beings and to the fact that human problems rarely have simple solutions. She frequently takes liberal and radical feminists to task for presuming that they know what is best for other women and for assuming that social life can be re-organized so that childcare no longer requires sacrifice on the part of parents. The problem with contemporary feminism, and many contemporary ideologies, Elshtain explains, is that "life is too various, diversity too dear, to give it over to a single definition or purpose. There are no ultimate solutions though there are those arrogant or dangerous enough to attempt them."⁹²

In "Antigone's Daughters," Elshtain defends a "social feminist" position, which she describes as a middle ground between liberal feminists who seek to enter public life on the

⁹² *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 300.

same terms as men, and anti-feminists who believe that women have no place in the public sphere.⁹³ Social feminists emulate Antigone by entering the public sphere in order to defend familial and communal life from an impersonal political and economic system that cares primarily about domination and efficiency. In defending familial and communal life, social feminists protect forms of social organization that are better equipped to protect individual dignity than political and economic institutions.

In her earlier explicitly-feminist works, Elshtain stresses the differences between familial and political life, portraying family life as a realm where the dignity of particular individuals is respected and politics as a realm that has traditionally been governed by self-interest and the lust for power. The experience of motherhood, she argues, at least in many cases, gives women a moral perspective that enables them to resist de-humanizing power structures.⁹⁴ The power that women exercise qua mothers is different from the power typically associated with economic and political life. Mothers wield a considerable degree of power in their role as interpreters of moral and religious traditions to future generations. Rather than dominating their children, mothers (ideally) give them resources that will help them flourish. Rather than prioritizing uninhibited individual freedom and bureaucratic rationality, mothers recognize that they have a duty to respond to the needs of particular children.

⁹³ "Antigone's Daughters," in *Oxford Readings in Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 372. In "Antigone's Daughters Revisited," from *Lifeworld and Politics* ed. Stephen White (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), Elshtain concedes that the theoretical framework offered in the original essay was overly simplistic. The tension between familial and political life, she admits, cannot be resolved simply by viewing the world from the standpoint of Antigone, as it is not clear that familial standards should always trump political priorities. Instead, this tension must be continually re-negotiated through political struggle.

⁹⁴ Elshtain's discussion of motherhood is significantly influenced by Sara Ruddick's essay on "Maternal Thinking."

In recent decades, Elshtain has emphasized the need to re-invigorate American civil society, which consists of “the many forms of community and association that dot the landscape of a democratic culture.” Among these associations are families, faith communities, neighborhoods, voluntary organizations, local government and unions. Communal associations play a number of vital roles, she explains; they maintain communal standards, they provide support to families in time of crises and they enable citizens to play an active role in directing their own future. Communities in which “members maintain a common life, often rooted in collective memory and shared values, constitute precisely those ecologies in which men, women and children are likely to thrive.”⁹⁵ Among the shared values that Elshtain hopes that a re-invigorated civil society will protect are heterosexual marriage, familial obligation and sexual restraint. Thus, re-invigorating civic society is also a task for contemporary Antigones.⁹⁶

For Elshtain, re-vitalizing civil society is not simply about creating various forms of associational life; it requires strengthening “civic” and “moral truths” which “underwrite the rationale for civic engagement,” and which will in turn be re-enforced by the networks and associations in which citizens participate.⁹⁷ Respect for the dignity of human persons and biological families are among these essential moral truths, as is recognition of the fact that human beings have obligations to each other. Revitalizing civil society also requires restoring a sense of shame, or a sense that one’s intimate self should be sheltered from public life. Those who disclose their intimate selves in public, Elshtain explains, put their own integrity at risk by subjecting their bodies to potential ridicule and exploitation. They also threaten the

⁹⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “A Call to Civil Society,” *Society* 36, no. 4 (1999), 14.

⁹⁶ Jill Locke notes that almost all of the policies that Elshtain advocates as necessary to re-invigorating civil society in *Democracy on Trial* are intended to defend family life. See Locke, “Hiding for Whom? Obscurity, Dignity and the Politics of Truth,” *Theory & Event* 3, no. 3 (1999).

⁹⁷ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “A Call to Civil Society,” *Society* 36, no. 5 (1999), 17.

integrity of civil society by turning the public sphere into a realm in which citizens are “harshly” confronted by those who demand that others legitimate their intimate behavior.”⁹⁸

Dissatisfied with a contemporary political landscape that lacks respect for individual dignity and a commitment to civility, Elshtain turns to Jane Addams. Addams, Elshtain explains, is an example of a modern woman who “embodies the standpoint of Antigone,”⁹⁹ and who “infused domesticity with a wider moral and social meaning, finding in it a way to serve others and to enact citizenship.” First, Addams believed that providing conditions in which families can flourish is a public responsibility. Addams campaigned for fair wages and working conditions because she saw industrial economic practices as a threat to family life. Second, Addams argued that as municipal governments become increasingly involved in areas that have traditionally been delegated to women - protecting child welfare, tending to the sick and overseeing the food supply - women must take up the role of “municipal housekeepers.”¹⁰⁰ Not only do women have skills and experiences that might improve public policy, but women’s political participation is also necessary to protect the wellbeing of their own families. Addams, Elshtain explains, envisioned a body politic that includes the “female body – most important the maternal female body” as “the central image of social generativity and fecundity.”¹⁰¹

Elshtain also finds in Addams a theorist who shares her fear that ideology and bureaucracy threaten individual dignity. Elshtain attributes Addams’s suspicion of Marxist analysis to a refusal to “use a collective category to classify hundreds of thousands of people,

⁹⁸ Jean Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*,

⁹⁹ “Antigone’s Daughters’s,” 373.

¹⁰⁰ Some Addams scholars believe that Elshtain fails to appreciate that Addams’s use of maternalist language was at least partly a rhetorical strategy designed to generate broader support for women’s suffrage. See “Introduction,” *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, eds. Marilyn Fischer, Carol Nackenoff and Wendy Chmielewski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 6.

¹⁰¹ Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*, 160.

and in so doing, to obliterate their distinctiveness.”¹⁰² Unlike Marx, Addams never lost “sight of the single, unique person in her determination to ease the suffering of the many.”¹⁰³

Addams recounted with much regret her experience as a public relief administrator during the depression of 1893; Addams had felt compelled to administer aid in compliance with government guidelines, even though this meant requiring recipients to perform manual labor, regardless of physical capacity. Of the experience, Addams wrote: “I learned that life cannot be administered by definite rules and regulations; that wisdom to deal with a man’s difficulties comes only through some knowledge of his life and habits as a whole.”¹⁰⁴ Given her insistence upon individual need, Elshtain speculates that Addams, if she were alive today, would have “emerged as a critic of what the postwar welfare state has become, with its mode of top-down social provision and its turning of would-be and should-be citizens into clients.”¹⁰⁵

Finally, Elshtain sees Addams as an ally in her struggle to maintain moral standards. She describes Addams as striving for middle ground between rigidity and relativism. While Addams believed that ethical standards must evolve over time, she did not, according to Elshtain, advocate “the abandonment of ethical standards.”¹⁰⁶ Elshtain explains that Addams encouraged women to take a greater role in public life, but that Addams did not want women to ignore their familial obligations.¹⁰⁷ *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* contains frequent references to Addams’s concern that the post-war generation placed too much importance upon sexual gratification, a warning that Elshtain believes contemporary

¹⁰² Ibid., 124.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 253.

¹⁰⁴ Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 162.

¹⁰⁵ Elshtain, *Jane Addams and The Dream of American Democracy*, 253.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 109.

society would do well to heed.¹⁰⁸ Addams's democratic ethos seems foreign to contemporary readers, Elshtain fears, because the moral standards and forms of communal life that shaped Addams's worldview are in decline. "There are days when I think the world has passed her by, that she is so securely lodged in a bygone era that it is impossible to draw her into a conversation about our situation, dominated as it is by impersonal techniques, and the rush to turn everything into a commodity."¹⁰⁹

Elshtain's articles and recent book on Addams contain important insights into Addams's political and moral thought. Particularly illuminating are Elshtain's analysis of the similarities between Addams and prominent nineteenth-century literary figures, such as George Elliot, and her recognition that Addams's belief in the political relevance of women's experiences constitutes a challenge to traditional Western notions of citizenship. For all the merits of Elshtain's account, however, Elshtain over-states the extent to which her own ideals are in fact embodied in Addams; Addams's pragmatist political ethics was more radical than Elshtain's social feminism framework will allow.

As Shannon Jackson notes, settlement work as practiced at Hull House constituted a more significant change to familial practices than Elshtain recognizes. As Jackson notes, Hull House offered an alternative to traditional family life for both residents and neighbors. Hull House enabled residents to postpone, avoid or escape conventional marriage. Florence Kelly arrived at Hull House with three children after divorcing her abusive husband. Some of the residents formed intense emotional bonds with each other that resembled bonds among family members. Mary Rozet Smith fulfilled many of the roles in Addams's life that would

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 23-4, 85, 114-117.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 254.

have been traditionally fulfilled by a spouse.¹¹⁰ More importantly, the residents offered services to their neighbors, such as childcare and domestic education that had been provided by the family.¹¹¹

Inherent in Addams's idea of "civic housekeeping" is a willingness to re-negotiate family life by transforming care for dependents from a private obligation into a public duty. Civic housekeeping means that the public sphere assumes partial responsibility for many of the needs that had traditionally been fulfilled by family, friends and neighbors. The women of Hull House lobbied state and federal government to regulate wages and hours so that men and especially women would not be compelled to neglect their families in order to feed them. They campaigned for public assistance to widows that would enable them to remain home with their children. Addams envisioned a municipal government that took an active role in shaping children's behavior by providing them with healthy forms of entertainment, disciplining problem children without turning them into hardened criminals and educating them to be good workers, parents and citizens.

Elshtain acknowledges Addams's belief that public and private life are irreconcilably intertwined, but she seems to interpret this as a call for a vigorous civil society, paying little attention to Addams's argument that a strong civil society requires increased government intervention in economic and social life. For Elshtain, the distinction between state and civil society is crucial; however, the distinction was less important to Addams, who generally

¹¹⁰ Addams and Smith shared a bed at Hull House and a summer home in Bar Harbor, Maine. While Addams destroyed most of her correspondence with Smith, surviving letters, as well as a love poem that Addams wrote about Smith, indicate intense affection and emotional attachment between the two women. "For over forty years," Victoria Brown writes, "Mary Rozet Smith devoted herself entirely to 'making life easier for Jane Addams. That,' recalled Jane's nephew, 'was her career, her philosophy.' A few months before she died, Mary thanked Jane for having 'made my life. All its meaning and color came from you,'" *The Education of Jane Addams*, 255.

¹¹¹ See Shannon Jackson, "Toward a Queer Social Welfare Studies," from *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*.

assumed that public and private associations have similar moral obligations and that the division of labor between the two should be determined by practical considerations. Addams believed that there would always be a need for social settlements and other organizations that serve as intermediaries between the people and the government, identifying new problems, experimenting with possible solutions and calling incompetent political officials and ineffective political programs to account. At the same time, Addams never prevented government from performing tasks that had been carried out by the settlement. With greater resources, she argued, the government can reach more people, while freeing the settlement to tackle other problems.¹¹²

While Addams may have been willing to re-think nineteenth century familial norms, her vision of family life was still fairly conservative, at least by contemporary standards. Addams, like most Progressive reformers, accepted that women would assume that vast majority of childcare responsibilities.¹¹³ Given Addams's commitment to revising moral standards as circumstances change, there is reason to be hesitant about assuming that Addams regarded gender roles as rooted in nature and therefore incapable of revision. Regardless of whether Addams shares Elshain's position on gender roles, however, she does not share her social feminist political vision. As described by Elshtain, the task of social feminists is to bring women's experiences into the public arena, and in doing so to promote "common, even universal imperatives and concerns."¹¹⁴ In contrast, the women described by Addams are not bound together by a sense of shared "civic and moral truths;" the women

¹¹² Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition in America* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971), 240.

¹¹³ In the *Second Twenty Years at Hull House*, however, Addams suggests that recent technological innovations that make housework less burdensome will enable contemporary women to pursue both a career and a family.

¹¹⁴ *Jane Addams and The Dream of American Democracy*, 158.

described by Addams display a variety of moral and civic perspectives, even on basic issues such as how to bury a dead child.

In her early days at Hull House, Addams made mistakes similar to that of the charity worker. Her treatment of a sickly child abandoned in the Hull House nursery offended the moral sensibilities of her neighbors. Having cared for the child as best they could, Addams and the Hull House residents had no qualms about allowing the county to provide the funeral. Her neighbors, however, were appalled at the idea of allowing a child to suffer the indignity of a pauper's funeral, and raised money amongst themselves to provide a proper burial. Interestingly, Elshtain's reaction to this incident differs from Addams's. Elshtain finds it puzzling that Addams would have made such a mistake. Given her "rich experience, suffused with wisdom from Scripture and from her favorite writers," Elshtain believes that Addams should have been attuned to the sensibilities of her neighbors, as "the dignity to be afforded the dead is a theme that runs through much of the literature of the West."¹¹⁵ Addams, on the other hand, did not regard the proper procedure for burying impoverished children as something that should have been intuitive to the Hull House residents, attributing the mistake to the fact that the Hull House residents were "comparatively new to the neighborhood," and did not understand the sentiments of the community.¹¹⁶ She noted with chagrin that the corrupt alderman who controls her neighborhood had a better grasp of community sentiments, as he always spared his supporters the humiliation of a pauper's burial.

The difference between Addams's and Elshtain's reactions to this incident is revealing. Having been raised within a loving family and close-knit community that upheld basic moral values such as the importance of family and the sacredness of individual persons,

¹¹⁵ *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*, 187.

¹¹⁶ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 106.

Addams should have, Elshtain believes, been adequately prepared for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Addams, on the other hand, was more ambivalent about the extent to which loving families, close-knit communities and the classics of Western literature were sufficient preparation for democratic citizenship. In her autobiography, Addams attributed her sense of integrity and concern for others to her father's example and she makes frequent references to having been shaped by her extensive reading of Western literature. At the same time, Addams acknowledged that her formative experiences in Cederville and Rockford Seminary did not adequately prepare her for the problems and perspectives she encountered in Chicago's nineteenth ward. Indeed, Addams worried that many young people in her situation would erroneously assume that they have the answers to problems that their own experiences have not prepared them to handle.

The dominant theme of Addams's books and essays is not that traditional duties and responsibilities must be protected from secular modernity, but rather that traditional duties and responsibilities are transformed in democratic societies. Democratic political institutions make citizens dependent upon the behavior and judgment of those who do not belong to their familial or communal networks. In doing so, democracy requires cooperation among people who have very different experiences and moral commitments; thus, democracy often calls for greater flexibility, humility and empathy than other forms of social organization. Furthermore, strengthening traditional familial, social and economic institutions would not ensure democratic flourishing unless these institutions were themselves democratized. Businesses must allow workers a greater role in decisions that impact their lives. Parents must make an effort to sympathize with children who do not live up to their own expectations, and children should not assume that they have nothing to learn from older

generations whose life choices were different from their own. “We are brought to a conception of democracy, Addams wrote, is “not merely a sentiment which desires the well-being of all men, nor yet as a creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all men, but as that which affords a rule of living well as a test of faith.”¹¹⁷

Given her commitment to the importance of seeking out new experiences, it is difficult to believe that Addams meant to imply that women’s familial and communal experiences are a sufficient preparation for civic activity. To the extent that her discussions of municipal housekeeping do imply this, it is almost certainly either an oversight on Addams’s part, or a strategic decision intended to persuade her readers that women can enter the public arena without losing their femininity. After all, Addams continually emphasized that democratic citizens have an obligation to seek out perspectives that they would not encounter in their own familial and communal life; indeed, she criticizes the “dainty clad charity worker” for assuming that the habits and values she learned from her own family can be easily applied in very different circumstances. In other words, women’s experiences as caregivers may give them a perspective that was and perhaps still is lacking in American public life, but women, like all citizens, have an obligation to learn from the experiences of others.

Elshtain is right to point out that Addams’s understanding of civic virtue differs from ancient and civic republican understandings, in that Addams believed that domestic and childcare work gave women unique insight into issues related to education, public health, juvenile crime and industrial poverty. Prominent civic republicans, including Rousseau, Jefferson and Emerson, have typically viewed self-reliant male farmers as the ideal democratic citizens, in part because they are not in the habit of deferring to the opinion of

¹¹⁷ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 7.

others. Addams, however, suggested that working for and with others could, at least in certain circumstances, improve moral judgment. Perhaps because she recognized that individuals are often encouraged to challenge their own opinions through interaction with others, Addams found room for moral autonomy in domestic work and other activities that civic republicans have traditionally regarded as offering no opportunity for independent moral judgment. Addams explained that housekeepers, particularly ones who live in urban areas, are often confronted with situations that encourage them to re-evaluate their own moral intuitions. They might interact with neighbors who have different religious convictions and notions about child rearing. They are likely to find their beliefs challenged by their children. They may be confronted with problems, such as criminality or poor schools that require new forms of political action. Addams's capacity to see opportunities for exercising moral judgment in work that involves caring for and being dependent upon others is unusual in the Western political canon.

However, Addams's discussion of the political relevance of women's labor is not simply an account of the intrinsic moral worth of domestic life. It is part of her broader participatory democratic vision, a vision informed by pragmatist moral intuitions. Because knowledge is shaped by experience, the best solutions to political and philosophic problems are likely to emerge, Addams believed, by consulting people who have had a wide range of experiences. It was not simply women's experience as mothers that Addams sought to incorporate into public life. She believed that women's experience of economic deprivation and discrimination also deserved political expression. She also worried that the experiences of immigrants and working-class women *and* men were too rarely incorporated into public

life. Most of the men in Addams's neighborhood, it is worth noting, also did not conform to the republican ideal.

IX. Jane Addams and Egalitarian Liberalism

With its emphasis upon the limits of self-reliance and the need for government involvement in the care of dependents, Addams's understanding of citizen responsibility may seem like less of an alternative to the post-war welfare state and more a justification for it. Daniel Levine argues that Addams was an early proponent of the ideas that lead to the expansion of the American welfare state in the sixties and seventies.¹¹⁸ Levine credits Addams with popularizing the notion that the poor should not be blamed for their circumstances. According to Levine, Addams rejected the notion that poverty is caused by moral depravity not only because many poor people are involuntarily unemployed, either as the result of illness or hard times, but because most human beings are the product of their environment and education. Children do not automatically become productive parents, workers and citizens unless they are given the tools that will enable them to do so. Addams believed that many of the vices that are widespread among the poor and working classes, such as early marriages, prostitution and petty crime result either from necessity or poor education. Even idleness is, according to Addams, often caused by society's failure to provide stimulating and fulfilling employment for workers. Levine notes that Addams's belief that economic and social status is more a matter of luck than of individual merit was shared by many advocates of the Great Society.

In casting suspicion upon the extent to which we deserve our economic and social success, Addams appears to resemble John Rawls, perhaps the pre-eminent philosopher of

¹¹⁸ According to Levine, "the terms on which the war on poverty was waged were much more in the direction of Jane Addams' ideas than was the New Deal. *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition in America*, 143.

the post-war American welfare state. There are, however, several key differences between Addams and Rawls. Most significantly, Addams's purpose is different from Rawls's. Rawls seeks to provide a normative justification for the major social and political institutions of contemporary democratic societies; in doing so, he offers a critique of contemporary American public life, since contemporary American institutions do not conform perfectly to the two principles of justice. Rawls does not, however, tell his readers what they must do in order to bring a just society into being. As Brian Walker explains, it is not entirely clear what "an ordinary citizen would do differently after reading Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*."¹¹⁹ In contrast, Addams sought to understand how citizens should apply democratic principles in their daily lives, even when their institutions fall short of those principles. Her recognition that the struggle for democracy is ongoing, in part because our understanding of what democracy entails is constantly evolving, meant that she believed it would always be necessary for citizens to consider how to achieve democratic principles through institutions that fall short of their ideals. Addams's primary task was not to envision ideal democratic systems, but rather to explain the responsibilities of citizens who live in existing non-ideal democracies.

Perhaps because she was preoccupied with civic virtue, Addams's rejections of the notion that poverty is a moral failing do not completely do away with personal responsibility, as Rawls's do. Rawls famously argued that because one's talents and character traits are the product of genetics and environment, individuals cannot be said to deserve their talents and traits, making individual merit an inappropriate method of allocating resources. Addams, on the other hand, recognized the role of environmental factors in shaping human beings, but suggested that individuals still bear some responsibility for their characters and choices.

¹¹⁹ "Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation," *Political Theory* 29, vol. 2 (2001), 156.

Addams did believe that certain conditions encouraged ignorance and indulgence, and this may be one reason why she tended to judge the poor less harshly than members of her own class. For example, she criticized her peers for failing to appreciate popular government, while explaining that it is difficult for the urban classes to understand the merit of democratic government, when their own governments are corrupt and inefficient. At the same time, she believed that most humans are born with a capacity to care for others, and regarded selfishness and unprovoked violence as moral failings for which individuals should be held accountable. Thus, she was less forgiving of those who habitually pursued their own gain at others' expense and who shirked their duties to their families, neighbors and communities. As noted earlier, she was critical of the widow who refused to help her fellow tenant's campaign for clean drinking water. She likewise had contempt for a neighbor who leaves his pregnant lover with his mother and is not heard from for several years.

Finally, Addams differed from Rawls in that she did not seem to take justice to be the "first virtue of social institutions." While she sought to correct economic relationships that she considered unjust, arguing that employees deserve safe working conditions and children are entitled to resources that will enable them to flourish, justice is not the only criteria she used to evaluate political institutions or determine the responsibilities of citizens. For Addams, political responsibilities are similar to familial responsibilities, in that they are not always freely chosen and they arise out of a combination of self-interest, affection and justice. Americans have a responsibility to ensure that other citizens receive a decent education not simply because a decent education is something that all citizens deserve, but because all Americans have a stake in ensuring that the electorate is competent to make political decisions. Moreover, just as members of a family have both a material and

psychological interest in the welfare of their family, members of a political community have a material and psychological interest in each other's welfare. Human beings have a desire to make a difference in the lives of others and taking responsibility for the welfare of others allows them to satisfy that desire.

She also cautioned that an overly legalistic sense of justice that is not tempered by empathy is insufficient to enable citizens to work together to promote shared problems. First, without empathy it is often difficult to determine what justice entails. If we truly want to give people what they deserve, we must examine their particular circumstances before passing judgment. Second, an obsession with preventing others from getting more than they deserve leads to stingy, rigid and suspicious behavior that is unlikely to generate fellowship among citizens. Observing that human beings are often willing to extend compassion to friends and family without considering whether compassion is deserved, Addams hoped that citizens of democratic societies, having become accustomed to seek collective solutions to shared problems, will be able to muster compassion for each other.

Just when our affection becomes large enough to care for the unworthy among the poor as we would care for the unworthy among our own kin is certainly a perplexing question. To say that it should never be so, is a comment upon our democratic relations to them which few of us would be willing to make.¹²⁰

It is worth noting that Addams's conception of democratic fellowship does not mean treating our fellow citizens exactly like family, as the special bonds of affection and responsibility that exist in the best of traditional and non-traditional familial relationships cannot be replicated on a grand scale. Addams acknowledged that the intense emotional attachments that emerge in many families can lead people to abandon their capacity for moral judgment. In *The Long Road of Women's Memory*, she described a mother who constantly

¹²⁰ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 31.

praises her son, who is serving time for murder, for being a devoted son and husband.

Addams believed that there is something beautiful and perhaps even useful in such unconditional parental love, as it enriches the lives of both mother and son. The son is fortunate to be “surrounded by the invincible affection which assures the fortunate and the unfortunate alike that we are loved, not according to our deserts, but to some profounder law.”¹²¹ However, this is not the kind of affection that Addams envisioned emerging among citizens. Though she encouraged affection among citizens, in the sense that they are genuinely concerned about each other’s welfare and willing to provide help that goes beyond the requirements of justice, she did not expect citizens to completely refrain from judging others.¹²² Though she sometimes intervened when her neighbors had legal problems, Addams refused to help a woman who had knowingly stolen schoolbooks because she thought that the woman deserved punishment.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, Addams’s understanding of citizen responsibility was very different from Thoreau’s. Whereas Thoreau believed that citizens must make an effort to avoid being implicated in harm, Addams expected democratic citizens to make an effort to reform corrupt and ineffective institutions. As members of democratic societies, Addams argued, we are automatically implicated in the behavior of our institutions and we have an obligation to ourselves and others to improve those institutions. Her argument that an industrial democratic society requires a new set of virtues offers a response to potential critics who, like Thoreau, argued that participation in public life is inherently corrupting and dissatisfying. Participation in the public life of American democracy only seems corrupting,

¹²¹ *The Long Road of Women’s Memory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 28.

¹²² *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 49.

Addams argued, to those who adhere to an outdated moral vision that emphasizes the importance of remaining true to the dictates of one's own conscience.

Despite such differences, Addams was part of a tradition in American political thought that includes Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, and which focused upon the responsibilities of citizens, as opposed to statesmen. Like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, Addams believed that membership in a democratic society is accompanied by a particular set of moral obligations. She also shared with these thinkers a belief that recognizing and fulfilling the duties that accompany citizenship requires cultivating virtues that are essential to the success of democratic institutions and to the flourishing of democratic citizens. All of these thinkers believed that democracy entails a particular kind of human flourishing, one that allows a diversity of life plans, but which requires citizens to respond when their governments behave unjustly.

For both Thoreau and Addams, democratic flourishing was incompatible with a completely unreflective existence, as they both considered attentiveness to experience to be a crucial democratic virtue. That Addams and Thoreau would resemble each other in this way is not surprising, as there are a number of similarities between pragmatist and transcendental epistemology. Perhaps because both are heavily influenced by Emerson, both the transcendentalists and the pragmatists assumed that experience can yield insight into a world that is constantly in flux if human beings make an effort to actively interpret their experiences. The emphasis upon active interpretation separates transcendentalism and pragmatism from Lockean empiricism. Rather than being a passive recipient of sense impressions, the mind gives meaning to experience, both by approaching experience with a particular set of questions and by reflecting upon the significance of particular experiences.

Moreover, experience is broader than simple sense impressions, as it also includes emotional and aesthetic impressions, both of which can also be interpreted by the mind. Thus, Thoreau believes that contemplating his own feelings while watching a loon or walking through snow can reveal something important about himself and his relationship to nature, while Addams thinks that examining her emotional response to a crying child can reveal something about humanity.

Of course, there were vast differences in the types of experiences that Thoreau and Addams consider politically significant and in the manner they believe experience should be interpreted. As discussed in the last chapter, Thoreau believed that moral and political obligations are disclosed as individuals interact with and interpret nature. Human beings can derive ethical imperatives from nature because nature and humanity are both infused with a divine spirit. The return to nature is also about escaping political and social institutions that encourage moral corruption. In encouraging the pursuit of luxuries and social approval, political and economic institutions produce citizens who cease to value integrity and lack the courage to stand up for their convictions. Nature provides an escape from corrupt institutions, and many of the truths that can be derived by reflecting upon nature encourage individuals to resist immoral and foolish ideas. In nature, one realizes that happiness does not require money or material possessions.

On the other hand, for Addams, our political responsibilities emerge not through attentiveness to nature, but through attentiveness to economic, familial and political life. Addams lacked Thoreau's faith that there is a divine presence that imbues nature with moral meaning, and his conviction that individuals who consult their own moral judgment will reach consensus about the natural law. The diversity of opinions she encountered in Chicago,

as well as her belief that diverse life experiences produce diverse opinions made it difficult for Addams to envision this kind of moral consensus. Whereas Thoreau insisted that each individual must experience the world for himself, Addams believes that we must draw upon other's experiences. For all of these reasons, it is difficult to imagine the mature Addams engaging in the kind of dialogue that Thoreau has with John Field, in which Thoreau attempts to convert Field to his own lifestyle. Unlike Thoreau, Addams would not begin the dialogue by assuming that she knows how to help Field or conclude that Field is beyond help because he cannot be spoken to as a philosopher.

Addams, Thoreau and other theorists in the Emersonian tradition also shared a capacity to respond to the political and moral issues of their times with faith in democracy, optimism about the future and a sense that the world is not entirely hostile to human aims. Many of Addams's contemporaries agreed with her that the world was changing, but were less confident that it was for the better. Max Weber feared that the modern world had become an "iron cage" which forces individuals to comply with the ethics of capitalism, even though the system no longer has a moral purpose. William Butler Yeats, who visited Hull House in 1911, concluded that the times lacked a guiding ethos; "the best lack all conviction and that worst are full of passionate intensity," and warned that the age of democracy would be one of mass mediocrity. Tolstoy believed that integrity was impossible within the industrial capitalist system.

Addams recognized that there were costs to industrial democracy. In encouraging mutual dependence, both industrialization and democracy deny individuals the glory of shaping the world according to their own whims, the capacity to listen only to the dictates of their own consciences and the satisfaction of knowing that they are responsible for their own

flourishing and that of their family. The heroic individualism celebrated by romantics like Carlyle, the self-reliance that enabled Horatio Alger's protagonists to get ahead and the conscientious tending of one's own garden endorsed by Tolstoy had in her view ceased to be viable ethical responses to the modern world. Yet, for Addams the glass remains more than half full. While democracy denies individuals the satisfaction of shaping the world according to their own principles, the process of working with others and the knowledge that one is participating in something bigger than oneself can be rewarding. While it is sometimes troubling to lack the confidence in one's convictions that earlier ages seemed to possess, this lack of certainty can foster tolerance and flexibility. Like all human activities, democracy has its frustrations and imperfections, but it will eventually enable citizens to solve many of their shared problems. Whether this optimism is sustainable in the twenty-first century, and whether Addams's optimism can be tempered without seriously altering her vision of democracy will be explored in the following chapters.

IV. Re-thinking Responsibility and Democratic Rule

The American public has often been described as politically complacent and lacking a sense of civic responsibility. After the Civil War, Walt Whitman longed for figures and movements that would “counterbalance the inertness and fossilism making so large a part of human institutions.”¹ The authors of the Port Huron Statement concluded that the average American citizen is “worried by his mundane problems which never get solved, but constrained by the common belief that politics is an agonizingly slow accommodation of views,” and “therefore quits all pretense of bothering.”² More recently, the political thinker Sheldon S. Wolin lamented that “at the start of the new millennium the contrast could not be starker between the politics of the corporate state and the promise of democratic politics, and yet there appears to be no widespread recognition of public crisis.”³

Those who find the American public to be overly complacent often blame a dominant public philosophy that emphasizes rights as opposed to responsibilities, prioritizes consensus over contestation, or uncritically accepts the concentration of political and economic power.⁴ At the same time, many of the political thinkers who attribute contemporary political ills to a misguided public philosophy believe that American political thought also contains moral resources that resist civic complacency, but which have been excluded from dominant narratives about American values and institutions. Michael Sandel uncovers a civic

¹ Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” in *Whitman Poetry and Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 974.

² Students for a Democratic Society, “Port Huron Statement,” in *Political Thought in the United States*, 2nd edition., ed. Michael B. Levy (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1992), 464.

³ Wolin, “Postmodern Democracy,” in *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Expanded edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 596.

⁴ See Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977); Eldon Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1994); Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Belnap Press 1996); Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

republican tradition in American political thought that offers a promising alternative to a morally bankrupt dominant political ideology. Similarly, Sheldon Wolin finds in the anti-federalists and various American social movements a democratic “politics of tending” that resists the dominant “politics of intending.”

My purpose is similar to Sandel’s and Wolin’s in that I look to American political thought for insight into ethical democratic citizenship. Unlike Sandel and Wolin, however, I do not view individualism as a wholly pernicious force in American public life. Rather, I draw upon the ideas of Thoreau and Addams to demonstrate that understandings of democracy that prioritize individual self-rule do not inevitably endorse civic complacency.⁵ According to both Thoreau and Addams, autonomous moral beings must accept some responsibility for their own fates. Furthermore, they insisted that democratic citizens cannot accept responsibility for their own actions and wellbeing without accepting some responsibility for the political institutions and processes in which they participate. In the previous two chapters, I have examined why Thoreau and Addams held democratic citizens responsible for the behavior of their political institutions and how they believed this responsibility should be discharged. In what follows, I discuss the extent to which their ideas deserve to inform contemporary political thought.

Beginning with Thoreau, I argue that his political ethics deserve attention from contemporary theorists who are interested in a public philosophy that discourages civic passivity. Thoreau’s account of democratic citizenship is sufficiently morally demanding to require citizens to take action against political injustice without expecting them to devote their lives wholly to the public good. At the same time, I urge contemporary political

⁵ As Daniel Levine notes, radical thinkers and movements in the American political tradition are often committed to liberal ideals. See Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971).

theorists and activists to be cautious about whole-heartedly embracing Thoreau's account of responsible democratic citizenship. Thoreau's account of responsible citizenship relies heavily upon the assumption that political problems result from blameworthy individual behavior and that therefore what is needed are projects of personal moral reform. Not only is this an unpersuasive description of most political problems, but, as William Connolly and Iris Marion Young have pointed out, there are considerable risks to political rhetoric that relies heavily upon blame.

Having raised concerns about Thoreau's understanding of responsibility, I turn to Addams's political and moral thought. Addams's political project bears a number of similarities to Thoreau's. *Twenty Years at Hull House* resembles *Walden*, in that Addams draws upon her own experiences to advocate a particular vision of how to live ethically in a democratic society. Like Thoreau, Addams criticized her fellow citizens for failing to accept responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions and for uncritically accepting social norms and practices. Addams avoided many of Thoreau's mistakes because she recognized that political injustices result from both individual behavior and structural processes and can only be resolved through cooperative action. Social cooperation, as envisioned by Addams, would ensure that shared problems would be resolved in a manner that included the diverse perspectives and experiences of individual citizens. Unfortunately, the kind of cooperation Addams envisioned is not always possible in democratic societies and Addams offers little guidance as to what citizens should do in such situations. More worrisomely, her excessive faith in the moral worth of cooperative solutions may make it difficult for democratic citizens to tolerate dissent from political outcomes that enjoy significant popular support.

My analysis of Thoreau and Addams calls attention to challenges faced by those who attempt to link individual autonomy with responsibility for political outcomes. It also, however, demonstrates that a political ethics that links individual autonomy and responsibility discourages civic complacency while avoiding many of the problems that are frequently associated with morally demanding accounts of citizenship. Citizens who recognize that they are implicated in the behavior of their institutions will feel compelled to actively resist unjust and inefficient outcomes. Citizens who have a healthy respect for individual self-rule, however, will not feel compelled to devote their lives to the public good or to uncritically accept the demands of political authorities and zealous majorities. Nor will they be unconcerned with the consequences of their political actions. For these reasons, I conclude that democratic theorists should emulate Thoreau and Addams in linking democratic self-rule and responsibility for political outcomes, but should attempt to do so without placing too much emphasis upon individual blame or excessive faith in social cooperation.

I. Thoreau: Responsibility, Individuality and Democratic Citizenship

As explained in Chapter One, Thoreau viewed democracy as a system of government whose purpose was to secure conditions that were conducive to individual self-rule. Self-rule, for Thoreau, was a heroic endeavor, in which individuals struggle against social pressures and self-deception, and perhaps even forgo personal comforts, in order to ensure that their actions conform to principles that they have consciously chosen. Individuals cannot, Thoreau insisted, claim to be self-ruling if they do not accept responsibility for their own thoughts and actions. Furthermore, self-ruling citizens must accept responsibility not simply for actions that directly cause harm, but also for actions that indirectly contribute to harm. Individuals

are responsible for actions that indirectly contribute to harm because as self-ruling creatures they are in control of their behavior. In many cases, individuals can avoid implication in harm simply by refraining from certain actions, such as purchasing tea or coffee produced through slave labor. In situations where passivity appears to imply consent, individuals must take action to demonstrate their opposition.

Thoreau, it is worth noting, held citizens responsibility not simply for their actions, but for the principles that motivate those actions and he expected citizens to make some effort to personally reflect on those principles. He did not, however, view such reflection as a purely inner dialogue, but rather encouraged his readers to reflect upon their own experiences and experiments, and to seek out experiences that might enable them to view social and political life from new perspectives. Contemplation of experience was, he believed, a democratic practice in that it discouraged uncritical acceptance of tradition and authority, and would hopefully make citizens more aware of the extent to which their society does not fully live up to democratic principles.

Thoreau's political ethics have always been appealing to those who share his belief that complacent acceptance of social norms and practices is a significant source of evil. In recent decades, Hannah Arendt's description of Adolf Eichmann has been cited as proof that Thoreau's concerns about the dangers of civic complacency were justified.⁶ Eichmann, as described by Arendt, organized the deportation of European Jews to concentration camps not because he desperately desired to exterminate human beings, but because he felt morally

⁶ George Kateb argues that a "serious and cultivated individualism" such as that of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman can discourage the thoughtless deference to political authorities and uncritical acceptance of national projects that characterized Adolf Eichmann. See "On Political Evil, from *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 199-222. Dana Villa's defense of moral individualism, a tradition that he believes includes both Thoreau and Socrates, is also partly an effort to find a worldview that is fundamentally incompatible with that of Eichmann's. See *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

obligated to obey orders and did not consider himself responsible for the consequences of actions that had been ordered by others. While explaining how bureaucratic institutions and language can make it easier for individuals to convince themselves that they do not bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions, Arendt attributes Eichmann's behavior primarily to the fact that he did not hold himself responsible for either the consequences of his actions or the principles that animated those actions.⁷

It may seem curious that *Eichmann* is often regarded as offering lessons for democratic citizens. After all, direct comparisons between Eichmann and democratic citizens are absurd and morally questionable. Democratic citizens are rarely as directly connected to harmful political outcomes as Eichmann was, and they are not connected (directly or indirectly) to harms as reprehensible as genocide. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* does, however, call our attention to how easily social norms and institutions can discourage individuals from recognizing or resisting harms that are connected to their own behavior, a phenomena that is by no means confined to the Third Reich. Like Eichmann, democratic citizens frequently function in circumstances that distance individuals from harms that are connected to their behavior. A citizen who pays taxes to the American government may not ever encounter the victims of her country's military endeavors. She may feel (rightly in most cases) that her behavior has little effect upon foreign policy outcomes and therefore find it difficult to understand why foreign military adventures should be of any concern to her. The fact that harmful institutions and processes are integrated into the daily routines of democratic citizens and frequently lauded as vital to the public good also makes it difficult for citizens to recognize, let alone resist, harms in which they are implicated.

⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Books: New York, 1963).

Furthermore, many of the problems that confront democratic publics could be resolved if more citizens accepted responsibility for harms that are connected to their own behavior. Global warming poses a substantial threat to public safety and economic prosperity, and it is a problem in which all citizens are implicated. The refusal of individual citizens to make an effort to reduce their own carbon footprints or to encourage their political institutions to restrict green house gas emissions allows global warming to continue almost unabated. Similarly, in the last decade, the American military has been involved in two foreign wars that initially received tremendous public support; in neither case, has the American public made much effort to ensure that the wars were successful or at least adequately funded. There has been little soul-searching among citizens who initially supported the wars and have since changed their minds. Responsibility for disastrous military decisions, it is assumed, rests with political and military leaders, not with the citizens who overwhelmingly supported those decisions. Such lack of responsibility on the part of citizens means that there is little reason to expect the American public to make any effort to discourage reckless military endeavors in the future.

In both cases mentioned above, the refusal of citizens to address harms that are connected to their own behavior is made easier by institutions and processes that distance individuals from the consequences of their actions, and by public norms which cast military endeavors and thoughtless consumerism as benign or even noble behaviors. Given that public norms and institutions frequently encourage moral complacency, a number of democratic theorists have expressed concern about the emphasis upon civic participation and collective action that often dominates discussions of civic virtue. It is necessary, Dana Villa argues, to find alternatives to accounts of democratic citizenship which insist “that ‘good citizenship’

consists, above all else, in the active service of something bigger than the self” but which do not encourage citizens to seriously consider what projects are being endorsed.⁸ According to many contemporary theorists, Thoreau offers such an alternative.

For Thoreau, ethical citizenship is not about putting the public good over one’s own interests and concerns; it is about accepting responsibility for one’s own behavior. Responsible democratic citizens must not, he insists, allow themselves to be implicated in causes that violate core convictions; nor can they uncritically conform to public opinion or received opinion. Brian Walker argues that Thoreau points toward a democratic practice of “self-cultivation” which enables citizens to maintain some degree of autonomy from the “the various other cultivational projects that float around in the air in modern society,” projects that are both undemocratic and extremely seductive.⁹ According to Walker, Thoreau’s ironic confession that he could “spit a Mexican with relish” after listening to military exercises and songs is an indication of how easily humans are swayed by social pressure and demonstrates why moral autonomy must be deliberately cultivated.

In addition to offering a political ethics that discourages unreflective participation in harmful institutions and processes, Thoreau also calls our attention to why so many democratic theorists and citizens find such behavior to be morally problematic. It is not simply that the failure of democratic citizens to feel accountable for outcomes to which they contribute allows unjust and inefficient practices to continue, but that such behavior does not seem entirely consistent with the kind of self-rule toward which many nineteenth and twentieth-century democrats aspire. If one agrees with John Stuart Mill that “human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a

⁸ Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xi.

⁹ Walker, “Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation,” *Political Theory* 29, no. 2 (2001), 163.

tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the forces that make it a living thing,” than it is hard not to share Thoreau’s frustration with his neighbors’ complacency.¹⁰ After all, it seems reasonable that self-ruling individuals who expect to choose their own life-plans would not allow themselves to contribute to outcomes that violate their core convictions. Institutions and norms that discourage individuals from accepting responsibility for harms in which they are implicated are troubling to democrats because they seem to promote behavior that is antithetical to self-rule. In demanding that citizens accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions and make an effort to cultivate their own moral judgment, Thoreau does not simply offer a political ethic that discourages complacent acceptance of unjust outcomes; he describes a political ethics that better enables citizens to better achieve the self-rule toward which many democrats aspire.

II. Re-thinking Responsibility, Autonomy and Blame

The common perception of Thoreau as a reckless, naïve, anti-democratic and apolitical actor bears little resemblance to the author of *Walden*, *Cape Cod* or even “Resistance to Civil Disobedience.” Not all of the problems with Thoreau, however, are rooted in misunderstanding. Some of these problems are similar to the ones that Addams identified with Tolstoy.¹¹ Like Tolstoy, Thoreau failed to appreciate the limited efficacy of personal projects of moral reform, and consequently emphasized the importance of cultivating individual moral judgment at the expense of dialogue with others. Even George Kateb, who generally treats Thoreau as an exemplary democratic citizen, laments Thoreau’s complete rejection of ordinary political activities such as voting or campaigning for office. Democratic political life would be improved, Kateb argues, by actors who share Thoreau’s

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), 56-7.

¹¹ Addams’s criticisms of Tolstoy are discussed in Chapter Two.

commitment to integrity and freethinking.¹² It is hard to imagine what would motivate a Thoreauian actor to participate in ordinary political activity, however, given that politics rarely enables individuals to ensure that their actions are fully consistent with principles that they have consciously chosen. As I explain below, significant revisions to Thoreau's understanding of both responsibility and individual autonomy are required not simply to create a political ethics that is more amenable to political action, but also to create an ethics that is capable of living up to Thoreau's own standards.

One of the biggest problems with Thoreau's political ethics is his fixation upon blameworthy individual behavior. Individual American citizens, he suggested, are responsible for slavery and imperialism because they have behaved in a blameworthy manner; they have allowed themselves to become implicated in outcomes that violate their moral convictions. While Thoreau did not believe that humans were created to be morally pure creatures or to exert complete control over their own fates, he assumed that humans usually have the ability to choose life plans that are compatible with their own individual geniuses without violating the rights of others. Thus, citizens who have allowed themselves to become implicated in political and economic injustice are deserving of blame. Thoreau's insistence upon the need for individual projects of moral reform was related to his belief that blameworthy individual behavior is the primary cause of political injustices, such as slavery and imperialism. "It is not the worst reason that reform should be a private and individual enterprise that perchance the evil might also be private."¹³

Thoreau's assessment of the relationship between individual behavior and political injustice is not persuasive. Most political injustices, including slavery, are not caused solely

¹² Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 100-105.

¹³ "Reform and the Reformers," in *The Higher Law*, 183. Thoreau makes a similar point in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, 159-65.

by individual action. They are also, in Larry May's words, caused by "the combined interactions of multiple individuals."¹⁴ In the case of slavery, one can pinpoint individual actions that directly enabled some human beings to buy and sell others. One can also, however, point to individual actions that only contributed to slavery when combined with the actions of other individuals and groups. For example, the decision of Thoreau's neighbors to pay their poll taxes implicated them in slavery because their elected officials decided to implement the Fugitive Slave Law. Furthermore, as Iris Marion Young explains, it is not fair to blame individuals for merely contributing to social processes that result in harm, if they do not have a feasible alternative. Young illustrates this point with the example of Westerners who buy clothing produced in foreign sweatshops. Blaming Westerners for buying such clothing is inappropriate, since there are no clear alternatives. Few people have the time to make their own clothing or the money to personally commission others to do so.¹⁵

This is not to say that participating in a process that results in injustice is never blameworthy. However, even when blameworthy behavior does contribute to injustice, the degree of blame is not always equal to the degree of harm. Thoreau's neighbors probably deserved some blame for consuming sugar and tea produced by plantation labor, as this did contribute to the survival of the plantation system and neither of these products is necessary for human life. They might also be blamed for failing to protest activities that violated their moral principles. The sins of Thoreau's neighbors, however, were not equal to the harms in which they were implicated; they were implicated in slavery and murder, but they were not themselves slave-owners and killers and did not deserve to be treated as such. Purchasing sugar that is produced through slave labor when one's own consumer habits have only a

¹⁴ See Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

¹⁵ Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," *Social Philosophy and Policy* (2006). 119.

miniscule effect upon the slave economy is not laudable behavior, but it is hardly the worst of human sins.

Thoreau's condemnation of his fellow citizens also did not take into account the sacrifices that protesting political evil often requires. To be sure, Thoreau recognized that sacrifices must be made, but he continually suggested that what is sacrificed is less than what will be gained. According to Thoreau, those who pursue individual acts of dissent and engage in projects of personal moral reform risk losing personal security, material luxuries and the approval of a corrupt society, whereas they stand to gain integrity and perhaps even the capacity to pursue their own projects. However, the options available to citizens are rarely this straightforward. Nineteenth century citizens who mounted serious protests against slavery risked not only their own wellbeing, but also that of their children and neighbors. They risked the survival of political institutions that allowed them to exercise some control over their own fates and which had been established at considerable cost. Moreover, they took such risks with no guarantee of success. It was not necessarily the case that Thoreau's neighbors failed to act upon their convictions due to cowardice, complacency or trivial concerns, but rather that they decided that acting upon their opposition to slavery with slim prospects of success was not worth sacrificing genuine goods and violating genuine commitments, such as their commitment to protecting the welfare of their children or ensuring the survival of "comparatively free" institutions. Most of us do not face a clear-cut choice between being fulfilled moral agents and being unfulfilled slaves to a corrupt system.

One might defend Thoreau against such criticisms on the grounds that his reliance upon blame was a rhetorical strategy designed to motivate radical social change.¹⁶ By convincing Northern audiences that their lives were completely tainted by their association with slavery and that they were not as morally superior to slave-owners as they may have thought, he hoped to encourage Northerners to take a more radical stand.¹⁷ The idea that Thoreau's emphasis upon blame was simply a rhetorical strategy is unpersuasive, given the extent to which this position reflects Thoreau's overall worldview, which assumes that those who cultivate individual moral autonomy can avoid implication in political and economic injustice. Furthermore, even if one accepts that blurring the lines between actual slave-holders and those who are in some way connected to slavery was a useful rhetorical strategy in the nineteenth century, this does not mean that it is a useful strategy in all circumstances.

Thoreau's contemporary admirers, many of whom seek to apply his political ethics to problems that are more ambiguous than slavery, rarely seem to acknowledge that attributing complex outcomes to blameworthy individual behavior is not a harmless means of calling attention to political evil.¹⁸ It is a rhetorical strategy that encourages particular solutions. If political evils and crises are primarily caused by blameworthy individual behavior, then individual acts of dissent and projects of personal moral reform are the most appropriate solution. If, as seems likely, such problems result from the combined interactions of

¹⁶ Joel Olsen argues that opponents of slavery used hyperbolic rhetoric strategically in order to convince moderates that compromise with slave-owners was morally unacceptable. See "The Freshness of Fanaticism: The Abolitionist Defense of Zealotry," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 4 (2007): 684-701.

¹⁷ In terms of shaping popular opinion, Thoreau's lectures defending John Brown were far more effective than his refusal to pay the poll tax.

¹⁸ Contemporary theorists look to Thoreau for insight into a variety of problems. In *The Inner Ocean*, Kateb focuses upon nuclear war and state-sponsored violence. In *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), George Schulman examines Thoreau's capacity to generate resistance to white supremacy. Numerous political theorists and public intellectuals have turned to Thoreau for insight into environmental destruction, including Jane Bennett and Wendell Berry.

individuals and institutions, then individual moral reform is unlikely to be the best response. Indeed, Thoreau's focus upon blameworthy individual behavior seems likely to distract attention from the social structures that both incentivize harmful behavior and implicate well-intentioned people in evil.

Furthermore, misappropriating blame can have harmful consequences. Individuals or groups who are viewed as engaging in blameworthy behavior are often marginalized or punished. They are often expected to bear a disproportionate share of the costs associated with addressing the consequences of their behavior. Misappropriating blame can result in unjustified punishment and social exclusion, particularly when blame is placed on those who lack political and economic power.

If, as William Connolly argues, Western societies are prone to generating unjust attributions of blame, then there is especially good reason to avoid relying heavily upon blame as a rhetorical strategy. The Western moral and philosophic tradition, Connolly explains, has typically assumed that "for every evil there must be an agent (or set of agents) whose level of responsibility is proportionate to the seriousness of the evil."¹⁹ This is a reassuring assumption, as it allows humans to take comfort in the idea that evil and suffering are not embedded in the natural order of things, but are rather the result of deviant human behavior. Unfortunately, while this assumption may be reassuring, it is not based in a plausible interpretation of human experience. Some evils, such as the Black Death, cannot be attributed to blameworthy human behavior. Moreover, even when suffering can be attributed to blameworthy human behavior, the degree of blame often does not equal the degree of suffering. Western assumptions about responsibility can be a source of cruelty because they

¹⁹ Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 103.

encourage Westerners to blame political and social evils on deviants in order to relieve their own anxieties about the human condition. By blaming deviants for political and social evils, “normals” can avoid acknowledging their own complicity in such problems, and retain their confidence in the goodness of the universe.²⁰ In this way, the notion that harm results from blameworthy individual behavior encourages scapegoating, often of socially marginalized groups.

Thoreau did not single out social outcasts or misfits for blame and punishment; indeed, by most standards he himself was a social outcast. As noted in Chapter One, Thoreau at times seemed capable of appreciating people who fell short of the heroic self-reliance he admired, particularly when he is recalling his travels throughout New England. In *Walden* and the anti-slavery essays, however, Thoreau attributed political and social evil to behavior that deviated from his own narrow understanding of the life choices that are suitable to morally autonomous beings. Evils such as slavery and imperialism exist, he explained, because Americans have chosen life-projects unworthy of autonomous moral beings. It is not entirely clear that Thoreau’s neighbors had completely abandoned their moral autonomy or whether Thoreau was simply unable to appreciate choices that differ from his own. In “Life Without Principle,” Thoreau recalled observing a stonecutter craft a lawn ornament and concluded that the stonecutter’s labor was wasted because it was not performed for his own fulfillment, but for the pleasure of an idle and self-indulgent neighbor.²¹ The stonemason is, according to Thoreau, the product of a culture that values conformity and public esteem over individuality and moral integrity. One wonders, however, if Thoreau is indeed correct that the stonecutter’s labor is completely inauthentic because it is intended to please others;

²⁰ *Identity/Difference*, 95-123.

²¹ “Life Without Principle,” 157.

perhaps the stonecutter received genuine pleasure from beautifying the homes of his clients. Nor is it clear that labor that is intended to benefit others is always morally corrupting, or that the failure of Americans to lead the kind of life that Thoreau associates with moral autonomy was a sufficient explanation for the continued existence of slavery.

While Thoreau's neighbors may have been complacent and unreflective, they were not necessarily completely consumed by inauthentic desires. Most of Thoreau's neighbors were likely neither heroic individuals who washed their hands of evil nor abject slaves to corrupt institutions. Denying the existence of a middle ground between these two extremes and attributing political and social ills entirely to blameworthy behavior, as Thoreau frequently did in his anti-slavery writings, may be a useful rhetorical strategy in certain situations. Ironically, it may also encourage precisely the kind of irresponsible behavior that Thoreau sought to avoid, particularly when one identifies one's own lifestyle as offering freedom from harm, and that of others as leading to degeneracy and political evil.

Thoreau's encounter with the Fields family illustrates how Thoreau's assumption that blameworthy individual behavior is the primary cause of political harms can lead to morally questionable behavior and conclusions. Thoreau found the Fields, a family of recent Irish immigrants, to be completely incapable of moral autonomy, describing them as passive participants in social processes that hinder their own and other's wellbeing. As noted in Chapter One, Thoreau's reaction of the Fields reflects anti-Irish sentiments that were common in nineteenth century New England. Thoreau's description of Field and his wife, however, is unsettling for several reasons that have nothing to do with these sentiments. First, confident that his life choices have put him on the path to moral integrity, Thoreau seems unaware of the fact that his is implicated in Field's misfortune. As a citizen of New England,

he was contributing to a political system that ignored the concerns of Fields and other Irish immigrants. Second, Thoreau's insistence on blaming the Fields for their own suffering and for the suffering of others seems almost cruel, since the Fields lacked the political and social power to alter their situation. Finally, it is not clear how accurate a description of the Fields Thoreau was able to offer, given that he seemed not to have made any effort to solicit or consider their perspective on the situation. While Thoreau's conviction that reform is an individual endeavor made him generally uninterested in other people's opinions, this lack of interest was likely re-enforced in this case by his sense that the Fields were not leading a lifestyle conducive to moral autonomy.

One could attribute Thoreau's fixation upon blame to the fact that his understanding of self-rule was influenced by liberal individualism, a tradition that is frequently criticized for unfairly blaming individuals for their own suffering.²² Preoccupation with blameworthy individual behavior, however, is by no means confined to liberal individualism, but is found among adherents of many ideologies. Tolstoy was hardly a liberal individualist, but as noted in the last chapter, he was even more preoccupied with rooting out blameworthy behavior than Thoreau. More importantly, unfair attributions of blame are not consistent with the understanding of self-rule endorsed by Thoreau, Mill and numerous other democratic thinkers. Democratic self-rule requires individuals to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions, reflect honestly upon their own actions and principles and have the freedom to pursue a variety of life-plans. Unfair attributions of blame for public

²² This is in fact the position that Connolly seems to take, at least in regard to the theory of democratic individuality that George Kateb constructs from the writings of Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman. See *Identity/Difference*, 72-81. According to Connolly, Kateb relies upon liberal understandings of individual freedom that place unfair burdens of responsibility upon individuals and thus inevitably lead to resentment. At the same time, Connolly also attributes the liberal preoccupation with individual freedom and blame to the influence of Christianity on Western culture.

problems threaten all of these goals, particularly when blame is placed upon groups who deviate from traditional norms or when it enables citizens to deceive themselves into believing that their own hands are clean. Thoreau's understanding of responsibility and self-rule must be revised in order to fulfill purposes that he considered central to democracy. In what follows, I argue that Addams offers some insight into how this might be done.

III. Addams on Democracy and Shared Responsibility

Like Thoreau, Addams expected democratic citizens to accept some responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions. Her understanding of responsibility placed less emphasis upon blame, however. Citizens bear responsibility for political outcomes, she argued, not because those outcomes are necessarily the product of blameworthy individual behavior, but because citizens affect and are affected by political outcomes. For example, political corruption was rampant in turn-of-the-century Chicago because of low moral standards among political leaders and other elites, because voters continually turned a blind eye to the improprieties of their elected leaders and because the political system rewarded corrupt behavior. The residents of Chicago bore responsibility for political corruption, Addams concluded, even if they neither voted for corrupt officials or handed out bribes. All citizens are connected to a political process that incentivize corruption, as they sustain the process with their tax dollars and are affected by the outcomes that result from this process; therefore, all citizens bear some responsibility for political corruption.²³

Addams's understanding of the responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship resembles the theories of shared responsibility recently developed by Larry May. Shared responsibility, according to May, applies to harms caused by "the way in which each of us interacts with others," rather than harms caused by blameworthy individual or group

²³ This is discussed at greater length in the previous chapter.

behavior.²⁴ Shared responsibility is accompanied by an obligation to address the harm, but not necessarily by guilt or blame. Furthermore, because responsibility is shared, individuals are not expected to address harmful outcomes solely through their own individual effort. For Addams, however, shared responsibility is not simply about recognizing that one's actions contribute to larger social processes and institutions, as it is for May. Shared responsibility, for Addams, was also about acknowledging that one's wellbeing is affected by social processes and institutions.

Addams's ideas about responsibility were located within a democratic tradition of political thought that expects individuals to accept some accountability for their own fates so as to avoid complete dependency upon others. While some participants in this tradition assume that individuals can accept responsibility for their own wellbeing without being active participants in public life, Addams concluded that the wellbeing of democratic citizens is significantly affected by the behavior of their political institutions, behavior that is in turn shaped by the actions and inactions of their fellow citizens. For this reason, she believed that citizens could not assume responsibility for their own fates without accepting shared responsibility for political outcomes and for each other's wellbeing. Democratic citizens, Addams concluded, share responsibility for political outcomes because those outcomes are affected by their behavior *and* because political outcomes affect their wellbeing.

In many ways, Addams offers a more persuasive account of the ethical obligations that accompany democratic citizenship than Thoreau. While democracy is premised upon the idea that individuals should be allowed to exercise more control over their own fates than other societies, it does not give individuals unlimited control. If democratic institutions are functioning properly, they will reflect the diverse wishes and perspectives of democratic

²⁴ May, *Sharing Responsibility*, 38.

citizens, as opposed to the wishes of a few individuals or groups. Because democratic citizens do not always agree as to what constitutes harm, the democratic process often produces outcomes that many citizens consider harmful. It is for this reason that principled withdrawal often seems appealing. Principled withdrawal is rarely, however, possible in modern democratic societies. Citizens can only avoid contributing to the maintenance of political institutions with great difficulty, and they cannot avoid benefiting from public services, such as police protection. As Addams explained when describing her disagreement with Tolstoy, those who attempt to disentangle themselves from political institutions rarely do so successfully, and thus end up bearing responsibility for having abandoned those institutions to the helpless and unscrupulous. Nor can citizens prevent their political institutions from wielding significant power over their own aspirations and wellbeing. In a society where just political outcomes cannot be achieved without cooperative action, individuals who are concerned only with tending their own gardens are neither promoting their own wellbeing nor protecting their own integrity.

Because democratic citizens do not have complete control over the behavior of their fellow citizens and political leaders, it does not seem fair to blame individual democratic citizens for being implicated in harm. At the same time, individual citizens should not be let completely off the hook, as they do have some influence over their political system. Democratic citizens can work with others to address shared problems, and they can voice their objections to policies they consider harmful. Furthermore, given that citizens receive benefits from their political institutions, maintain them with their tax dollars and have some input into the selection of political leaders, democratic institutions can in a certain sense claim to be acting on their citizens' behalf. Citizens who deny any responsibility for their

political system – a system that affects their lives, to which they contribute and which claims to act in their name - are behaving as subjects, rather than self-ruling citizens who accept responsibility for their own fates. However, shared rather than individual moral responsibility is often a better means of describing the kind of responsibility that accompanies democratic citizenship.

One potential problem with Addams's account of shared responsibility is that it seems to place excessive burdens on those who have already been victimized. If all participants share responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions, then the victims of political injustice share responsibility for their own suffering. Those who have been coerced into prostitution, for example, share responsibility for the crimes that have been committed against them.²⁵ Holding citizens responsible for harms committed against them is less unreasonable than it may initially seem. First, claiming that victims share responsibility for their own suffering does not mean that they have behaved in a blameworthy manner. It simply means that they have an obligation to address the cause of their suffering. Second, ignoring the responsibility of victims may actually contribute to their victimization. The argument that victims cannot be held at least partly responsible for their own rehabilitation implies that victims are incapable of taking any control over their own fates. Not only is this demeaning, but it also can be used to justify excluding victims from being involved in designing policies that are intended to help them. As Victoria Bissel Brown explains, Addams's increased willingness to hold her neighbors responsible for addressing urban

²⁵ Forced prostitution or sexual slavery was relatively common in industrial Chicago, and Addams argued that Chicagoans shared responsibility for this problem. While Addams sometimes suggested that all prostitution is involuntary, in the sense that women often resort to prostitution due to lack of other alternatives, when she wrote about "forced prostitution," she meant women (frequently recent immigrants) who were either tricked or kidnapped into prostitution. See in particular Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2002).

problems coincided with her increased respect for her neighbor's insights into their own situations.²⁶ Finally, there is significant evidence to suggest that victims benefit from taking part in policies that are designed to help them. Victims often obtain satisfaction from playing a role in solving their own problems.

There are situations in which victims are incapable of taking steps to remedy their situation – either they lack the resources that effective reform would require, they fear violent retribution or they have suffered severe emotional trauma. In such cases, it is probably unfair to expect victims to accept responsibility for their situation. Nor is it fair to expect victims to completely remedy their situation without assistance and moral support from those who have more resources, as well as from those whose behavior may have directly caused their suffering. At the same time, those who are committed to democratic self-rule must reject the notion that victims of injustice bear no responsibility for improving their situation and must therefore be taken care of by others.²⁷

Of course, the claim that everybody is implicated in harm can be used to evade the reality that some hands are dirtier than others. Indeed, some slave-owners excused their behavior by arguing that because all Americans were responsible for contributing to an economic system that made slavery profitable, slave owners should not be judged too harshly or forced to shoulder the burdens that emancipation would entail. While the slave-owners had a point that many non-slave owners profited from the plantation system, it was simply not the

²⁶ Victoria Bissel Brown, *The Education of Jane Addams* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 252-3.

²⁷ Young's social-structural model of responsibility requires that "those who can properly be argued to be victims of structural injustice can also be said to share responsibility with others who perpetrate the unjust structures," "Responsibility and Global Justice," 123-124. Yet, Young does not offer a clear explanation as to why victims should be held responsible, other than that they are participants in social structures that cause harm. In arguing that accepting responsibility for the institutions in which one participates is a central component of democratic self-rule, I offer a more persuasive explanation as to why victims share responsibility for remedying their situation.

case that all profited equally. Nor did all participants have the same degree of power to change the system. As a slave owner, Thomas Jefferson, could have freed his slaves after his death, had his finances been in better shape. Subsequent generations of slave-owners actively took steps to preserve slavery, by ensuring its spread to other territories and making it difficult for others to free their slaves. Furthermore, the slave owners and traders did not become implicated in harm through ordinary social interactions; they were engaging in behavior that was both reprehensible and a direct cause of harm. In such cases, the claim that all participants in the American economic system shared responsibility for the institutions of slavery might actually function to disguise the extent to which some participants bear more responsibility than others, and thus can legitimately be asked to bear a greater portion of the cost of remedying the situation.

While citizens may share responsibility for political problems, this responsibility is not always evenly shared. To some extent, Addams seemed to have recognized this. In general, she assumed that responsibility should be adjudicated at least partly based upon the capacity of particular agents to address particular problems. For example, Addams admired her neighbor's decision to provide tea to a union organizer because she believed that this was all that the elderly and overworked woman was capable of doing.²⁸ On the other hand, she criticized another neighbor for failing to participate in neighborhood efforts to improve the cleanliness of the water supply because the woman clearly had the time and energy to do so.²⁹ Addams also differentiated between citizens who become implicated in harm through relatively innocent activities, and those who willingly profited at others' expense. Thus, while she held both ordinary citizens and brothel owners responsible for forced prostitution,

²⁸ Addams, *The Long Road of Women's Memories*, 46-7.

²⁹ Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 296-8.

she certainly did not imply that they were equally responsible. Ordinary citizens are responsible in that they are implicated in forced prostitution and therefore have some obligation to take steps to end forced prostitution. Brothel owners, on the other hand, are responsible in the sense that they have engaged in blameworthy behavior that has caused harm to others, and are deserving of criticism and punishment.³⁰

As noted in Chapter Two, Addams had little respect for individuals whom she regarded as entirely self-serving and was particularly disturbed by people who showed no concern for the wellbeing of their own families and neighbors. Aside from her insistence that complete disregard for the welfare of other human beings is morally reprehensible, Addams did not provide clear criteria for distinguishing between those who are deserving of blame and those who are not. Those who are looking for insight into this problem must turn to other sources. Her political ethics serves other purposes; in particular, she demonstrates that shared responsibility is a central feature of democratic citizenship and she reminds democratic citizens that they should not be too quick to attribute political and social problems to the behavior of others. Democratic societies cannot be neatly divided into those who are implicated in harm, and those who have clean hands. This does not mean that all citizens are equally guilty. It does, however, mean that those who believe that they have entirely clean hands are likely deceiving themselves about the innocence of their own actions. It also means that citizens should be hesitant to conclude that other people's lives are thoroughly corrupt or foolish, particularly if those people lead lives that are very different from their own. Restraint

³⁰ Addams's intuitions on how to divide shared responsibility are fairly similar to May and Young's. May proposes that responsibility should be divided based on the degree of control particular agents exerted over the outcome and the extent to which individual agents engaged in blameworthy behavior. See *Sharing Responsibility*, 29. Young argues that "connection, power and privilege" should shape individual's understanding of responsibility for structural injustice, noting that "where individuals and organizations do not have sufficient energy and resources to respond to all structural injustices to which they are connected, they should focus on those where they have more capacity to influence structural process," "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 386.

in the use of blame is necessary because erroneously blaming political problems on deviant behavior violates the celebration of individuality that is essential to democratic flourishing. Restraint is also necessary because democratic citizens share responsibility for problems that are both complicated and rarely limited to their own particular communities. If democratic citizens are to address the problems for which they are responsible, they must be capable of working with those who have different habits, experiences and perspectives. Such cooperation is likely to be difficult if democratic citizens insist upon blaming political problems on those who deviate from their own standards.³¹

If Thoreau had been practicing the restraint advocated by Addams, the dialogue with John Field would have been less troubling. Even in this scenario, Thoreau would not have cast Field as a victim who bears no responsibility for his circumstances. If Field is to be treated as a self-ruling citizen, he must be expected to accept some responsibility for his own welfare and the behavior of the institutions in which he participates. Thoreau would, however, have recognized that Field's behavior is significantly constrained by his circumstances. Thus, Field cannot necessarily be blamed for participating in unjust circumstances, but he can be expected to take action against unjust circumstances, if given the opportunity to do so. Most importantly, Thoreau would not have treated Field as somebody who was too tainted by a corrupt system to have any insight into his own behavior.

Likewise, an analysis of the environmental crisis that is informed by Addams's insights would be different from ones that focus entirely upon identifying and correcting blameworthy individual behavior. Such an analysis would acknowledge that the

³¹ Addams's commitment to the "sympathetic interpretation" of others' behavior is explained in the previous chapter.

environmental crisis is not solely the result of blameworthy individual behavior, but rather results from a combination of blameworthy behavior and institutional constraints. This analysis would not allow those who have intentionally disregarded (or sought ways around) environmental regulations to escape punishment or suggest that changes in individual and corporate behavior are unnecessary. But it would also make an effort to ensure that those who have broken no laws and whose livelihood depends upon unsustainable economic practices will not be compelled to bear the entire cost of addressing the environmental crisis. It would also encourage environmental reformers not to condemn too harshly those who fail to live up to their own standards of sustainable living, as those citizens' choices are likely constrained and the reformers themselves are not necessarily leading lives that are completely free of ambiguity.

In describing the responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship as shared, Addams retains much of what is valuable in Thoreau's political ethics, while avoiding many of his mistakes. Like Thoreau, she reminds her readers that citizens who aspire to be self-ruling must accept some responsibility for the behavior of their governments. Her description of the relationship between individual citizens and political injustice is, however, more plausible than Thoreau's. In many cases, it simply does not make sense to hold individuals personally responsible for political injustice, given that their contribution is neither voluntary nor easily avoidable. Furthermore, because she does not assume that political injustice is caused entirely by blameworthy behavior, her political ethics is less likely than Thoreau's to encourage scapegoating.

Addams also resembles Thoreau in that she offers a political ethic that expects citizens to critically evaluate their own behavior. In insisting that responsibility for political

problems is shared, Addams did not allow democratic citizens to assume that their way of life is wholly innocent or that they can avoid being implicated in harm, assumptions that often result in complacent acceptance of existing practices, as well as unfair condemnations of those who deviate from accepted norms and habits. Moreover, Addams's argument that complacency and narrow-mindedness often result not from excessive political and civic activity, but rather from relatively limited social interactions is a compelling response to Thoreau's claim that overly engaged citizens are likely to find it impossible to resist the pressures of group indoctrination. If democratic citizens have difficulty subjecting communal norms and practices to moral scrutiny, Addams suggested, the solution may not be to cease civic engagement, but rather to seek out forms of civic engagement that might broaden their understanding of the society in which they live. Those who limit their social interactions to people of their own social position, Addams explained are often ignorant about harms in which they are implicated because they rarely come in contact with those who have been harmed. For example, few middle-class Chicagoans of Addams's era had intimate knowledge of the experiences and perspectives of industrial capitalism's victims, and thus they had little awareness of the extent to which an economic system that benefited them caused significant harm to others.

IV. Civic Housekeeping and Civic Cooperation

In the previous section, I argued that contemporary citizens and theorists can learn a great deal from Addams's account of democratic shared responsibility. In this final section, however, I argue that democratic theorists and citizens who are attracted to Addams's theory of shared responsibility should not unreflectively endorse her beliefs about the relationship between familial and civic life. I begin with a brief analysis of Addams's embrace of

maternalist ideas and policies, a topic that has been the source of considerable scholarly debate. Unlike many of Addams's harsher critics, I am not particularly concerned by her endorsement of the notion that women's maternal experiences enable them to make a distinct contribution to public life; as I explain below, Addams's maternalism was not nearly as coercive as some of her recent critics claim and in any case it is not central to her understanding of shared responsibility.³² I am, however, concerned about her claim that democratic citizens should always be able to discharge shared responsibilities in a cooperative manner, a claim that is significantly influenced by her belief that familial life can serve as a model for civic life.

Addams's embrace of maternalist policies is frequently mentioned by those who believe that her vision of responsible citizenship was the vision of a Victorian elite who expected the rest of society to conform to her moral standards. Her encouragement of women to participate in "civic housekeeping" and support of maternalist policies, such as laws that restricted women's workweek on the grounds that wage labor hindered women's ability to perform their responsibilities as wives and mothers, is one of the most commonly cited examples of Addams's efforts to impose her moral standards upon others. Gwendolyn Mink, for example, concludes that Addams and other Progressive reformers not only assumed that responsible citizenship meant fulfilling traditional gender roles and conforming to Anglo-

³² As noted in the last chapter, Addams argued that the shared responsibilities that accompany membership in a democratic society demanded that women play a greater role in public life than they had been afforded in agrarian and feudal societies. In industrial democratic societies, Addams argued, women could not fulfill their familial duties by remaining solely private creatures. Moreover, given that democratic societies cannot flourish without a healthy and educated citizenship, public life would be improved by the inclusion of women who have unique insight into the needs of children.

white standards of behavior, but also sought to ensure that political and educational institutions would encourage and even compel citizens to conform to these standards.³³

Mink, I think, overstates the extent to which Addams sought to enforce her own moral standards on poor women. While many progressive reformers were intent on controlling and regulating the lives of poor women, this was not Addams's primary mission. She had ideas about how democratic citizens should behave, but these ideas were shaped by her interactions with her neighbors, who did not share her privileged Anglo-American upbringing. Furthermore, the notion that the lives of working class women (and men) should be regulated by government institutions and middle-class reformers is inconsistent with the shared responsibility and social ethics that Addams advocated. To the extent that Addams was involved in promoting welfare policies that were designed by middle class reformers to punish behaviors that they considered immoral, she was not living up to her own ethical standards. Most importantly, as explained in the previous chapter, Addams did not view care-giving as a practice that instilled in women a set of moral imperatives that should be uncritically applied in public life. Addams's insistence upon the political relevance of women's care-giving experiences was part of a broader effort to ensure that political outcomes were informed by diverse perspectives and experiences, and to encourage political actors to learn from people whose experiences are different from their own.

Addams may have, as is frequently argued, embraced maternalist language and policies partly for strategic reasons; her understanding of gender roles was nevertheless traditional when judged by contemporary standards and practices; for example, she was suspicious of the idea that women could be both mothers and participants in the workforce.

³³ Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Given Addams's insistence that ethical standards, including gender roles, must be updated as circumstances change, it is likely that she would have changed her mind about women's workforce participation, particularly when confronted by examples of the many women who do successfully juggle these roles. Regardless of what Addams would have concluded, there is no logical reason why contemporary theorists who are inspired by her account of shared responsibility need embrace her understanding of gender roles; her claim that citizens share responsibility for outcomes that affect their wellbeing and are affected by their behavior does not rest on a particular understanding of gender roles. One can also reject Addams's assumption that care-giving is a role that should be embraced by women without discarding her belief that the experience of care-giving is politically relevant, just like the experience of working in a factory or serving in the military are often assumed to be.

Addams's belief that the mutual interest and empathy that exists among family members can somehow be replicated in political life was, however, central to her understanding of how citizens should understand and discharge their shared responsibilities; it must therefore be carefully evaluated by those who are inspired by her political ethics. Addams viewed political and familial life as similar in that both were cooperative endeavors that enable humans to fulfill needs that are essential to human survival and flourishing; in likening municipal activity to housekeeping, Addams explicitly rejected the idea that politics is about the pursuit of honor, power and glory. She also believed that democratic citizens, like family members, share responsibility for addressing common problems and for securing their collective wellbeing. Because democratic citizens have an interest in each other's wellbeing, she argued, the problems for which citizens share responsibility could be resolved through cooperative effort in a manner that is advantageous to all parties. Democratic citizens

should at the very least, she assumed, be able to put aside their differences and work together during times of crisis, as even many dysfunctional families do; for example, if George Pullman and his employees had been willing to make some concessions, both parties would have benefited. The workers would have gained better working conditions, Pullman would have earned the respect of his employees, both parties would have avoided a long, costly conflict, and all citizens would have benefited from decreased social tension.

On the one hand, Addams's comparison of democratic political activity to "civic housekeeping" contains some important observations about democratic life. Modern democracy is neither a heroic nor an aristocratic enterprise; it is not about pursuing military glory or giving landed elites unfettered freedom to pursue honor and refined pleasures. Modern democracy is an effort to enable individuals to exercise some control over their fates – to choose the projects and goals that play an important role in their lives, and to have some influence over the institutions that enable them to pursue their projects and goals. Grand enterprises and heroic actions are usually not demanded of modern citizens. Most of the problems that confront democratic societies do not require heroic action, but rather thousands of relatively ordinary acts. Responsible democratic citizenship is like housekeeping in that it includes humble enterprises, such as cleaning a road, organizing an after-school program or attending a community meeting. Social movements can enable democratic citizens to play a role in shaping their own fates and lend excitement to democratic politics; however, social movements are not the only means by which citizens can engage in meaningful political action and they rarely offer opportunities for the kind of individual distinction that those of aristocratic inclination tend to value. The responsibilities of modern democratic citizens are

not always unexciting or unpleasant, but they are different from the responsibilities of citizens in cultures that are more concerned with glory, honor and refinement.³⁴

Democratic civic life also resembles familial life in that it is not a realm of unfettered individual independence. Democracy offers its citizens a certain kind of independence. It frees them from complete submission to the whims of others and allows them to be shapers of their own fates. It also gives them the opportunity to pursue their own projects and express their own convictions. These freedoms, however, can only be exercised if citizens recognize that they are dependent upon others in significant ways. Citizens depend upon the support of others to accomplish their political objectives and to retain their freedom; this means that democratic citizens cannot pursue their own personal projects without concern for the welfare of their fellow citizens, and they may become implicated in harms without their express consent. Moreover, when they do enter the political arena, citizens may have to compromise aspects of their own political vision.

While democratic political life may resemble familial life more closely than is often acknowledged, democratic politics cannot resemble family life in the manner Addams envisioned. As Addams herself recognized, democratic societies generally contain a greater diversity of experiences and perspectives than families. The diversity of lifestyles that exist within contemporary democratic societies also hinders consensus. When reacting to public problems, citizens rely upon ideals and information that have been shaped by different experiences. An urban resident who takes it for granted that the government will provide him with transportation, garbage collection and drinking water, and is generally satisfied with how these services have been provided is likely to have a different approach to the role of

³⁴ As Elshtain notes, one of Addams's contributions to democratic theory is her insistence that many responsibilities are thrust upon democratic citizens, rather than resulting from voluntary behaviors. See *Jane Addams and the Dream of Democracy*, 156-7.

government than somebody who comes from a rural area where individual households are expected to maintain their own wells, hire private garbage collectors and provide their own transportation. It was precisely because democratic societies contained such diversity that Addams emphasized the importance of cultivating habits such as empathy, flexibility and humility. Such habits are useful in family life, but they often develop (relatively) naturally within families who share common experiences and values, whereas they require much more effort in political life. The plurality of experiences and perspectives, along with differences in power and status, also make cooperation much more difficult and sometimes impossible in political life.³⁵

In a letter home to his wife, Dewey recalled a disagreement with Addams in which he rejected her argument that conflict is unnecessary, that antagonism results from egoism and hubris as opposed to irreconcilable differences. Dewey's recognition that some conflicts reflect genuine and irresolvable disagreements reflects a more realistic understanding of human experience than Addams's insistence that most conflicts can be resolved if actors approach them with sufficient humility, sympathy and good-will.³⁶ In contexts of deep ideological disagreement, solutions that satisfy all interested parties may not be possible. It is difficult, for example, to imagine a resolution to the abortion debate that would not constitute a genuine loss to interested parties. Moreover, while all citizens are affected by public problems, they are not affected in the same ways. Nor are solutions to those problems likely to impact all citizens in the same manner. My opinion about whether taxes should be raised in order to pay for a public water supply is likely to be different from my neighbor's, if my

³⁵ Given the tension within her own family about her decision to move to Chicago and the domestic abuse that she frequently witnessed in her ward, Addams did not assume that family life is always harmonious; however, she recognized that family members often develop a sense of shared interest and mutual affection that facilitates cooperation despite intense disagreement and thus saw the family as a model for democratic civic life.

³⁶ See Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 80-1.

ground water is contaminated by minerals that significantly reduce water quality and hers is not.³⁷ Likewise, a coalminer in Kentucky and a schoolteacher in L.A. are both affected by global warming, but efforts to reduce carbon dioxide emission are likely to impact the coalminer more than the schoolteacher. Disagreement in such cases occur not simply because humans are unwilling to make personal sacrifices for the common good, but also because they disagree about what a fair distribution of sacrifices would entail. In such situations, it may not be possible for citizens to practice the kind of cooperation that Addams envisioned.

Cooperation, for Addams, was not simply a matter of getting stake-holders to accept previously agreed upon solutions; democratic cooperation required that stake-holders play an active role in shaping outcomes. One of the primary purposes of cooperation in Addams's mind was to ensure that political outcomes reflected the diversity of perspectives and experiences that exist in democratic societies; genuine cooperation therefore required that individuals be willing to express their opinions even if they are unpopular and to listen to opinions that they find objectionable. Cooperative endeavors, she believed, may require participants to compromise their objectives, but only after they have been given a fair hearing. Moreover, genuine cooperation also requires that concessions be distributed among stake-holders.

This kind of cooperation is not easily achieved. As in the case of the Pullman Strike, those in positions of power often fail to recognize the need to make meaningful concessions to those who have little power. Similarly, those who have been victimized by existing social and political conditions are not always able to muster the moral courage to work with those who have benefited (or to recognize that they may also be engaging in behavior that causes

³⁷ Growing up, my parents were the only people in the neighborhood that wanted access to public drinking water. This was partly due to ideological differences about the role of government, but also due to the fact that our well water was of poorer quality than that of most of our neighbors.

harm to others). One can imagine, as Addams did, that the Pullman Strike could have been resolved more equitably, had Pullman been more willing to listen to the worker's demands, had the workers been less quick to resort to violent agitation and had the American government established a system for arbitrating grievances. Nevertheless, the conditions conducive to consensus were lacking in this circumstance, as they are frequently lacking in contemporary democratic societies.

While Addams believed that humanity was evolving in such a way so that cooperative sentiments would increasingly take priority over antagonistic and egoistic emotions and that therefore the inflexibility exhibited by all parties in the Pullman strike would become less common, the events of the past eighty years make it difficult, perhaps even impossible, to share Addams's confidence that human nature is perfectible. There has been considerable progress in some areas – desegregation has facilitated forms of interracial cooperation that were unimaginable eighty years ago. However, progress has been uneven; in many cases, the hostility of contemporary citizens toward recent immigrants, particularly Muslims, rivals the hostility that Addams thought was waning in her own day.³⁸ The popularity of figures such as Glenn Beck suggests that the development of cooperative sentiments is not simply uneven, but reversible. While Beck is certainly capable of encouraging collective endeavors such as rallies, protests and letter writing campaigns, these endeavors rarely entail the respect for diverse opinions that Addams associated with genuinely democratic cooperation.

Citizens who want to accept responsibility for political outcomes that affect their wellbeing may not always be able to pursue their political objectives in a cooperative

³⁸ After President McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist of Polish descent, the United States experienced a wave of hostility toward immigrants that is not dissimilar from the anti-Muslim hysteria of today.

manner. Unfortunately, Addams does not offer much guidance as to how citizens should respond when they find themselves unable to achieve cooperative solutions. Her recollections of her own activities during World War One offer some guidance to citizens who find themselves dissenting from outcomes that are overwhelmingly popular and where dissent is unlikely to be a useful means of persuading public opinion. She does not, however, offer much guidance to citizens who find themselves in situations where dissent might be an effective means of calling citizens' attention to shared problems. Nor does she offer much insight into how citizens might determine when citizens must dissent from political outcomes.

More worrisomely, in a world where the kind of inclusive and respectful cooperation envisioned by Addams is not always possible, excessive confidence in the ability of citizens to achieve cooperative solutions can encourage behavior that violates her own commitment to individual self-rule and expression. Citizens who assume that cooperation is a natural part of democratic life may be tempted to conclude that relevant perspectives are automatically included in democratic political processes and thus fail to recognize when important voices are being ignored. Furthermore, if citizens believe that political outcomes are the result of cooperative effort among political actors who are acting in good faith, then they may be overly quick to dismiss people who dissent from those outcomes as egoistic or reckless individuals whose perspectives do not deserve to be considered. As Addams herself experienced during World War One, dissent is often silenced or strongly discouraged during wartime on the grounds that citizens who genuinely care about the fate of the political community support the war effort.

There is little evidence that Addams was herself overly quick to question the motivations of those who dissented from projects that she regarded as essential. In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, for example, she was surprisingly sympathetic to the young men who stopped attending a club at Hull House because they did not want to associated with “rough characters;” the young men, she conceded, had a point that members of the working classes who aspired to be socially mobile would be judged by their associations. Nevertheless, contemporary democratic citizens and theorists should not embrace Addams’s optimism about the ability of well-intentioned political actors to achieve cooperative solutions; not only is such optimism unwarranted, but it can make it difficult for democratic citizens to treat dissenters with respect.

Conclusion

Both Thoreau and Addams believed that individual self-rule is an important component of democratic citizenship and expected self-ruling citizens to accept some responsibility for the behavior of their governments. This linking of responsibility and democratic self-rule has a number of merits. First, if citizens feel personally implicated in political outcomes, they will be more likely to feel obligated to ensure that their political institutions live up to democratic aspirations. Second, by stressing that citizens who aspire to be self-ruling cannot automatically accept tradition and authority uncritically, Thoreau and Addams discourage complacent acceptance of norms and practices that contribute to political injustice.

On the other hand, it is difficult to articulate an account of responsible democratic citizenship that is not in tension with democratic understandings of self-rule. Many of these problems result from the fact that democracy does not allow unlimited self-rule; individual

citizens cannot always avoid becoming implicated in harms and they cannot always address those harms through individual action. As explained above, Thoreau emphasized blameworthy individual behavior and personal projects of moral reform because he worried that collective action made it difficult for individuals to obey their own moral voices. In focusing upon blameworthy behavior as the cause of political and social ills, however, Thoreau ends up defending a political ethic that encourages precisely the kind of self-loathing and scapegoating of deviant behavior that he believed democratic societies were created to avoid.

Because she recognized that democracy requires shared responsibility, Addams avoids many of Thoreau's mistakes, but ended up over-estimating the extent to which democratic citizens are capable of discharging their shared responsibilities in a cooperative manner. Addams certainly did not intend to create a political ethics that de-legitimated dissent, as her emphasis upon shared responsibility was combined with a commitment to individual moral judgment. Unfortunately, not only are the inclusive cooperative endeavors valued by Addams less easily achieved than she realized, but exclusive forms of cooperation are easily mistaken for more democratic forms. Like Thoreau, Addams ended up endorsing a political ethics that was less conducive to pluralism and individual expression than she realized.

A coherent account of responsible democratic citizenship is not, however, unachievable. In the following chapter, I argue that accepting shared responsibility for public life does not require sacrificing the more fundamental kind of responsibility valued by Thoreau: responsibility for the principles that animate their actions. Shared responsibility remains something toward which democratic citizens should aspire, even if they can no

longer have faith that humanity is evolving in a way that makes cooperation more possible and even if political conditions no longer seem to favor the progressive politics that Addams associated with shared responsibility. In response to such changes, I stress the importance of both principled cooperation and principled dissent, and argue that responsible democratic citizenship calls for even greater humility, patience and willingness to live with moral ambiguity than even Addams realized.

5. Democracy and Shared Responsibility

The failure of democratic citizens to accept responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions is frequently lamented. However, it is not always obvious why citizens should accept such responsibility. After all, in Western moral philosophy, individuals have traditionally been held responsible for outcomes that are causally linked to blameworthy actions. Because individual behavior rarely determines political outcomes, the idea that individual citizens bear responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions is not entirely compatible with traditional Western understandings of responsibility.¹ And while a number of prominent philosophers have recently articulated notions of collective or shared responsibility that are intended to apply to outcomes that result from collective social process, it is not self-evident that such notions are compatible with democratic norms. Nor is it clear what accepting such responsibility would entail.

In the first two chapters, I analyzed the political ethics of Thoreau and Addams, both of whom believed that democratic notions of self-rule require citizens to accept some responsibility for political outcomes. In the previous chapter, I assessed what contemporary thinkers and citizens can learn from Thoreau and Addams. Thoreau, I explained, provides a compelling argument that citizen cannot achieve the kind of self-rule toward which many democrats aspire unless they accept some responsibility for political outcomes. Unfortunately, Thoreau's understanding of self-rule and responsibility places too much emphasis upon uncovering and eliminating blameworthy individual behavior, a problem that continues to plague American discussions of responsible citizenship. Addams, on the other

¹ For more on the limitations of traditional understandings of moral responsibility see Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2004): 365-388, and "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," *Social Philosophy and Policy* (2006).

hand, recognized that many of the problems that confront democratic societies are not caused by blameworthy individual behavior, but rather by the combined interactions of many individuals. Such problems can only be addressed through cooperative action. While Addams generally offers a more realistic account of the situation in which most democratic citizens find themselves, she overstated the extent to which civic cooperation is possible and desirable in pluralistic, liberal societies.

The difficulties with both accounts of responsibility stem from the tensions between the individual and community that are inherent within democratic theory. On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine how individual democratic citizens could accept responsibility for their own wellbeing or for the consequences of their actions without also accepting some responsibility for political outcomes. On the other hand, theories of collective responsibility are not easily reconciled with democratic ideas about individual integrity and self-determination. In this chapter, I articulate a theory of democratic shared responsibility that acknowledges the importance of individual integrity.

I begin by exploring why democratic ideals require citizens to accept some responsibility for their own actions and wellbeing. Next, I argue that democratic citizens cannot accept responsibility for their own actions and wellbeing without sharing responsibility for political outcomes. My argument is influenced by Larry May's claim that existentialist notions of moral agency require individuals to share responsibility for collective processes in which they participate. Democratic notions of self-rule are, I believe, similar to existentialist notions of moral agency in that they require individuals to make some effort to shape their own fates and consequently expect citizens to accept some responsibility for political outcomes. A theory of shared responsibility rooted in democratic notions of self-rule

will, however, differ in several ways from a theory shaped by existentialist ideas about moral agency; in particular, democratic citizens must accept responsibility for outcomes that affect their own well being, as well as for outcomes that are affected by their behavior.

In the second half of the chapter, I explain how my theory of democratic shared responsibility avoids or at least mitigates common problems, paying particular attention to problems identified in previous chapters. First, I address the concern that theories of shared responsibility inevitably require levels of civic cooperation that are neither achievable nor desirable, arguing that the notion of self-rule that underpins my theory of shared responsibility actually requires citizens to dissent from harmful cooperative endeavors. Second, I respond to the objection that political theories which rely upon Western notions of responsibility inevitably lead to scapegoating and resentment. Finally, I demonstrate that while my theory of responsible citizenship is demanding, it is not all-consuming and therefore does not prevent citizens from pursuing their own life plans. In responding to these potential criticisms, I more fully articulate what democratic shared responsibility entails.

I. Personal Responsibility and Democratic Self-Rule

As Jeffery Stout explains, democracy in the modern world does not have the same meaning that it did in the ancient world. For the ancients, democracy meant rule by a particular class of people, the commons. For us moderns, on the other hand, democracy “is a form of government in which the adult members of the society being governed all have some share in electing rulers and are free to speak their minds in a wide-ranging discourse that rulers are bound to take seriously.”² In what follows I take self-rule to be one of the primary

² *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

moral purposes that underpin modern democracy.³ My primary goal is not to defend this account of democracy, but rather to articulate the responsibilities that accompany membership in a society that values self-rule. Readers who are looking for a detailed explanation as to why this account of democracy is preferable to other accounts will have to look elsewhere. At the same time, by demonstrating that democratic self-rule requires both personal and civic responsibility, I call attention to some of the reasons why self-rule is a worthy objective.

Democratic self-rule is not a privilege of birth or a reward that is earned by great deeds; it is something to which all human beings are entitled. Democrats who value self-rule reject absolute, arbitrary and paternalistic power because they believe that human dignity requires that *all* individuals have some influence over their own fates and because they believe that human societies benefit from the creativity and energy that individual self-expression generates.⁴ Self-rule, however, entails more than the absence of external constraints. It requires the opportunity to participate in the political process, as well as a certain degree of economic security. This is because self-rule means, in George Kateb's words, "being, to some important degree, a person of one's own creating, making, choosing, rather than being merely a creature or a socially manufactured, conditioned, manipulated thing."⁵ It is impossible to be a creature of one's own choosing if one is incapable of influencing institutions that have a significant impact upon one's fate; in order to be self-ruling, citizens must be able to choose their political leaders, hold political office and

³ My understanding of democracy is generally similar to Stout's in that it is indebted to ideas about individual integrity and autonomy that were first articulated by liberal thinkers. Like Stout, I identify most closely with nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers who advocated universal suffrage and increased civic participation on the grounds that citizens cannot be self-ruling unless they have some input into their collective fates.

⁴ Thomas Spragens Jr., *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on our Democratic Ideals* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 119.

⁵ George Kateb on the notion of freedom espoused by Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. See *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 90.

advocate on their own behalf. It is likewise impossible to be a creature of one's own choosing if one is completely dependent upon others in economic and civic life. For this reason, democrats may tolerate government intervention in the economy so as to ensure that citizens have access to the resources that will enable them to participate in public life and exercise control over their life plans. Nevertheless, those who value self-rule will not sanction unlimited expansion of state power.

While democratic institutions can create conditions that are conducive to self-rule, they cannot guarantee that citizens will achieve self-rule. Citizens who thoughtlessly imitate the behavior of others and uncritically accept received opinions are not capable of playing an active role in shaping their own fates. Citizens cannot, however, be coerced into being thoughtful, critical or active participants in their own lives. To some extent, self-rule requires deliberate effort upon the part of citizens. And while individuals rarely, if ever achieve a state of complete moral autonomy, those who value self-rule will make an effort to cultivate moral autonomy and allow others to do the same.

Logically, the increased freedom that accompanies democratic citizenship should be accompanied by increased responsibility on the part of citizens.⁶ In Western philosophy,

⁶ The idea that societies that value individual freedom demand greater personal responsibility from their citizens is accepted by both modern democracy's defenders and its critics. Richard McKeon argues that the rise of liberal democracy was accompanied by increasing emphasis upon both personal and civic responsibility. Nineteenth century liberals, McKean concludes, would not have accepted universal suffrage if they had not assumed that most citizens were capable of accepting responsibility for the consequences of their political actions. Furthermore, McKeon argues that as liberals became more concerned with individual moral autonomy they became less concerned with ensuring that individuals conformed to traditional moral standards and more inclined to insist that individuals should be free to make their own choices, so long as they accepted responsibility for the consequences. See "The Development and Significance of the Concept of Responsibility," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 39, no. 9 (1957), 3-32. More recently, Thomas Spragens Jr. explains that "as an autonomous being, the good citizens of a liberal polity is willing to stand answerable for his or her actions. Responsible individuals accept the status and burdens of agency. They acknowledge that they are doers of deeds and not merely loci of reactions," 220. In *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), William Connolly likewise believes that modern notions of freedom require personal responsibility, but worries that "the self constituted as a unified, self-responsible agent contains resentment within its very formation," 78.

individuals are usually considered responsible for outcomes that are causally connected to voluntary actions.⁷ In giving their citizens greater latitude to choose their life plans, democratic societies increase the number of outcomes for which citizens can be held accountable. Whereas citizens in caste-driven or feudal societies have little choice over their life plans, democratic citizens are expected to choose a vocation and are held accountable for the consequences of their choices.

The increased personal responsibility that accompanies membership in democratic societies has a number of consequences. First, it means that the actions of individual citizens can be imputed to them and regarded as a reflection of their characters. Second, citizens cannot completely avoid responsibility for behaviors that result in harm on the grounds that they were following orders, fulfilling civic duties or simply mimicking others; as self-ruling beings, democratic citizens are expected to make an effort to ensure that their behavior conforms to moral standards that they would endorse after serious reflection. Finally and perhaps most importantly, citizens can be expected to behave as if they will be held responsible for their actions, and to make an effort to avoid being accountable for harmful outcomes. While democratic societies may not be alone in making such demands of citizens, they generally demand more personal responsibility than other societies. Feudal relationships in which lords assume responsibility for the welfare of obedient vassals who are expected to march to war at their bidding or paternalistic arrangements in which the head of the household makes important decisions on behalf of his wife and children both create circumstances in which individuals are neither expected to choose their own fates nor held

⁷ As Robert Goodin notes, individuals can be accountable for both good and bad outcomes, though philosophic discussions of responsibility have traditionally been preoccupied with bad outcomes. See Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 113.

fully accountable for their choices. Such relationships are respected in some societies, but they are not compatible with democratic ideals.

Political and moral frameworks that emphasize personal responsibility have been subject to considerable criticism by those who believe that such frameworks typically minimize the extent to which constraints that are unfairly distributed limit the range of available choices. In many cases, constraints upon individual choice are the result of socio-economic processes; if one cannot afford a college education, for example, than one's career options are likely to be limited and one cannot fairly be held accountable for the consequences of one's limited education. Internalized social norms and expectations may also constrain personal choices. A person with homosexual desires may feel morally compelled to deny her sexual inclinations; given the power of internalized social norms, it seems unfair to hold her fully responsible if she ends up in a heterosexual marriage that is unfulfilling for both her and her husband.

The fact that unlimited self-rule and complete personal responsibility is not possible, however, does not mean that individuals are completely incapable of exerting control over their own fates or accepting responsibility for those choices. As Nancy Hirschmann explains, people whose choices are constrained in significant ways are often still capable of exercising some control over their fates. "We may be subjected to pressures and obstacles that seem overwhelming, but that does not mean that our existence is determined for us, that we do not exist as beings who can affect and influence those social formulations and practices."⁸ A woman living in a traditional Islamic society may not be allowed to go out in public without veiling herself. If she is willing to wear the veil, however, she may have the

⁸ Nancy J. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 211-13.

ability to choose whether she will work outside the home and what kind of career she will pursue. Thus, it would be inaccurate to portray the woman as a completely passive creature who has no control over her fate.⁹ Similarly, a battered wife may find it difficult to leave an abusive husband because she is uncertain about her ability to support herself financially and fears that leaving might cause the violence to escalate. The battered wife may not have good options, but she has options nonetheless and therefore has the potential to, in Martha Mahoney's words, "act for oneself under conditions of oppression."¹⁰ This does not mean that the battered wife should be held wholly responsible for her situation, as many things, including her husband's behavior and her inability to find a job, are not fully in her control. She can, however, be expected to accept some responsibility for things that are in her control, such as whether she files a restraining order against her husband, moves to another state or seeks psychological counseling. Furthermore, as Hirschmann and Mahoney point out, the battered woman is likely to benefit if she sees herself and is seen by others as a moral agent who has some control over her situation.

While democrats should be concerned about structural constraints and unnecessary moral expectations that limit people's choices in significant ways, they can reasonably expect most democratic citizens to exercise some control over their own fates and to accept some responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This does not mean that democratic citizens should be left to fend for themselves; it would be unreasonable to expect a battered woman to improve her circumstances without assistance. Democratic citizens should, however, be held accountable for harms that result from their actions and to have their

⁹ Nancy J. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty*, 204.

¹⁰ Martha Mahoney, "Victimization or Oppression? Women's Lives, Violence and Agency," in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, eds. Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk (New York: Routledge, 1994), 61; cited in Hirschmann 131

character judged by how they respond to the circumstances in which they find themselves. For democrats holding individuals responsible for the consequences of their actions is largely about treating them as though they are capable of making their own choices. In doing so, democrats acknowledge that other people have capacities that are associated with human dignity and are entitled to make important life decisions for themselves.

The *Up-series*, a series of documentaries that interviews British citizens from different socio-economic classes every seven years suggests that many democratic citizens do, in fact, believe that responsibility, autonomy and human dignity are related. In most cases, the broad trajectory of the child's life can be predicted from interviews conducted at the age of seven; indeed, several of the upper-class seven years olds are able to correctly identify which university they will attend. The two most unpredictable trajectories result from extraordinary circumstances; the child of a rural farmer becomes a physics professor due to remarkable intellectual gifts and the child of middle-class parents finds himself homeless as the result of serious mental illness. Reflecting back upon the documentary, however, almost all participants are enraged by the suggestion that their lives were completely determined by broader structural forces. John insists that his acceptance to Oxford was not the result of an "indestructible birthright," but rather a combination of privileged circumstances and long nights of study.¹¹ Jackie, who was born in the working-class East End neighborhood, makes a similar argument. While she did not have the same advantages and choices as somebody like John, she believes that she had some control over her education, career and family choices; indeed, she suggests that she may have had more control, as her parents' expectations were less rigid than that of the upper-class parents.¹²

¹¹ Michael Apted, Dr. *21 Up* (Grenada Television, 1977), DVD.

¹² Michael Apted, Dr. *42 Up* (1998), DVD.

John and Jackie's claim that their life plans were shaped by circumstances outside their control, but not wholly determined by those circumstances is consistent with the nuanced understanding of human freedom and responsibility defended above. Similarly, their outrage at the suggestion that their lives were wholly determined by the circumstances of their birth reflects the democratic sentiment that denying agency and responsibility to classes of people, even in order to call attention to structural injustices, is incompatible with human dignity.

II. Democracy and Shared Responsibility

As the previous example demonstrates, the idea that democratic citizens bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions is widely accepted. Holding citizens accountable for the behavior of their political institutions is, as Michael Walzer observes, more complicated. On the one hand, there is something morally unsatisfying about the idea that people can benefit from the protection of political institutions without feeling in any way implicated in the behavior of those institutions. On the other hand, it seems unfair to hold citizens accountable for the behavior of institutions that they do not control, and to which they have not consented. Furthermore, Walzer observes that political authorities often rely upon noble sentiments to manipulate their citizens, embarking upon military endeavors without consulting their citizens and then demanding that those same citizens accept responsibility for ensuring that the war is successful.¹³ Walzer also warns that the notion that citizens bear responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions is often used to justify collective punishment; if all Japanese citizens could have been held accountable for

¹³ Michael Walzer, *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1970), 203-217.

war crimes committed by their government during World War II, then the American military could not have been expected to make any effort to minimize civilian injury.¹⁴

The problem, however, is not simply that theories of collective responsibility can easily be used to justify projects that subvert democratic norms, but also that some discussions of collective responsibility are rooted in assumptions that are in tension with democratic ideals. For example, Hannah Arendt's claim that membership in a political community is automatically accompanied by responsibility for actions taken on behalf of the political community is not fully compatible with democratic ideals.¹⁵ Treating democratic individuals as self-ruling creatures means acknowledging their particular actions, rather than lumping them together as a collective entity.¹⁶

Iris Marion Young criticizes Arendt along somewhat similar lines, writing that Arendt's assumption that political membership is accompanied by political responsibility suggests that such responsibilities result from the "mere contingent fact" of group membership, rather than the reality that citizens who share common political institutions are more likely to affect and be affected by each other's behavior.¹⁷ Young proposes a "social connection" model of responsibility as an alternative to Arendt's. According to this model, "our responsibility derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize

¹⁴ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: a moral argument with historical illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 296-304.

¹⁵ See Arendt's *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), particularly the essay entitled "Collective Responsibility."

¹⁶ Marion Smiley notes that many accounts of collective responsibility violate what Rawls referred to as the "separateness of persons," in that they hold individuals accountable for outcomes that are not directly connected to their own actions and choices. See M. Smiley, "Collective Responsibility," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2011) <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/collective-responsibility/#1>.

¹⁷ See Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2004), 376. Young is particularly worried that Arendt's lack of concern for individual behavior results in a theory of political responsibility which offers little moral guidance to individuals who are implicated in unjust outcomes.

projects. Even though we cannot trace the outcome we may regret to our own particular actions in a direct causal chain, we bear responsibility because we are part of the process.”¹⁸ Because individuals are differently positioned in social processes, however, they do not bear equal responsibility. The responsibilities of particular individuals should be determined, she argues, based upon the degree of power, privilege, interest and collective ability they possess with regard to particular process.¹⁹

More so than Arendt, Young offers a theory of responsibility that acknowledges the particular actions and circumstances of individuals. On her account, individuals do not bear responsibility for harmful outcomes simply because they belong to a metaphysical entity such as a nation; they bear responsibility because their actions indirectly contribute to harmful outcomes and the degree to which they are responsible is related to the nature of their actions. Young also offers a theory that satisfies Walzer’s concern that the idea of collective responsibility enables political leaders to cast their own decisions as an expression of popular will. Individuals are responsible for political outcomes, Young suggests, because they participate in processes that shape those outcomes, not because they have tacitly consented to those outcomes.

Unfortunately, Young offers little explanation as to why citizens bear responsibility for processes in which they participate, other than that such responsibility is consistent with widely accepted norms of justice; “Within this scheme of social cooperation,” she explains, “each of us expects justices toward ourselves and others can make claims on us.”²⁰ It is not clear, however, that ordinary notions of justice provide an adequate justification for the

¹⁸ Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model, *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation* (2006), 119.

¹⁹ Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model,” 127-130.

²⁰ Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model,” 119.

account of responsibility that Young defends. While human beings are obligated to pursue justice for both themselves and others; it is not clear that they bear a particular obligation to address injustices that result from processes in which they participate. In the case of people who are benefiting from unjust processes, one might argue that it is only fair that they make an effort to improve the circumstances of people whom they have harmed. However, Young also requires individuals to accept responsibility for processes that have harmed them, a requirement that seems to violate common understandings of fairness. There are, I think, good reasons why democrats would want citizens to accept some responsibility for institutions and processes that have harmed them. The idea that only privileged citizens are morally obligated to reform unjust institutions resembles feudal and paternalistic ideas about government that democrats have rightly rejected on the grounds that self-ruling individuals must accept some responsibility for their own wellbeing. While expecting citizens to accept some responsibility for institutions that have harmed them may be consistent with democratic ideals, it is not entirely consistent with the ordinary intuitions about justice and reciprocity upon which Young relies.

Larry May's theory of shared responsibility is similar to Young's in that it holds individuals responsible for processes in which they participate, but it is rooted in existentialist notions of the self, as opposed to common understandings of justice. May looks to existentialism because it is a philosophical tradition which stresses that responsibility is possible in a world where human behavior is significantly constrained. In what follows, I discuss May's theory at length because I think that it avoids many of the limitations commonly associated with theories of shared responsibility, though some revision is necessary in order for it to apply to democratic contexts.

May's discussion of Camus's "Myth of Sisyphus" helps illuminate the relationship between responsibility and existentialism. In the myth, Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a hill only to have the stone fall down when it reaches the top. According to Camus, each time Sisyphus chooses to continue rolling the stone up the hill he defies the gods by not giving into despair. This story is not a perfect metaphor for the human experience, as most people have greater control over their fates than Sisyphus. What May takes from the "Myth of Sisyphus" is that even though humans do not have complete control over the conditions in which they find themselves, they can exert some control over their own attitudes and actions; in other words, humans are capable of self-rule and responsibility. May also agrees with Camus that self-rule and responsibility are essential to human dignity. By recognizing that they are responsible for their own behavior and attitudes, individuals demonstrate their capacity for agency and avoid becoming objects that are merely affected by outside forces.²¹

In contrast to Camus, who focuses primarily upon individual attitudes and behaviors, May considers himself to be a "social existentialist," who pays greater attention to the fact that human beings are social creatures.²² As a social existentialist, May does not believe that individuals are entirely free to choose their own attitudes; rather, he recognizes they are only capable of choosing attitudes that are available in their own cultural and historic contexts. More importantly, May emphasizes that individuals are responsible for the way in which their own attitudes and behaviors affect the behavior of the communities and institutions in which they participate. In many cases, individuals cannot control the broader social consequences of their own behavior, as these consequences are affected by the behavior of

²¹ *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 18-23.

²² *Sharing Responsibility*, 2-5.

others. For this reason, it makes sense to think of responsibility as shared, rather than as residing with individuals.

According to May, shared responsibility occupies a middle ground between individual and collective responsibility, as it refers neither to outcomes that result directly from individual behavior nor to outcomes that result from coordinated group behavior. Instead, shared responsibility applies to outcomes that result from the “way each of us interacts with others.”²³ Individuals share responsibility for such outcomes because they have some control over the behaviors that contribute to such outcomes, and because they are capable of choosing how they will respond to the consequences of their behaviors.

The fact that responsibility is shared does not mean that it is shared evenly. For example, all members of a community that encourages racist sentiments share responsibility for hate crimes committed by individual members because in encouraging racist sentiments, they indirectly legitimate violent actions.²⁴ Those who merely encourage racist sentiments, however, bear less responsibility than those who commit racially motivated crimes. May proposes that responsibility should be attributed based on the degree of control particular agents exerted over the outcome and the extent to which individual agents engaged in blameworthy behavior. Lesser degrees of responsibility may be accompanied by shame, regret or outrage, as opposed to guilt; however, even these lesser degrees of responsibility will hopefully be sufficient to motivate individuals to address political and social harms in which they are implicated.²⁵

²³ *Sharing Responsibility*, 38

²⁴ May emphasizes that those who encourage racist sentiments only share responsibility for racial violence if (1) they have reason to believe that such sentiments will lead to violence and (2) they do nothing to discourage violence.

²⁵ *Sharing Responsibility*, 40.

The account of shared responsibility articulated by May is broadly consistent with the idea of democratic self-rule articulated in the previous section. Democrats, like existentialists, believe that human beings must accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions in order to demonstrate that they are capable of moral autonomy; to deny responsibility for the consequences of one's action is to deny that one has any control over one's behavior. Furthermore, democratic understandings of self-rule, like existentialist accounts of individual moral agency, must acknowledge that human beings do not live on their own private islands. Democratic citizens affect and are affected by political outcomes, which are caused by the combined interactions of multiple individuals and institutions. Almost all citizens engage in actions that have political consequences. By accepting the legitimacy of laws, choosing political leaders, utilizing public services and paying taxes, citizens exert influence over their government's behavior. The behavior of individual citizens also contributes to the economic and social problems that threaten self-rule and which political institutions are therefore expected to solve. It would not make sense to hold democratic citizens fully responsible for political outcomes over which they have little control. At the same time, democratic citizens can often control whether they contribute to harmful political outcomes and they can almost always control how they respond to harmful political outcomes; and, if they aspire to be self-ruling beings they must accept some responsibility for the consequences of behaviors that are within their control. Therefore, responsibility for democratic political outcomes should in most cases be regarded as shared.

A theory of shared responsibility that is rooted in democratic notions of self-rule will, however, differ from an account that is influenced by existentialist notions of moral agency. For democratic citizens, self-rule is not simply about refusing to allow their fates to be

dictated entirely by chance or by capricious gods; it is about refusing to allow one's fate to be completely determined by others. In addition to accepting responsibility for the consequences of their behavior, self-ruling citizens are expected to make an effort to actively secure outcomes that are conducive to their own wellbeing. Individuals who do not make any effort to secure their own wellbeing, democrats fear will, become overly dependent upon others, losing their ability to choose their own life plans in the process. Thus, democratic shared responsibility applies to a broader range of outcomes than May's theory of shared responsibility, as citizens share responsibility not only for political outcomes that are affected by their behavior, but also for outcomes that affect their own wellbeing. Just as citizens cannot accept responsibility for the consequences of their own choices without accepting some responsibility for political outcomes, they cannot accept responsibility for their own wellbeing by simply tending their own gardens. The wellbeing of individual citizens is, after all, significantly affected by the behavior of their political institutions, which is in turn shaped by the behavior of their fellow citizens.

Democratic shared responsibility is also driven by a more complex set of motivations than May's, as it is animated by a desire to avoid being implicated in harm *and* a need to protect one's own wellbeing. Citizens who accept shared responsibility for democratic political outcomes are expected to make some sacrifices in order to solve public problems because these problems affect and are affected by their behaviors. They are also, however, expected to consider their own needs, as self-ruling citizens must exercise some control over their own wellbeing. Indeed, democratic citizens will be wary of people who make extreme sacrifices for the public good, as such people often expect considerable gratitude in return, an expectation that will make it difficult for them to treat their fellow citizens as equals and to

work with them to address shared problems. Self-ruling citizens are therefore encouraged to advocate on their own behalf, calling attention to structural problems that adversely affect them, denouncing political outcomes that they regard as harmful, and refusing to be made the scapegoat for problems that result from combined activities.

A democratic theory of shared responsibility addresses many of the problems discussed above. It does not imply that citizens are responsible for political outcomes because they have tacitly consented to them, but rather stresses that citizens affect and are affected by political outcomes and bear responsibility for those outcomes regardless of whether they agree with them. It insists that those who benefit from the status quo share responsibility for securing better political outcomes with those who are harmed by the status quo because citizens who aspire to be self-ruling must accept responsibility for outcomes that affect their wellbeing and are affected by their behavior; in doing so, it discourages the notion that privileged citizens have a particular obligation to promote the public good, a notion that is well-intended, but which often results in paternalistic or even coercive reform efforts.

My theory of democratic shared responsibility expects citizens to accept responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions, even when their connections to these institutions are not voluntary. Citizens cannot always avoid depending upon their government for vital services such as roads and clean air. Citizens' contributions to the government are likewise often involuntary; after all, tax evaders are subject to punishment. If democratic citizens aspire to be self-ruling, they cannot passively allow their actions to be channeled in directions that violate their own convictions and they cannot ignore significant threats to their own wellbeing; thus they must accept some responsibility for outcomes that

affected and are affected by their behavior, even if their connection to these outcomes was not voluntarily chosen.

My claim that citizens bear responsibility for political outcomes that result from behaviors that were not completely voluntary may seem less unreasonable if we remember that democratic self-rule is not about having unlimited freedom to determine one's own fate; it is about ensuring that individuals are capable of exercising moral agency and responsibility in a world where individual actions and choices are significantly constrained. Just as individuals do not have complete control over the behavior of their political institutions, they do not have complete control over the circumstances that shape their own personal choices. In the example from the *Up Series* noted earlier, neither Jackie nor John wielded complete control over their actions and choices, as they function in a world where the consequences of particular choices cannot be completely predicted and where the choices available to individuals are shaped by circumstances outside their control. Just as Jackie and John have some capacity to shape the direction of their lives, however, they have some capacity to influence their political system, and in doing so, they have some ability to be self-ruling and responsible moral agents. Indeed, making some effort to influence their political system is one way in which Jackie and John can minimize unfair constraints on their life-choices.

In recent years, some philosophers have advocated completely separating discussions of blame from discussions of responsibility for collective political processes, on the grounds that addressing pressing problems is more important than establishing causality²⁶ or on the grounds that traditional theories of moral responsibility can be applied to blameworthy behavior, regardless of whether such behavior occurs within collective institutions or

²⁶ See Robert Goodin, "Responsibilities and Vulnerabilities: An Ethical Defense of the Democratic Welfare State," *The American Political Science Review* 79, no. 3 (Sep 1985): 775-787.

processes.²⁷ As I have stressed elsewhere, there are good reasons why democratic theorists and citizens should not be overly preoccupied with blame; many of the behaviors that contribute to political outcomes are not blameworthy, few problems can be addressed solely through personal moral reform and those who are bent upon identifying blameworthy behavior often end up unfairly scapegoating others. At the same time, discussions of shared responsibility should not completely ignore blame. Practically, blame can be a useful means of encouraging individuals to change behaviors that contribute to harmful political outcomes. On a more theoretical level, some behaviors are only blameworthy when they are combined with other's behavior. Thinking of responsibility as shared seems appropriate in such cases, given that the connection between individual behavior and harmful outcomes is indirect. Using paper napkins as opposed to cloth can be considered blameworthy because people who do this are knowingly contributing to harmful outcomes; it is not, however, the individual action of using a paper napkin that causes environmental destruction, but rather the combined effect of wasteful behavior on the part of multiple individuals.

Democratic shared responsibility, as I understand it, is neither synonymous with blame nor unconcerned with blame altogether. To the extent that blameworthy individual or group behavior shapes political outcomes, then shame and even punishment may be warranted. At the very least, citizens can be expected to cease engaging in blameworthy actions. Companies who use false or doctored research to influence public policy debates are deserving of blame, as are individuals who advocate public policies that are personally beneficial, but fiscally irresponsible. If citizens are not engaging in blameworthy behavior, but nevertheless affect and are affected by public policies, then they are still expected to accept responsibility for political outcomes in the sense that they are under an obligation to

²⁷ This is Iris Young's position.

seek to make them behave in a morally acceptable way. For example, because the War on Terror both affects and is affected by the behavior of ordinary citizens, Americans share responsibility for the War on Terror and can be expected to make some effort to ensure that it is conducted in an ethical and effective manner. They cannot be punished for war crimes committed by public officials, unless they directly abetted such crimes.

In some cases, the shared responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship can be discharged through individual effort. If citizens can easily change behaviors that contribute to harmful outcomes, then they are required to do so. It is appropriate to expect individuals to change behaviors that contribute to global warming, especially if they can do so without shirking other important moral obligations. Upper-middle class citizens can be expected to pay a little more money for fuel-efficient cars and physically fit citizens can be expected to walk short distances as opposed to driving. In many cases, however, citizens cannot change behaviors that contribute to harmful political outcomes because they do not have feasible alternatives. A coalminer, for example, cannot cease activities that contribute to global warming if he has no other good way of feeding his family. In such cases, cooperative effort is needed.

Citizens who accept shared responsibility for public life cannot assume that all problems can be resolved solely by righteous individual behavior, but must acknowledge that group effort is often needed. There are a number of ways in which citizens can take part in cooperative efforts to reform institutions and processes that produce poor public outcomes. They can lobby political officials or try to persuade fellow voters. They can participate in public institutions such as schools, public parks and social welfare offices as either paid employees or volunteers, or they can join associations that monitor the behavior of public

institutions. They might also participate in civil society associations, which seek to correct the structural constraints that contribute to both the less than optimal functioning of political institutions and the problems that those institutions are then expected to resolve.

Because democratic political institutions are relatively stable over time, democratic citizens should expect to share responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions throughout their lives. Consequently, the civic activities of democratic citizens should be guided by a sense of responsibility for future public policies, as well as current ones. This means that democratic citizens should consider the long-term consequences of current behaviors, particularly behaviors that prevent future citizens from accessing education and other resources that will enable them to be responsible and productive members of society.

Some political theorists find discussion of responsibility that focus upon national political communities to be out-dated, given that contemporary democratic citizens function in an era in which nation states have limited control over global economic forces and in which national identity is often contested. To some extent, I agree with these theorists. With Young, I argue that citizens bear some responsibility for the consequences of their participation in the global economy; for example, consumers who purchase goods produced in sweatshops bear some responsibility for the conditions of exploited workers. Like Fared Abdel-Nour, I acknowledge that citizens who hold the same passport may not share the same national identity. It would be a mistake, however, for democratic citizens to conclude that they do not bear any particular responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions, that democratic institutions are simply one of many social collectives in which individuals happen to be implicated. It would also be a mistake to conclude that those who feel no particular affection for their political communities cannot be held accountable for the

behavior of their political institutions.²⁸ Nation states are not completely fictional entities. Passports and citizenship papers, at least in democratic regimes, are accompanied by tangible benefits, including police protection, voting rights and entitlements such as public education and in many cases health care. Moreover, as Irish citizens have recently discovered, political incompetence impacts the wellbeing of citizens in significant ways.²⁹ And states continue to be major players in world affairs, who have the potential to implicate their citizens in crimes against the residents of other states. It is also worth noting that globalization is not an inevitable or irreversible phenomenon. National governments are likely to remain relevant for the foreseeable future, and democratic citizens can therefore be expected to accept some responsibility for their behavior.

III. Adjudicating Shared Responsibilities

While citizens share responsibility for ensuring that their political institutions function in a just and efficient manner, they must exercise their own discretion when determining what their responsibilities are at a given moment in time and how those responsibilities should be discharged. Such discretion is necessary because there are no hard and fast rules as to how citizens can identify and address political problems. Man-made climate change, which is considered by many to be a significant public crisis today, was not a problem that could have been imagined by previous generations and therefore established

²⁸ Farid Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (2003): 693-719. Abdel-Nour's claim that citizens only bear responsibility for harms caused by their political institutions if they also take pride in the achievements of those institutions assumes, wrongly I think, that nation-states are completely fictional entities.

²⁹ Ireland is a good example of how national governments continue to impact the lives of their citizens. While residents of the European Union who were compelled to finance the Irish government's rescue package have been affected by the Irish financial meltdown, Irish citizens will bear the brunt of the economic collapse. Ireland's current economic woes are partly the result of global economic forces over which the government has not control; however, these woes also result from years of shortsighted fiscal policy for which both political leaders and citizens bear responsibility. For at least a decade, critics have pointed out that a fiscal policy that is based upon low taxes and high spending cannot be sustained over the long-term, particularly since money was not being spent in ways that enabled Ireland to develop a highly skilled workforce.

norms and procedures do not offer a solution to this problem. Allowing citizens discretion over how they fulfill their shared responsibilities is also consistent with democratic ideas about self-rule. In a free society, citizens should be encouraged to exercise their own judgment.

Because democratic citizens are implicated in so many problems, they will have to choose which problems to tackle themselves and which to leave to others. While this is a decision that ultimately rests with individual citizens, it should be made with certain considerations in mind. First, citizens should prioritize threats to democratic rule. Second, they should prioritize problems that are more directly connected to their own behavior. Finally, they should prioritize problems that are solvable.³⁰

a. Threats to self-rule

Citizens should prioritize significant threats to human life, dignity and self-expression. Not only is it hypocritical to cast oneself as a democrat while contributing to institutions that violate democratic norms, but it is also in the long-term interest of all citizens to ensure that democratic rights, duties and privileges are respected. This does not mean that citizens must devote all of their civic energy to solving crises; after all, democratic societies could not survive, let alone flourish, if more mundane problems such as failing schools, contaminated water and unsafe intersections are ignored. If one claims to be committed to

³⁰ These criteria are similar to the criteria offered by Iris Young in “Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model:” connection, power, privilege. Unlike Young, however, I do not attempt to reconcile these criteria with ordinary moral intuitions about justice. First, it is not clear to me that reconciliation is possible; expecting citizens to accept responsibility for problems that are not of their making is unfair, but it is nevertheless something that should be expected of democratic citizens. Second, neatly dividing citizens into those who are “privileged” by existing institutions and those who are marginalized, as Young does, is misleading. To be sure, problems such as failing infrastructure and poor public schools affect some citizens more than others, but in the long-run all citizens will be affected by these problems. A theory of democratic shared responsibility should, I think, call attention to the fact that all citizens have an interest in solving shared problems; citizens who recognize that they have shared interests may be more capable of finding mutually beneficial solutions. More importantly, citizens who recognize that they have a stake in addressing public problems may be less inclined to view themselves as nobly sacrificing for the public good and therefore deserving of gratitude from the people they are trying to help.

democracy, however, than one cannot completely ignore significant threats to democratic norms. Thus, Thoreau was not wrong to question the priorities of New England clergy who fixate upon relatively minor public nuisances, such as drunkenness, while ignoring slavery and imperialism.

b. Connection

In general, those whose behavior is more directly connected to a particular problem bear greater responsibility than the average citizen. An owner of a coalmine should do more than the average citizen to end global warming because her behavior is more directly linked with the release of fossil fuels into the environment.

When harmful outcomes result from blameworthy behavior, requiring citizens to accept greater responsibility for problems to which they are more directly contributed is consistent with conventional intuitions about justice, which demand that praiseworthy behavior be rewarded and blameworthy behavior be punished.³¹ Expecting employees of British Petroleum who participated in a culture that encouraged reckless disregard for safety and environmental regulations to accept greater responsibility for cleaning up the oil in the gulf is consistent with these intuitions, as these employees engaged in blameworthy behavior. Responsibility for public problems, however, cannot always be allocated in a manner that is consistent with conventional notions of justice. Because democratic citizens function in a world where innocent actions often have unintended consequences, they may become directly linked to problems through no fault of their own. The willingness of sweatshop workers to accept low pay and poor working conditions contributes to exploitative economic

³¹ Samuel Scheffler has observed that liberal democratic citizens of various political persuasions assume that “important benefits and burdens” should be allocated on the basis of individual desert. See “Reactive Attitudes and Liberalism,” in *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13-14.

practices and yet sweatshop workers are hardly deserving of blame if they do not have alternative means of feeding their families. Nevertheless, the sweatshop workers share responsibility for addressing exploitative practices, as these practices are impacted by their behavior and affect their wellbeing.

There are at least three reasons why political responsibility need not be allocated in a manner that is perfectly consistent with conventional understandings of moral desert. First, conventional wisdom does not always assume that responsibility must always be allocated this way. As Bernard Williams notes, conventional understandings of both moral and legal responsibility typically accept that luck plays some role in determinations of responsibility. Attempted murders are generally punished less harshly than successful murders, even if the difference was due to luck, as opposed to intention. A driver who runs over a child will not be punished if he was not at fault; however, because his actions contributed to harm, he is expected to feel worse about the incident than a mere bystander.³² These examples suggest that expecting citizens to feel particularly responsible for outcomes to which they have directly contributed even if they have not engaged in blameworthy behavior does not require a complete suspension of conventional moral understandings, so long as this responsibility is accompanied by an obligation to take political action rather than punishment or public shame.

Second, expecting citizens to feel a particular sense of responsibility for problems to which they directly contribute is also consistent with democratic understandings of self-rule. Democratic citizens do not fully control the circumstances in which they act and thus they cannot always avoid being implicated in outcomes that they do not support. If they aspire to

³² Williams, "Recognizing Responsibility," in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: Berkeley California Press, 1993), 50-75. Abdel Nour called my attention to Williams's driver example.

be self-ruling creatures who exercise meaningful control over their fates, however, democratic citizens must make some effort to prevent their actions from being channeled into directions that they do not support. A retailer who finds himself selling goods that were produced through sweatshop labor may be justified in resenting the fact that he has become implicated in injustice through no fault of his own, but if he aspires to be self-ruling, he must make some effort to oppose sweatshop labor.

Finally, expecting those who contribute more directly to harmful political outcomes to bear particular responsibility for addressing those outcomes makes it more likely that the victims of harmful social processes will be treated as moral agents who deserve input into their own fates. After all, victims of systemic injustices often find themselves required to engage in activities that promote the structures that are oppressing them. Once again, victims should not be blamed for their own suffering, but they should be expected to make some effort to improve their own situation. As in the case of the battered women discussed above, treating victims of injustice as if they are moral agents who have some capacity to shape their own fates is preferable to treating them as if they are completely passive creatures who are incapable of doing anything about their situation; expecting victims to play some role in solving their own problems is likely to give them increased confidence and result in solutions that are more effective.

c. Expected impact

When deciding which problems warrant their attention, citizens should also consider whether the problem can be successfully resolved and whether they are in a position to make a meaningful contribute to the resolution.³³ This is particularly the case with problems that

³³ Iris Marion Young's theory of "social structural responsibility" also allows expected impact to play a role in determining which problems deserve citizens attention.

cannot be addressed without sustained collective effort. As social theorists have long pointed out, successful collective action requires certain preconditions, such as a favorable political climate, social networks that are capable of being mobilized and social norms that support collective action.³⁴ If such preconditions do not exist and there seems little possibility of bringing them into existence, then citizens are usually justified in choosing to focus upon other problems. Likewise, if individual citizens are not capable of making a meaningful contribution to resolving a problem, either because they lack the necessary skills or they do not live in the proper location, they may also be justified in choosing to focus upon other problems.

While citizens may consider all three factors when determining which problems they should tackle, this last factor should be given less weight than the previous two. In other words, if fundamental democratic principles are at stake or if individuals have contributed significantly to a particular problem, they are expected to make some effort to resolve the problem, even if they are unlikely to be successful. In the first case, making an effort is about standing up for democratic principles. In the second, effort is required because individuals cannot be trusted to make an accurate assessment of the likelihood of success when their own interests are at stake.

IV. Shared Responsibility and the Limits of Cooperation

It is tempting to conclude, as Addams did, that citizens who share responsibility for political outcomes should be able to work together to address shared problems. Citizens, however, affect and are affected by political outcomes in different ways. Sweatshop workers share responsibility for economic exploitation with the merchants and consumers who profit

³⁴ This is outlined in Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly's, *The Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

from their abuse; however, there is no guarantee that workers, merchants and consumers will be able to achieve a solution that is mutually beneficial to all parties. Nor can self-ruling citizens be expected to settle for solutions that do more harm than good simply because they feel compelled to cooperate.

Democratic shared responsibility, as I understand it, is a theory that explains how individuals might achieve some degree of self-rule in a world shaped by large institutions and processes that are largely resistant to individual control. Self-rule therefore functions as an underlying principle that can help citizens understand how their shared responsibilities should be discharged. Previously, I argued that the shared responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship can be discharged through individual action or group effort, depending upon the circumstances. Context is likewise important in determining whether citizens should discharge shared responsibilities by cooperating with people who have different interests and perspectives or by dissenting from solutions that they consider harmful.

In many cases, cooperation is conducive to self-rule, in that it enables citizens to play some role in shaping outcomes that affect their own wellbeing and are impacted by their own actions. This may even be the case when cooperation requires participants to compromise their own principles and objectives, so long as compromise is not simply about unreflectively acquiescing to other people's demands, but about making an effort to achieve better outcomes. It would be inaccurate to characterize Abraham Lincoln as failing to cultivate self-rule simply because he was willing to compromise with slave-owners. Lincoln's decision to tolerate slavery was motivated neither by a reflexive embrace of the status quo nor a total dependency upon popular approval, behaviors that would be

unbecoming of somebody who values self-rule. Lincoln chose to settle for restricting the spread of slavery after conscious deliberation. Lincoln may not have made the right decision – reasonable people can disagree about whether preserving the union was more important than abolishing slavery – but this decision was in some meaningful sense made by him, rather than imposed upon him by others.

The importance of political compromise is a reflection of the reality that democratic citizens function in circumstances that they do not fully control. Democratic citizens cannot force their fellow citizens to adopt their own policy preferences and thus they must be willing to compromise in order to address the problems for which they share responsibility. It is worth noting that the inability of individual citizens to completely control their political and economic lives is actually consistent with democratic norms. In most cases, when individuals are capable of wielding complete control over their own fates, they are also capable of exerting excessive influence over the fates of others. George Pullman came fairly close to being able to completely control his own destiny, but he was also fairly close to completely controlling the destiny of others. Thus, political compromise is not simply the means by which democratic citizens achieve their goals, but it is also a means by which democratic citizens express their commitment to democracy itself.

At the same time, Thoreau was not entirely wrong to worry that cooperative endeavors pose a threat to both self-rule and responsible citizenship. Some cooperative endeavors do more harm than good. More worrisomely, cooperative endeavors often generate feelings of solidarity among participants that discourage citizens from consciously reflecting upon norms and practices that are widely accepted among their peers, let alone vocally opposing such practices. For these reasons, citizens should not view cooperation and

compromise as ends-in-themselves, however. Instead, they should view cooperation as a method that enables democratic citizens to achieve self-rule in circumstances where they do not fully control their own wellbeing or the consequences of their actions. Furthermore, they must therefore be willing to dissent from cooperative endeavors that do not enable them to exercise control over their own fates – this includes endeavors that are likely to do more harm than good, especially if they are likely to undermine democratic principles. In some cases, dissent may also be an appropriate means of calling attention to problems that are being ignored.

Citizens who accept shared responsibility for the democratic outcomes cannot view dissent as the action of isolated individuals or groups who are solely interested in demonstrating their moral commitment. Instead, dissent should be viewed as an action carried out by individuals or groups who share responsibility for public problems that are unlikely to be resolved without collaborative effort; in other words, dissenters should not be content with simply expressing their feelings, but must make an effort to persuade their fellow citizens to support their cause.³⁵

In a society where citizens share responsibility for political outcomes, dissent also does not enable democratic citizens to “wash their hands” of public life, as Thoreau assumed. Complete freedom from moral taint is rarely permitted to democratic citizens. Because they affect and are affected by political outcomes, democratic citizens are always already implicated in injustices perpetrated by their political institutions. While democratic citizens

³⁵ To some extent, I agree with Arendt that dissent should not be viewed simply as the expression of personal moral conviction, but as a political activity that is intended to change public opinion. Unlike Arendt, however, I do not dismiss individual acts of dissent as apolitical expressions of personal moral conviction and assume that only groups can engage in activities that are intended to shape public opinion. See Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Crises of The Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1969), 49-185. For an excellent analysis and critique of Arendt’s theory of civil disobedience, see Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa: Roman & Allanheld, 1984), 102-114.

cannot always ensure that their hands are clean, they are expected to do what is in their power to promote good outcomes and minimize their contribution to harmful ones. In many cases, the best course of action is to participate in cooperative endeavors that address or at least alleviate the harm, even if those endeavors fall short of one's ideals. In other cases, dissent and protest may be the better course. Citizens who protest harms committed by their political institutions, however, continue to affect and be affected by those institutions; hence, they continue to bear responsibility for the behavior of those institutions. While dissent may enable them to discharge their civic responsibilities at a particular moment in time, responsible citizenship is an ongoing moral commitment that may require cooperative effort in the future. Thus, citizens who feel compelled to dissent from particular endeavors should make an effort not to act in ways that will make future cooperation impossible.

V. Responsibility and Resentment

My account of shared responsibility is indebted to modern democratic understandings of self-rule and responsibility, which are often criticized for placing unfair burdens on individuals and groups. The problem, according to William Connolly, is that human beings frequently use blame as a means of relieving their own existential anxieties. In attributing suffering to other's blameworthy behavior, humans are able to reassure themselves about their own righteousness and about the justness of the universe. Given that the inability to explain human suffering is a frequent source of anxiety, Connolly concludes, liberal democratic ideas about freedom and responsibility inevitably lead to scapegoating.³⁶

Connolly's analysis warrants concern because human beings often do seem to be driven to unfairly blame other people in order to relieve their own existential anxieties. From

³⁶ Connolly, "Freedom and Resentment," and "Responsibility for Evil," in *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Expanded Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002).

medieval Christians accusing the Jews of spreading the plague to my college acquaintance who insisted that socialist academics had developed the GRE to keep him out of graduate school, humans look for scapegoats so that they do not have to confront their own limitations or the fact that suffering cannot always be explained. Such scapegoating is a significant threat to -democratic ideals, including autonomy, diversity and individuality. As Connolly notes, individuals and groups who deviate from norms and practices that are favored by the majority are particularly likely to be unfairly blamed for political and social problems. The paradox of liberal political thought is that modern-democratic understandings of self-rule and responsibility frequently generate feelings of resentment that are directed against the diverse lifestyles that liberal societies seek to promote.

My account of shared responsibility, however, rejects many of the assumptions that encourage scapegoating. First, I assume that democratic citizens seldom if ever bear complete responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Second, I do not assume that democratic citizens must have engaged in blameworthy behavior in order to be responsible for a harmful outcome; therefore democratic citizens are not required to identify guilty individuals or groups in order to ensure that public problems are solved. Third, I acknowledge that most harmful political outcomes are caused by a combination of structural processes and individual behavior,

Finally and perhaps most importantly, I emphasize that even when blameworthy individual behavior contributes to harmful outcomes, the degree of blame is not equal to the degree of harm. For example, a man who chooses to buy a gas-guzzling car is engaging in behavior that contributes to climate change, a problem that is likely to have drastic consequences over the coming decades. Unless he has a large family or a job that requires

him to own that particular car, the man deserves to be blamed for purchasing a car that harms the environment, when other options were available. It is not fair, however, to treat this man as if his actions were morally equivalent to killing polar bears in cold blood, unleashing destructive storms on already impoverished countries or destroying vineyards in southern California. His contribution to global warming is, after all, indirect. Moreover, the desire for a car that improves his self-image is hardly the worst of human sins, particularly when his decision to forgo the fuel-inefficient car is not going to save the polar bears or stop the storms. His decision to buy the car is irresponsible and self-serving, but it does not make him a terrible human being. Nor is it the case that global warming is caused entirely by irresponsible individual behavior; the failure of citizens to collectively create institutions that do not incentivize pollution is also a significant cause of global warming.

In emphasizing that blame and harm are rarely proportional when it comes to collective social processes, I discourage political actors from assuming that others bear full responsibility for a complicated problem simply because they have behaved in a blameworthy manner. Hopefully, I also make it easier for political actors to admit that they may also have engaged in behavior that is both harmful and blameworthy. In general, citizens who accept my theory of shared responsibility will be suspicious about efforts to blame complex social and political problems solely upon the behavior of particular individuals and groups. If they are aware of the powerful existential anxieties that Connolly identifies, they should be particularly suspicious of accounts that cast themselves solely as innocent victims of others' misdeeds. My theory of shared responsibility does not, however, completely do away with blame, and therefore does not wholly eliminate the dangers Connolly identifies. Blame is probably necessary for social life, and it is certainly essential to democratic notions

of personhood. Democracy is premised upon the idea that individuals have some capacity to control their own actions, and are therefore capable of engaging in blameworthy and praiseworthy behavior. Citizens who recognize that responsibility for political and social problems is often shared will hopefully be less likely to scapegoat others; however, given that blame is both necessary for social life and contains tremendous potential for cruelty, any attempt to completely avoid scapegoating is likely to be imperfect.

VI. Political Participation and Democratic Pluralism

In claiming that citizens share responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions, I disagree with those who suggest that democratic citizenship should be accompanied by minimal moral obligations, such as obeying the law and refraining from harming others. Contemporary theorists have, however, raised a number of legitimate concerns about political theories that expect a great deal of civic participation or moral commitment. In what follows, I attempt to address several of these criticisms.

One common concern is that expecting citizens to participate in public life denies citizens the ability to choose their own life plans. If citizens are given the freedom to choose their own life plans, the argument goes, some will choose not to participate in public life and citizens must be free to make this choice. My account of shared responsibility, however, does not deny citizens the ability to choose whether they will or will not participate in public life. It suggests that certain choices are more compatible with democratic ideals than others, but does not require that citizens who make what it regards as morally less admirable choices be punished. Citizens cannot be forced to be responsible, anymore than they can be forced to be self-ruling; both responsibility and self-rule are behaviors that citizens must deliberately cultivate.

If my account of responsible democratic citizenship required citizens to “live for the state,” in the sense that they are expected to devote most of their time to civic activity or regard public service as their primary purpose in life, than my account would be incompatible with democratic purposes, even if I do not compel citizens to participate in public life. After all, requiring citizens to “live for the state” would prevent them from choosing their own life purposes, which is one of the primary purposes of modern democracies. Some contemporary theorists seem to assume that political frameworks which require citizens to actively participate in public life inevitably demean private pursuits.³⁷ It is easy to see why theorists would have this concern. Many proponents of active citizenship do view the Athenian polis, whose citizens enthusiastically embraced public commitments as they had wives and slaves to attend to their household concerns, as a model. And many of the most politically active citizens are guilty of the tendencies observed by Thoreau – they have so little regard for private pursuits that they cannot bear to participate in or take pleasure from activities that do not directly contribute to “the redemption of the race.”

My theory of shared responsibility, however, does not require citizens to devote themselves to public activity or to regard political activity as the highest form of self-expression. Responsible democratic citizenship requires some time and energy, but it need not consume so much time and energy that citizens are unable to pursue interests that have no apparent public value or to form particularistic attachments. The fact that responsibility for the behavior of political institutions is shared means that citizens need not demand heroic efforts from either themselves or others. Individual citizens are expected to make some effort to ensure that their institutions neither cause harm to others nor adversely impact their own wellbeing, but they are not required to devote their lives to these tasks. And they should not

³⁷ Walzer, *Obligations*, 203-229 and Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 81.

feel guilty about focusing upon some problems, and leaving other problems for their fellow citizens to tackle. In other words, citizens can accept responsibility for public life and still have the time and energy to pursue their own projects. Furthermore, citizens have options as to how they will discharge their shared responsibilities, giving them an opportunity to choose forms of political and civic activity that are compatible with their own interests and commitments.

Democratic shared responsibility is compatible with a variety of life plans; a Jewish African American university professor from New York City, a Protestant tobacco farmer, a Catholic coal miner from West Virginia and an atheist professional surfer from Los Angeles can all accept shared responsibility for public life without compromising their religious convictions, ignoring their family commitments or abandoning their professional goals. At the same time, democratic shared responsibility does conflict with some life plans. Life plans that entail a complete disregard for the public good are in tension with responsible citizenship, as are life plans that require seclusion from public life or forbid moral flexibility. Devout Jehovah's Witnesses are probably incapable of responsible citizenship, as their commitment to leading a life of separation from non-believers precludes most forms of political and civic activity. Figures such as Tolstoy who believe that their purpose in life is to rigorously adhere to a particular moral code and sneer at those who lack such commitment are also unlikely to be responsible citizens. The character of Roy Cohn as portrayed in *Angels in America* is also incapable of responsible citizenship, not due to moral rigidity, but rather due to his desire to seek power and personal gain, regardless of the social consequences.

While there is little reason to lament a political framework that discourages behavior such as Cohn's, the moral rigidity practiced by Tolstoy and the seclusion cultivated

by certain religious groups do have some attractive qualities. As Addams notes, there is something admirable about people who have the willpower to faithfully adhere to a moral code and such faithfulness is often rewarded by a sense of inner peace. And communities, such as the village portrayed in *Fiddler on the Roof*, which are largely secluded from people who do not share their religious convictions and traditions often experience a degree of solidarity and mutual-understanding that more diverse communities lack. There are, however, compelling reasons why those who are committed to democratic self-rule should be willing to accept an account of responsible citizenship that conflicts with life plans that are admirable in some way. Without sustained political and civic cooperation, it is likely that the political, social and economic conditions that are conducive to democratic self-rule will cease to exist.

Furthermore, life projects that are incompatible with shared responsibility are, in most cases, also incompatible with democratic self-rule. As explained above, democratic self-rule entails more than freedom from arbitrary authority or external constraint. Democratic self-rule is about choosing one's own life plan and accepting some responsibility for one's fate, including the behavior of one's political institutions. If one believes that theories of democracy that emphasize self-rule are both consistent with important human goods and most likely to generate a culture that encourages individual flourishing and minimizes cruelty, then the fact that democratic shared responsibility is not compatible with all life projects should not be extremely problematic. In a society that values self-rule and shared responsibility, citizens whose life projects are incompatible with these objectives will inevitably command less respect from their peers and will likely have more difficulty achieving their political objectives in political institutions that reflect democratic values. At

the same time, such citizens cannot be punished or persecuted, and they deserve to have their experiences and perspectives listened to by others. Democratic citizens may regard devout Jehovah's Witnesses as irresponsible citizens whose life plans do not fully live up to the moral purposes that underpin democratic regimes; they are not, however, entitled to persecute Jehovah's Witnesses or to completely disregard their opinion on political and civic affairs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that democratic understandings of self-rule require individual citizens to accept some responsibility for the consequences that their actions have on their own wellbeing and that of others. Furthermore, I have argued that democratic citizens cannot accept responsibility for their own actions and wellbeing without accepting shared responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions. My understanding of shared responsibility does not completely eliminate blame and punishment. At the same time, I urge democratic citizens to be cautious about allocating blame, as the temptation to scapegoat others unfairly is difficult to avoid and incompatible with liberal democratic norms.

The account of responsible democratic citizenship articulated in this chapter is unlikely to satisfy those who believe that democratic citizenship requires heroic commitment and passionate moral intensity. It is also likely to upset those who believe that democratic citizenship is accompanied by few moral obligations other than voting and obedience. I have, however, tried to demonstrate why neither passivity nor passionate intensity are desirable traits in democratic citizens. Citizens who aspire to be shapers of their own fates cannot sit back and allow their actions to be channeled into directions that they do not endorse. At the

same time, citizens who recognize that other people are entitled to self-rule cannot expect that public policies will always reflect their own beliefs and commitments.

My account of responsible democratic citizenship draws upon numerous sources. I have, however, made a particular effort to incorporate what is best about both Addams and Thoreau. With both thinkers, I insist that treating citizens as beings who are entitled to self-rule means assuming that they are capable of accepting some responsibility for their own fates. Like Addams, I stress that the fates of democratic citizens are intertwined in significant ways and that consequently individual citizens cannot accept responsibility for their own wellbeing without cooperative effort. Like Thoreau, I stress that citizens must be prepared to dissent from cooperative efforts that do more harm than good and should devote some of their civic energy to changing practices that fundamentally violate democratic norms.

The account of democratic shared responsibility articulated above is more indebted to Addams, in that it does not require heroic or saintly effort on the part of citizens. Indeed, it is suspicious of those who aspire to be either heroes or saints, as such people rarely appreciate the patience and flexibility that is required of democratic citizens. People like Tolstoy may be admirable, but they are not ideal democratic citizens. At the same time, the account of responsible citizenship articulated above is not undemanding. Responsible democratic citizenship is demanding not because it requires citizens to continually sacrifice in order to remain true to their principles, but because, as Addams recognized, it requires sustained commitment, as well as patience, and flexibility.

Morally demanding accounts of citizenship do run the risk of encouraging unrealistic expectations that are likely to result in disillusionment with democratic ideals. Given that some democratic citizens will almost certainly choose not to participate in public life if they

are not compelled to do so, placing high expectations on democratic citizens can lead to disappointment when citizens inevitably fail to live up to expectations. Often, such disappointment results in efforts to limit individual freedom and choice. This is not, I think, a reason to give up on morally demanding accounts of citizenship. Such accounts may generate enthusiasm rather than disillusionment and inspire citizens to adopt behaviors that are more conducive to democratic flourishing. Figures such as Martin Luther King, it is worth noting, have been able to combine inspiring civic ideals with guarded optimism about American public life. Furthermore, disillusionment often results not from ideals that are not fully achievable, but rather from the belief that anything less than the ideal is worthless and corrupt. So long as citizens appreciate that most citizens are neither perfectly responsible nor completely irresponsible, they will be able to aspire to improvement without becoming disillusioned when their ideal is never fully achieved.

6. Pragmatism and Political Ethics

“People wish to be settled; only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles”¹

In the introduction, I called attention to three challenges that make responsible democratic citizenship a demanding undertaking. First, there is the difficulty that political actors are not always able to avoid being implicated in harm. Second, there is the challenge of determining responsibility for problems that are caused by a combination of individual behavior and structural processes. Finally, there is the fact that democratic citizens are frequently implicated in problems that their experiences have not fully prepared them to handle.

The first two of these challenges were addressed in the previous chapter. Responsible democratic citizenship is not, I argued, about refusing to be implicated in harm; it is about being a self-ruling citizen who seeks to exert some control over her own fate and over the consequences of her actions. In most cases, responsibility for political outcomes should be regarded as shared, rather than resting solely with individuals. Because the problems for which citizens share responsibility are caused by a combination of individual behavior and structural processes, citizens should address these problems through a combination of personal moral reform and collective effort. Regardless of how they discharge their shared responsibilities, citizens must make an effort to ensure that their actions reflect their own principles and commitments, while remembering that their fates are significantly intertwined with those of their political institutions and fellow citizens.

¹ Emerson, “Circles,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 261. I discovered this quote in George Kateb’s *Emerson and Self Reliance* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 155.

In what follows, I discuss how democratic citizens might accept responsibility for problems that their experiences have not fully prepared them to understand. I begin by explaining why citizens cannot limit their civic activities to local issues and events about which they are capable of making informed judgments. Next, I explore in more detail why individuals often fail to fully understand problems that are not confined to their own communities and ordinary social networks. Finally, I argue that a pragmatist political ethics can help citizens better recognize and respond to problems that are not confined to their own social networks.

I. The Limits of Local Civic Engagement

Tocqueville's description of nineteenth century New England townships is one of the most influential accounts of democratic civic engagement, and for many political theorists, it offers a blueprint for solving contemporary civic ills. Nineteenth century Americans, Tocqueville explained, rarely endorsed "sublime" formulations of civic virtue that required individuals to sacrifice their own interests for the good of the nation. Instead, they adhered to a doctrine that he referred to as "self-interest rightly understood." Americans recognized that their own wellbeing was connected to that of their fellow citizens and as a result were willing to participate in cooperative endeavors to promote the common good.² The recognition of shared interests was facilitated by the existence of local political institutions and associations that encouraged frequent interaction and facilitated the development of mutual affection:

It is difficult to drag a man away from his own affairs to involve him in the destiny of the whole state because he fails to grasp what influences the destiny of the state might have on his own fate. But if it becomes necessary to make a road across the end of his own estate, he sees at once the connection between this

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 609-13.

minor public affair and his greatest private interests and will discover, without being shown, the close link between individual and private interests.³

There are a number of parallels between the civic engagement required by “self-interest rightly understood” and the engagement that is demanded of democratic citizens who share responsibility for public life. In both cases, citizens acknowledge that they cannot accept responsibility for their own wellbeing without also accepting some responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions. And neither form of civic action requires extraordinary personal sacrifice.

The concerns that animate Tocqueville’s discussion of local civic engagement are, however, somewhat different from mine. Tocqueville described civic engagement as a means to prevent liberal citizens from being so preoccupied with private pursuits that they fail to guard against despotic government. I argue, on the other hand, that civic engagement is important because political outcomes have a significant affect upon citizens’ wellbeing and because political outcomes have the potential to implicate citizens in harm.

I also do not share Tocqueville’s confidence that the cooperation that occurs within local communities automatically generates a sense of solidarity and mutual interest among democratic citizens as a whole.⁴ The members of the towns described by Tocqueville recognized common problems and concerns because they have had similar experiences and frequent interactions. Such civic activity, however, is often focused upon problems shared by members of the same social networks, rather than problems shared by democratic citizens more broadly. The New England citizens whom Tocqueville observed building roads and

³ *Democracy in America*, 593.

⁴ Robert Putnam’s theory of social capital has likewise been criticized for ignoring the fact that norms and networks of reciprocity that facilitate cooperation within groups do not automatically generate broader social cooperation. See Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), as well as Bob Edwards, Michael Foley and Mario Diani, *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective* (Tufts University Press, 2001).

raising barns together were some of the same people whom Thoreau denounced for ignoring their own complicity in slavery. This does not mean that local civic engagement is pernicious or undesirable; it does, however, suggest that local activity animated by “self-interest rightly understood” does not automatically generate responsible citizenship. The political problems that affect and are affected by democratic citizens are not confined solely to local communities and thus responsible democratic citizenship cannot have an exclusively local focus.

One could imagine a community of citizens that is united by local concerns, but that also attempts to recognize how their actions affect and are affected by other communities. This is the kind of local community envisioned by poet and essayist Wendell Berry. More so than Tocqueville, Berry is concerned about the failure of democratic citizens to accept responsibility for harms caused by the institutions in which they participate. The members of Western societies have, he believes, ceased to behave as morally responsible agents. They “have given proxies to the corporations to produce and provide *all* of their food, clothing and shelter” and they have given proxies to the government to provide all sorts of services, from childcare to education to the regulation of corporations.⁵ Berry concludes that the only solution to this problem is the restoration of communally controlled political and economic institutions. Because citizens have detailed knowledge of their own communities, they have a better understanding of their own needs than outsiders do. Furthermore, political and economic institutions that are controlled by local communities make it easier for citizens to secure their own wellbeing and ensure that they are not implicated in harm. Citizens who have a stake in the wellbeing of local communities will be motivated to be good neighbors to other communities, Berry believes, both because they care about the moral integrity of their

⁵ Berry, “The Idea of a Local Economy,” *Orion* (2003), 30.

own community and because they have an interest in maintaining beneficial relationships with outsiders.⁶

While he insists that local political and economic institutions will enable democratic citizens to secure ethical relationships with members of other communities, Berry is at his most persuasive when he is explaining how the experience of living in a small community that is attached to a particular geographic location provides members with local knowledge that outsiders are unlikely to possess. The problem with a political system that is controlled by national or international elites, he explains, is that it imposes the same programs and regulations upon all citizens, even though the needs of individuals and communities vary. In a poignant essay about poverty in Eastern Kentucky, Berry tells the story of a skilled furniture maker who is dependent upon food stamps and barely capable of sending his children to school. What is so maddening about the furniture maker's plight is that the furniture maker has marketable skills. If he had access to power tools and the means to advertise his products, he would be able to feed his family, rather than relying upon the state and charity organizations.⁷ In order for public programs to meet the needs of particular people, such as the furniture maker, they must be administered by local institutions that have detailed knowledge of the community's needs, as well as the needs of individual members. Thus, not only do local institutions enable citizens to accept greater responsibility for their own fates, but they also produce better outcomes. In more recent works, Berry paints a stark contrast between "global thinking," which attempts to devise a set of solutions that can be applied in all contexts and "local thinking" which seeks to address the problems of particular individuals and communities. "Global thinking," he concludes, produces "simplifications too

⁶ Berry, "The Idea of a Local Economy," *Orion* (2003), 28-37.

⁷ "The Tyranny of Charity," from *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, 1969), 3-12.

extreme and oppressive to merit the name of thought.”⁸ “Local thinking”, on the other hand, is the solution to most, if not all, contemporary ills. “If we could think locally, we would take far better care of things than we do now. The right local questions and answers will be the right global ones.”⁹

Berry’s discussion of the furniture maker highlights the challenges of acting responsibly toward people and places with which one is not familiar. Furthermore, he rightly recognizes that many of these challenges stem from the experiential nature of political judgment. If citizens could minimize their contribution to harmful outcomes by following a set of rules, then accepting responsibility for problems that affect and are affected by multiple communities would not be particularly challenging. Unfortunately, political actors must often rely upon judgment that is shaped by real-world experiences, and their experiences do not always prepare them to understand the complex problems for which they are responsible.¹⁰

Given that political judgment requires judgment rooted in practical experience, it is likely that democratic citizens will be more capable of recognizing and resolving the problems for which they are responsible if they are given more opportunities to do so on the local level. Unfortunately, while communities may be in a better position than individuals to control the political outcomes that affect and are affected by their own behavior, they also cannot completely control the harms in which they are implicated or the problems that affect the wellbeing of individual citizens. The economic problems that plague Detroit cannot be addressed solely by the city’s residents because they only have limited control over the fate

⁸ *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 19.

⁹ *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 19-20.

¹⁰ As Benjamin Barber notes, political thinkers who agree upon little else, agree that political judgment must be informed by practical experiences. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 169.

of the automobile industry. Similarly, Berry's dream of turning rural Kentucky from a tobacco-producing economy into an economy that produces food in a sustainable manner depends upon the willingness of people from other communities to purchase sustainable agricultural products and provide sustainable farmers with needed equipment. In other words, the shared responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship require coordinated effort among members of different communities. Regardless of whether they share Berry's longing for a society in which local communities have greater control over their fates, citizens who share responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions cannot limit themselves to local civic activity.¹¹

One might object that the previous discussion is not particularly relevant, given that democratic citizens rarely live within completely enclosed communities. There is some merit to this objection. After all, one of the reasons why advocates of intense communal solidarity such as Berry are so critical of contemporary democratic societies is that few citizens feel a strong sense of identity with geographically defined communities. In contemporary America, there is significant interaction between people who have had different experiences and perspectives, and many citizens identify with multiple communities. My father, for example, belongs to the Socialist Workers Party and the American Historical Association, while also maintaining close ties with friends and relatives from his hometown in southern Illinois, who share neither his political beliefs nor his educational background. However, while few Americans live in completely enclosed enclaves, very few of us belong to social networks

¹¹ Kimberly K. Smith likewise argues that Berry's "argument for local self-sufficiency is less satisfying than his argument for local civic engagement." It is not simply that local communities face internal threats such as natural disasters and majority tyranny, but that self-sufficiency isn't entirely consistent with Berry's own philosophical framework. "A central principle of that framework," she notes, "is that we can never escape from 'the whole network of interdependence and obligation' in which human lives necessarily unfold. So why should we try to escape the interdependencies and vulnerabilities of the global economic system? Isn't local self-sufficiency just another misguided bid for an illusory sense of security?" See Smith, "Wendell Berry's Political Vision," from *Wendell Berry: Life and Work* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 57.

that fully reflect the diversity of experiences and perspectives that exist within American society. Most of us share responsibility for problems that are not confined to our own social networks and therefore cannot confine our civic activities to people with whom we share similar experiences.

It is also worth noting that physical proximity does not automatically guarantee the kind of shared experiences and frequent interactions that Berry describes.¹² Even in the small close-knit communities described by Tocqueville and Berry, there are likely to be people who do not belong to the same social networks and who do not feel a strong sense of mutual interest or affection. Given that most Americans live in towns and cities that are significantly larger than both Port Royal and nineteenth century New England townships, it is even less likely that they will live in communities where solidarity develops spontaneously. In urban areas, solidarity among members of the same street or neighborhood often emerges; however, as Addams noted, because urban communities are often segregated by race, class and ethnicity, neighborhood associations often fail to reflect the diverse experiences and needs of urban communities. In other words, many of the same barriers that hinder cooperation between different geographic communities often exist within local communities.

Citizens might long for the kind of intimate local communities that share common experiences and goals described by Berry. If they want to accept responsibility for outcomes that affect their own wellbeing and in which they are implicated, however, they must be prepared to work with people with whom they are not intimately acquainted. They must also avoid allowing the ideal of a self-sufficient local community to become an ideology.

¹² Romand Coles makes this point when talking about political organizing in Durham, North Carolina. “The abysses between people located very differently just minutes apart in urban areas today are often so deep that the idea that we are likely to hear one another well simply by communicating in a relatively neutral place – across whatever table wherever between us – greatly obscures and possibly undermines the task at hand.” Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005), 221-2.

According to Michael Walzer, an ideal becomes an ideology when citizens mistakenly think that they are living in a society that reflects their ideals and allow their political actions and decisions to be guided by this mistaken conviction. The ideal of a local community becomes an ideology when citizens envision themselves as members of self-sufficient entities that share common experiences and purposes, when in fact their fates are significantly intertwined with that of people whose experiences and perspectives are very different from their own.¹³

II. The Limits of Local Thinking

As noted earlier, Berry's insistence that responsible democratic citizens must think carefully about their experience of political and social life is persuasive. Those who attempt to impose inflexible rules and regulations upon communities and individuals with which they are unfamiliar often end up creating more problems than they solve. Berry does not, however, offer a compelling alternative to the careless and inflexible approach to political action he rightly criticizes. People who prioritize local knowledge and experiences in the manner Berry recommends are unlikely to understand the large and complex problems for which they are responsible. In what follows, I analyze the limitations of local thinking in more detail. In explaining why local knowledge and traditions do not always prepare citizens to understand the problems with which they are responsible, I identify many of the reasons why a pragmatist political ethics is desirable.

¹³ Walzer talks about the dangers of ideals becoming ideologies in a somewhat different context, arguing that the ideal of participatory democracy threatens to become a counterproductive ideology when political authorities cast their own decisions as reflecting the will of the people, when in fact that people had no input into those decisions. See *Obligations: essays on disobedience, war and citizenship* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1970), 212-213.

The limitations of local thinking are apparent in Berry's own essays and novels, which describe life in rural Kentucky as rife with complexity and moral ambiguity, while simultaneously implying that the rest of American society is presented with unambiguous choices. Large sections of the American public are, according to Berry, engaged in foolish and immoral enterprises. American scholars are elitists concerned with trivial matters, sales clerks are slaves to the capitalist machine who are conspiring to steal his humanity and the entire coal industry is bent on defacing God's creation. All of these people have clear choices; they can continue to participate in a post-industrial society that is destroying the earth and disempowering ordinary people, or they can promote communal institutions and enterprises that are conducive to responsible citizenship. The tobacco farmers of rural Kentucky, on the other hand, are engaged in a morally ambiguous enterprise and cannot easily disentangle themselves from harm. Berry concedes somewhat grudgingly that tobacco is harmful to human health, but insists that tobacco farming has human and environmental benefits. A demanding crop that requires skill and collaborative effort, tobacco encourages individual discipline and communal solidarity. It also does not ruin the soil as quickly as other cash crops. Moreover, most tobacco farmers did not choose to grow tobacco. They were born into the practice and it is the only way they know of making a living. The continued existence of small family farms, Berry explains, regardless of what they grow, is essential if the idea of a local economy is ever to be realized. Hopefully, one day the tobacco farmers of rural Kentucky will transition from primarily producing tobacco to producing food that will be consumed by the local community.¹⁴

Berry's defense of tobacco farming is thought-provoking and should give pause to those who want to discourage tobacco production without making any effort to compensate

¹⁴ See "The Problem of Tobacco," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*.

tobacco growers. However, it also calls attention to why participation in local institutions and cultivation of local knowledge do not automatically result in responsible citizenship. First, Berry's intimate knowledge of Port Royal, Kentucky does not fully prepare him to understand the problems that affect his own community's wellbeing. Whereas Berry tends to attribute problems such as strip-mining to blameworthy individual behavior, many of the activities that Berry denounces are similar to tobacco farming, in that they cannot easily be abandoned without fundamentally altering ways of life that are good in many respects. Coalmining, for example, often generates considerable solidarity among participants and it is also a profession that is passed down among families.¹⁵ Berry's lack of knowledge about experiences that are different from his own makes it difficult for him to understand that many public problems are not caused simply by immoral behavior, but by a combination of individual actions and structural processes. Without such understanding, it is difficult to imagine Berry cooperating with his fellow citizens to solve shared problems.

Second, Berry's affection for his own community seems to prevent him from fully recognizing harms in which he is implicated. His claim that the ill effects of tobacco have been embellished seems to be based primarily upon wishful thinking, rather than considered judgment. Very few clean air activists or anti-obesity experts suggest, as Berry does, that air pollution or fattening food are greater threats to human health than tobacco. And while Berry is right that illness is part of the human life cycle, there is overwhelming evidence that tobacco use has a significant effect upon both the length and quality of life.¹⁶ Such wishful

¹⁵ Much of my knowledge of coalmining comes from my father, who grew up in a coalmining town and remains in contact with childhood friends who ended up working in the mines. However, Norman Dennis's *Coal is Our Life* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969) provides a compelling description of the communal solidarity that coalmining can generate.

¹⁶ Tobacco-use is widely cited as the single greatest cause of preventable deaths in American society. The deaths attributed to air pollution by clean air activists (10,000 a year) dwarf the fatalities attributed to tobacco (430,000).

thinking is almost certainly related to his desire to believe that his own way of life is morally justifiable. As Berry explains, “to me the tobacco patches and tobacco barns and stripping rooms of my native countryside have been an indispensable school. And so I cannot help but look on our tobacco culture with considerable affection and gratitude.”¹⁷ While such affection for communal practices may be understandable, it can make it difficult for citizens to acknowledge harms in which they are implicated, suggesting that intense identification with a particular community may in some circumstances discourage responsible moral agency.

Finally, the plight of tobacco farmers calls into question Berry’s claim that the “right local solutions” are always the right “global ones.” While the continuation of government subsidies to tobacco farmers may have been the optimal solution for small farming communities in places like Kentucky and North Carolina, it may not have been the optimal solution for the nation as a whole. It is not immediately clear that the preservation of farming communities is worth the impact that tobacco has on public health. Similarly, it is not clear that the solidarity generated by coalmining is worth the environmental costs.

Citizens who share responsibility for democratic political outcomes cannot always make the preservation of communal practices their highest priority. Practices such as tobacco production or coalmining that contribute to the flourishing of particular communities may be a significant source of harm to others. Furthermore, when combined with the activities of other communities, activities that bring short-term prosperity to particular regions may result in long-term harm. In the long-term, the extreme weather patterns produced by global warming have the potential to adversely affect both coal-producing and non-producing regions. Responsible democratic citizenship does not require extraordinary acts of

¹⁷ Berry, “The Problem of Tobacco,” 55.

selflessness; citizens who aspire to be self-ruling cannot under normal circumstances be expected to endorse political outcomes that require them to bear the sole burden for addressing shared problems, particularly if they are likely to be left completely impoverished and dependent upon others. They can, however, be expected to confront shared problems as mature adults who recognize that practices that are genuinely good in some way might do more harm than good and are therefore willing to make some sacrifices in order to avoid contributing to harmful outcomes. Moreover, without some understanding of the broader social consequences of individual and communal behaviors, citizens will be incapable of making informed judgments as to which sacrifices are truly necessary. And without a better understanding of other's circumstances, they may end up demanding excessive sacrifices from others.

Ironically, local thinking often results in the kind of abstract and simplistic theorizing that Berry seeks to avoid. The problem is partly that few problems are confined to local communities; it is not simply that citizens may not understand how to address problems that are not confined to their own communities, but that they may not even be aware of problems that are connected to their own behavior. As Addams noted, many middle class Chicagoans had little knowledge of the extent to which their own political leaders were directly abetting forced prostitution.

Political and moral knowledge may also be more contextual than Berry realizes. For Berry, much of what is essential to human flourishing is determined by nature and easily grasped by those who pay attention to the world around them.¹⁸ It is obvious that human

¹⁸ According to Patrick Daneen, "Berry uncannily echoes the thought of Aristotle. His standard, like Aristotle's, is nature. Nature sets the terms of and establishes limits to human understanding." See Daneen, "The Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought," *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, 304. Because he emphasizes that moral truth is revealed in nature, Berry is often compared to Thoreau. It is worth noting,

flourishing requires environmentally sustainable economic practices and stable heterosexual marriages in which young children are cared for by parents rather than by institutions. It is equally obvious that human flourishing requires that men be taught to treat women with greater respect than they treat each other. Political judgment is contextual, according to Berry, because human beings only come to recognize the value of environmental sustainability and stable marriages by paying attention to their own experiences and that of their community. Furthermore, the means by which human flourishing is achieved varies with context; the furniture maker requires access to tools and markets in order to flourish, whereas tobacco farmers have a different set of needs. Berry's confidence that most of what is essential to human flourishing is clearly written in nature enables him to denounce national governments and corporations who seek to intervene in the affairs of rural communities while at the same time instructing people from urban and suburban areas about ethical living.

Even if Berry is right about what human flourishing entails, however, it is not clear that his experiences in rural Kentucky enable him to understand how shared problems such as the environmental crisis can be resolved. Political actors are never free to create the world anew, but must function within societies that have been shaped by historical processes.¹⁹ If they want to ensure that they do more good than harm, political actors must consider the impact of their actions upon societies that function according to norms and practices that are not easily altered. This means that they cannot minimize their accountability for harm by living as they believe nature intended, but must have some understanding of what the consequences of their actions are likely to be in particular contexts; and, in a world where problems are not confined to local communities, this means that they must have some

however, that while Thoreau shares Berry's conviction that moral laws are written in nature, the moral laws that Thoreau finds in nature are neither as universal nor as fixed as Berry's seem to be.

¹⁹ Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 169.

understanding of what life is like outside their own geographic locations. Environmentalists may dream of a political-economy that is guided by sustainability; they live, however, in a political-economy that is not built upon sustainable practices and must therefore consider the consequences that environmental regulations are likely to have upon people who depend upon unsustainable practices to put food on the table.

There are also good reasons to be suspicious about the claim that nature provides the kind of clear path to human flourishing that Berry envisions. While nature instills humans with certain desires and instincts, and it places constraints upon their behavior, it is less clear that nature offers a clear set of guidelines about how humans should live. As both Thoreau and Addams demonstrate, the way in which humans experience nature is shaped by contingent concepts, experiences and desires. For some cultures, the victorious hunter is celebrated, whereas other cultures might lament the fact that the humans are required to kill innocent creatures in order to survive. Even within a given culture, there are significant differences in how humans experience the natural and social worlds. A tourist vacationing on Cape Cod and a sailor's widow will inevitably view the Atlantic Ocean in different ways. Addams's charity worker grew up in a community where economic self-reliance brought happiness and prosperity; in industrial areas, economic self-reliance may come at the expense of other goods, such as solidarity and healthy childhood development. Finally, the world in which humans find themselves is constantly in flux, meaning that ideas and practices that contribute to human flourishing at one point in time may not be of enduring value.²⁰

Membership in an industrial democracy is accompanied by a somewhat different set of ethical obligations than membership in an agrarian republic. Addams and Thoreau suggest

²⁰ As explained in Chapters One and Two, both Thoreau and Addams saw nature as in a state of flux, and believed that individual human beings and human cultures are likewise prone to evolve over time. More so than Thoreau, Addams's ideas about the evolution of human societies were shaped by her reading of Darwin.

that political knowledge is more radically experiential than Berry recognizes; it is not simply the means by which human achieve flourishing that is shaped by the context in which humans live, but also the nature of flourishing itself.

If political knowledge is contextual in the manner that Addams and Thoreau suggest, then the kind of local thinking described by Berry is likely to make it even more difficult for citizens to recognize and respond to the problems for which they share responsibility. Citizens who assume that their own experiences provide complete insight into human flourishing are likely to end up like Addams's charity worker: unprepared to work with people whose experiences and perspectives differ from their own and unable to secure good outcomes in circumstances that differ from the environment in which they were raised.

III. Pragmatism, Political Ethics and Shared Responsibility

In many ways, Addams's activities at Hull House offer an alternative to Berry and Tocqueville's vision of local civic engagement. This is a vision which recognizes the importance of networks and associations that emerge out of shared experiences and attachment to a particular geographical location, but which also acknowledges that civic activity should not be completely confined to such networks and associations. On the one hand, the Hull House residents developed programs that were tailored to the needs of their neighbors and provided a meeting space for local organizations. On the other hand, Hull House was specifically designed to encourage interaction between people who did not belong to the same social networks, or live in the same geographical location. Addams encouraged, but did not compel, social interaction between urban residents of different ethnic groups. She invited numerous scholars, political reformers and literary figures to Hull House and she invited her neighbors to attend her lectures at the University of Chicago. Furthermore,

Addams and many of the Hull house residents not only participated in state, national and even international mass member organizations, but they believed that the activities of these organizations would benefit their own neighborhood.²¹

Addams's participation in local, national and international reform efforts was consistent with her belief that democratization and industrialization were rapidly creating a world in which the fates of all human beings were interconnected; in such a world, individuals cannot accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions or for their own wellbeing unless they are willing to work with people who do not belong to their own familial and social networks. The theory of shared responsibility articulated in the last chapter places similar expectations upon citizens; citizens affect and are affected by problems that are not confined to their own local communities and they therefore cannot expect that their civic activities will be confined to a particular geographic location.

My theory of democratic shared responsibility certainly does not require democratic citizens to completely emulate Addams. Most citizens do not have the time, energy or ability to be involved in as many different causes and organizations as Addams was. While democratic citizens do share responsibility for public life, they are not expected to devote their lives to public service; they have their own projects to pursue and they also have moral obligations to friends, co-workers and families. Furthermore, as noted in the previous chapter, shared responsibilities often require a division of labor. In most cases, successful outcomes are more likely to be achieved if political actors are capable of taking the time to

²¹ Contemporary social and political theorists often regard mass member associations as a threat to more desirable forms of civic engagement that entail face-to-face interactions. As Carol Nackenoff notes, Addams seems not to have shared this attitude. She “encouraged face-to-face interactions in the neighborhood around Hull House, and she was also an important actor in large-membership organizations, working to organize women municipally, nationally, and internationally.” Nackenoff, “New Politics for New Selves: Jane Addams’s Legacy for Democratic Citizenship in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, eds. Marilyn Fischer, Carol Nackenoff and Wendy Chmielewski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 123.

better understand the situation. Given that the problems for which citizens share responsibility often require that labor be divided, it is appropriate that some citizens would devote most of their civic energy to local causes and organizations, and that others might focus upon broader initiatives. My point is not that all citizens must do everything at once, but rather that citizens who share responsibility for democratic political outcomes cannot idealize the kind of local civic engagement described by Tocqueville and Berry. Local civic engagement should be regarded as one way in which citizens can discharge shared responsibilities, rather as the only way. After all, from slavery in the nineteenth century to the collapse of the banking system in the first half of the twentieth century to global warming and foreign wars in the current century, many of the most significant threats to democratic flourishing transcend particular communities and networks.

Citizens who attempt to tackle problems that are not confined to their own social networks often confront problems that their experiences have not fully prepared them to handle; they must also work with people whose experiences and perspectives are very different from their own. Addams's pragmatist political ethics offers insight into how citizens might address these challenges. Pragmatism, as articulated by Addams, is a democratic philosophy in that it assumes that most human beings have some understanding of the world around them and are to some extent capable of shaping their own fates. Because the world in which democratic citizens find themselves is heterogeneous and constantly in flux, however, citizens who cultivate a particular set of attitudes and practices will be better able to understand the society in which they live and more capable of exerting control over their own fates.²² In particular, citizens must make an effort to recognize that because most people have

²² Some more contemporary pragmatist philosophers such as Richard Rorty reject all appeals to human nature and all efforts to make sense of the world in which humans find themselves. Democratic citizens should, Rorty

some grasp of their own circumstances, people whose life experiences are very different from their own may have insight into political and social problems that they themselves lack.

Berry, for example, probably does have some insight into the plight of the rural poor that urban and suburban citizens lack, and democratic citizens can learn from his experiences even if they do not share his overall worldview.

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that the attitudes and practices that play an important role in Addams's pragmatist political ethics can help citizens recognize and discharge shared responsibilities in increasingly pluralistic and inter-connected societies; these attitudes include curiosity, humility, sympathy and flexibility. It would be inconsistent with Addams's own political intuitions to assume that her ideas can be un-problematically applied in a context that is different from her own. Thus, while my account of the attitudes and practices associated with democratic citizenship is significantly influenced by Addams, it is by no means a re-statement of her political ethics. I draw from a variety of thinkers who share my belief that political judgment should be informed by practical experience.

Furthermore, my understanding of the practices and attitudes that responsible democratic

concludes, abandon the futile effort to understand the world and seek instead to be strong poets who re-describe the world. See Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). As many scholars have commented, Rorty's ideas are not fully consistent with that of the original pragmatists. Hilary Putnam notes that Dewey did not share Rorty's interest in abandoning philosophic and social inquiry. Dewey, Putnam explains, developed a theory of inquiry that is committed to "fallible, revisable, but nonetheless 'warrantably assertable' judgments." See Putnam, "Pragmatism Resurgent," in *The Cornell West Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 21. Similarly, the classic American pragmatists did not completely reject the notion that nature endows human beings with certain desires and instincts, but rather insist that these instincts and desires do not determine social organization. Dewey, for example, recognized "tendencies and impulses that actually are genuine elements in human nature," but stressed that these tendencies and impulses were "shaped into acquired dispositions by interacting with environing cultural conditions." From *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, eds. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 221-2. My understanding of pragmatism is closer to Dewey and Addams's than to Rorty's, in that I believe that democratic citizens must make an effort to understand the world in which they live, even if those understandings are contingent and fallible. Like Addams and Dewey, I also believe that there are basic human instincts, needs and desires that shape, but do not determine human society and culture. More so than Dewey and Addams, however, I argue that these passions and instincts suggest that democratic rule will always be a challenging and risky endeavor.

citizenship requires is informed by a worldview that is less confident that solidarity is easily achieved or that such solidarity always functions to serve democratic purposes. More so than Addams, I emphasize that the sentiments that discourage responsible citizenship, such as the desire to believe that political ills are the result of others' blameworthy behavior, are deeply ingrained and must be continually resisted by democratic citizens.

Curiosity

In the introduction to *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams declared that “we are under a moral obligation in choosing our experiences, since the result of those experiences must ultimately determine our understanding of life.”²³ Citizens whose understanding of political life is informed by a broad range of experiences will, she believed, be more capable of understanding and addressing harms in which they are implicated. As Addams illustrates with her analysis of the women who came to Hull House to visit the devil baby, it is not necessary to continually engage in activities and discussions that are explicitly political in order to broaden one's understanding of political and social life. By listening to the women talk about their own lives, Addams learned about threats to democratic flourishing such as domestic abuse that were not part of her own experience. Perhaps more importantly, she gained insight into people whose worldviews were unfamiliar to her, insight that might facilitate cooperative political action in the future.

Discussions about the need for political actors to seek out unfamiliar experiences and perspectives often bring to mind figures such as Dorothy Day, who not only dedicated her life to improving the wellbeing of the underprivileged, but sought to live in a manner that

²³ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 8.

would enable her to understand what it is like to be poor.²⁴ While Day was in many ways an admirable figure, she does not offer a particularly useful role model for democratic citizens. Self-ruling citizens are not expected to devote their lives to public service; they have their own projects to pursue and they also have moral obligations to friends, co-workers and families. They are not, however, required to make interacting with diverse others their life's mission. More importantly, democratic citizens should be suspicious of the notion that it is possible to pursue a lifestyle that will enable them to identify fully with "the other half." As Addams reminded Tolstoy, it is impossible to truly emulate the experience of "the people." In a polity that includes rural tobacco farmers in Kentucky, autoworkers in Detroit and suburban "soccer moms," there is not one group of people whose experiences completely reflect the "average American" or the "under-privileged masses."

There are many ways in which democratic citizens can broaden their own experience of political and social life without completely disrupting their own lives. They can travel to other parts of the country, join new organizations or even watch television programs that focus on unfamiliar people and places. Indeed, finding new experiences and perspectives is often less challenging than approaching such experiences with an open-mind, as opposed to forgone conclusions. As I explain below, citizens must cultivate a number of attitudes if they are to learn from new experiences. Perhaps the most important of these attitudes is curiosity about people and places that fall outside one's own experiences. Citizens who are genuinely curious about political and social life will not be content to simply observe women gossiping about a devil baby; they will, as Addams did, want to understand why the women are so heavily invested in the existence of supernatural phenomenon.

²⁴ Maurice Hamington offers an excellent analysis of the differences between Addams and Day. See "Two Leaders, Two Utopias: Jane Addams and Dorothy Day," *National Women's Studies Association* 19, no. 2 (2007), 159-186.

Genuine curiosity about unfamiliar people and places is one means of overcoming the fact that political norms and institutions often seem to discourage citizens from recognizing and responding to harms in which they are implicated. Curiosity certainly does not make citizens willing to challenge popular practices and institutions; hence, I also emphasize the importance of courage. By cultivating curiosity about political and social life, however, citizens can address the problem that individuals are often distanced from those who are harmed by the processes in which they participate. Citizens who are genuinely interested in the world around them are more likely to seek out the kinds of experiences that would enable them to better understand the benefits and costs of existing institutions and processes. Such citizens may also be more likely to recognize that there are alternatives to existing practices and alternatives.

There are many ways in which Thoreau is not an ideal democratic citizen; however, his curiosity about the world around him, including people and places outside Concord, is something that democratic citizens would do well to imitate. Like Addams, Thoreau demonstrated how curiosity about unfamiliar experiences and perspectives can help citizens become aware of the costs of their own way of life and of the fact that other alternatives are possible. Thoreau is a role model for democratic citizens primarily because he approaches new experiences with the expectation that he might learn something from them. Of course, this does not mean that Thoreau's mind is a blank slate that approaches new experiences without any preconceived notions. Thoreau approaches Cape Cod with theories about how the region has shaped American life. The drowning of Margaret Fuller also seems to have influenced Thoreau's impression of Cape Cod, as the dangers of the Atlantic Ocean are never far from his mind. However, Thoreau does not travel to Cape Cod simply to confirm his own

worldview. He expects that the experience will shape his consciousness in some way, just as he expects that an encounter with a loon on Walden Pond will affect his understanding of nature. Moreover, Thoreau's understanding of the region and its history is changed by his experiences; he leaves Cape Cod with an appreciation of how the Atlantic Ocean both threatens and sustains human life, as well as genuine admiration for people who live in an environment that is less hospitable than Concord.

Thoreau suggests that valuable political insight can be gained through non-human encounters. History and literature can enable citizens to appreciate political and moral alternatives that are rarely valued in their own community. By experiencing the pleasures of wild places for themselves, Thoreau is able to appreciate the costs of unrestrained economic development. Upon traveling to Cape Cod, Thoreau comes to appreciate that for all his intelligence and ingenuity, there are circumstances that he is not well equipped to handle.

History, literature and nature are by no means a perfect substitute for the interaction with diverse others that Addams practiced. Democratic societies cannot afford to have too many citizens who share Thoreau's disregard for the opinions and experiences of others. After all, history, literature and nature do not necessarily call citizens attention to contemporary problems. Moreover, interpreting literary texts and contemplating the natural world also do not inevitably allow citizens to cultivate political skills. Thoreau's encounter with John Fields suggests that learning how to interpret a loon's howl is not exactly the same thing as learning to understand another human being, as human beings have narratives to tell about their own lives that loons do not. At the same time, there is a need in democratic societies for people like Thoreau, who are capable of looking at contemporary society from perspectives that are shaped by a detailed knowledge of history or an appreciation for the

natural world. Ideally, however, these citizens would have greater appreciation for other's experiences and perspectives.

Humility

Humility is often assumed to go hand-in-hand with the toleration of different opinions and lifestyles that is expected of liberal-democratic citizens. According to Thomas Spragens Jr., democrats must recognize that the truth of their convictions cannot be demonstrated in any "incontrovertible and definitive way," and that they are therefore unable to justify enforcing their beliefs upon others.²⁵ Humility is also, however, essential to democratic practices of responsibility.

Responsible democratic citizenship requires humility for two reasons. First, humility is necessary because individual experiences do not always fully prepare citizens to understand the problems for which they are accountable. Citizens can correct limitations to their own understanding by exposing themselves to new experiences, only if they acknowledge that their own understanding of political and social life is likely limited. Without humility, citizens are unlikely to gain political insight from new experiences, and will be prone to interpret those experiences so that they confirm existing moral convictions. Without humility, citizens are also unlikely to recognize the need to listen to those who have different perspectives. In other words, humility helps sustain curiosity about political and social life.

Second, humility is necessary because citizens function in a morally complicated and interdependent world. They function in a world where most people are neither perfect saints nor moral monsters, where well-intentioned actions often have unintended consequences and where the fates of individuals are intertwined in significant ways.

²⁵ *Civic Liberalism*, 225.

Democratic citizens are unlikely to recognize or discharge their responsibilities, if they are under the illusion that they are complete masters of their own fates who are blessed with righteousness and foresight, and thus could not have, even unintentionally, engaged in behavior that contributes to public problems. For example, those who insist that homeowners who accepted unwise mortgages and financial institutions that profited from risky loans bear full responsibility for the financial crisis often ignore their own participation in institutions and processes that contributed to the financial crisis. Many Americans contributed to the widespread suspicion of government intervention in the economy that resulted in banking regulation during the Clinton administration; many Americans also profited from the risky mortgages that contributed to the financial crisis. Moreover, those who want to require borrowers to bear the full costs of the mortgage crisis often forget that their own wellbeing is bound to that of their fellow citizens; massive bankruptcies or evictions are likely to threaten the stability of the American economic and political system.

Accepting shared responsibility for political outcomes in complicated, heterogeneous and interdependent societies requires that citizens cultivate humility toward their own political intuitions, and accept that many of their actions do not have easily foreseeable consequences. Such humility is necessary, even among people who possess expert knowledge, as expert knowledge is not a perfect substitute for lived experience. The welfare officials vilified by Berry might actually possess some expertise in how to avoid poverty that might benefit the rural poor. They may know what kinds of training and skills are generally required in order to obtain a good-paying job. At the very least, they likely know what public services are offered by the government, how ordinary citizens can best take advantage of these services and they might have some insight into how meaningful

reform could be pursued. The welfare officials' training may not enable them to fully understand the obstacles faced by the individuals they are trying to help. Even if the welfare officials have themselves experienced poverty, their situation may not have been entirely similar to that of their clients. Annelise Orleck explains that male welfare officials who themselves benefited from government-funded jobs programs were often particularly unsympathetic to female welfare recipients, whose child-care responsibilities prevented them from fully taking advantage of jobs programs.²⁶ What is needed in this situation, and in other situations where citizens with expert knowledge are attempting to address political and social problems is humility. The welfare officials must recognize that there are multiple causes to poverty and that inflexible regulations and one-size fits all solutions are unlikely to address the complex set of problems that make it difficult for particular individuals to escape poverty. They should be prepared to listen to and, if possible, work with the people they are trying to help.

Sympathy

In addition to cultivating humility toward their own moral and political intuitions, democratic citizens should make an effort to sympathize with other's experiences. Making a conscious effort to sympathize with others is necessary because humans are generally not prone to err on the side of compassion when interpreting those whose behavior is very different from their own. Our own opinions often appear self-evident because they have been confirmed by our experiences; hence it is easy to conclude that those who think or act differently are foolish or depraved. Because we are familiar with the virtues of our friends

²⁶ Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mother's Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

and family, we are less likely to focus only upon their faults. When it comes to people with whom we are not acquainted, however, this kind of charity is often less forthcoming.²⁷

Particularly when combined with self-righteousness, the tendency of citizens to judge people outside their own social networks unfairly makes it difficult for citizens to recognize and address their shared responsibilities. It prevents citizens from learning politically relevant information from those who have had different experiences, and it hinders cooperative efforts to solve shared problems. The people in the example above who insist upon holding borrowers solely responsible for the financial crisis are guilty of both excessive confidence in their own righteousness and an inability to sympathize with those who are differently situated.

As explained in the previous chapter, Addams's success as a political actor was largely due to her ability to sympathize with the residents of her neighborhood.²⁸ This ability enabled her to learn from her neighbor's experiences, even though they did not discuss their experiences in terms that were familiar to her. In talking with the women who were committed to the existence of the devil baby, Addams gained insight into threats to human wellbeing, such as domestic violence, that were not a part of her own experience. Similarly, her ability to sympathize with her neighbors led her to conclude that behaviors to which she objected, such as drunkenness and vote-selling, did not necessarily indicate utter depravity and that she could find common cause with people who engaged in such behaviors. Without

²⁷ Michael Morell notes that psychologists have consistently found that humans tend to see members of their own group as responsible for praiseworthy behavior, while attributing negative behavior to situational factors outside their control. See Morell, "Throwing Grandma Under the Bus: Obama and the Role of Empathy in Democratic Deliberation," paper presented at the American Political Theory Association Annual Meeting (2009), 20.

²⁸ Addams's theory and practice of sympathy is often considered to be one of her most important lessons for contemporary democratic theorists and citizens. See Charlotte Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Re-weaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the Feminist Ethics of Care* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

this ability to sympathize with others, Addams's experiences in Chicago's nineteenth ward might not have led her to conclude that cooperation between middle-class women and the urban working classes was both possible and desirable.

Contrasting Addams's reaction to her encounters with the urban poor and working classes to contemporary British psychologist Anthony Daniels' reaction to his experiences working as a prison and hospital psychologist in Birmingham, England is illuminating. Daniels concludes that his patients' problems result from their frivolous lifestyle; the English "under-classes" approach sex, children and money as if their behavior has no meaningful consequences for themselves or others. This is evil behavior in Daniels's eyes because the participants are fully aware of the consequences of their actions. Many of his female patients were themselves abandoned by their own fathers and abused by their mother's boyfriends; therefore they must understand the consequences of forming liaisons with irresponsible and volatile men, and their willingness to enter into such relationships is particularly reprehensible.²⁹

Daniels, it is worth noting, does not place the blame for problems such as child abuse and teen-age pregnancy solely upon women, as he acknowledges that the women's behavior is shaped by political institutions and social norms. From the perspective of those who are concerned about self-rule and shared responsibility, however, Daniels analysis is nevertheless troubling. The under-classes, he suggests, are responsible for contemporary social and political ills, but they are not capable of self-rule and therefore they are not fit to participate in devising solutions to these problems. Crime, poverty and abuse will be resolved, Daniels concludes, not by listening to people who have experienced these problems, but rather by

²⁹ Theodore Dalrymple (pen name of Anthony Daniels), "The Frivolity of Evil," *City Journal* (August 2004).

listening to the experiences of people such as Daniels who have carefully observed the consequences of the modern welfare state and the sexual revolution.

If Daniels analysis of urban poverty is correct, then the kind of self-rule and shared responsibility described in the previous chapter is impossible in contemporary democratic societies. There are, however, good reasons to reject his analysis. First, it is not clear that Daniels experience as a prison psychologist necessarily gives him complete insight into the urban poor or even into the lives of his patients, whom he is likely encountering during some of the lowest points in their lives. Second, Daniels often fails to recognize that his patients' mistakes are not always proportional to the ensuing harms. Women who form liaisons with abusive and irresponsible men are putting their future children at risk for poverty and abuse; these women are not, however, child abusers and do not deserve to be treated as such. To refer to such behavior as "evil" is not fair to the women involved, and risks trivializing some of the truly reprehensible actions that Daniels describes, such as the man who locked his girlfriend in a closet or the mother who threw her child out of the house at fifteen. Daniels' patients may not be perfectly virtuous citizens, but they are not necessarily completely morally depraved or utterly incapable of making an effort to secure their own wellbeing.

One suspects that Daniels would have come to a different conclusion if he made more of an effort to sympathize with his patients. It is unlikely that greater sympathy would lead to the conclusion that his patients are completely innocent victims of unfortunate circumstances. Being sympathetic does not mean ignoring other people's faults, but rather making an effort not to dwell solely upon those faults. Addams, it is worth noting, acknowledged that her neighbors often made poor decisions and that these decisions contributed to their misfortunes. Because she made an effort to sympathize with them, however, Addams also

came to conclude that her neighbors were often punished more harshly for their mistakes than other segments of society, and that people who make poor judgments are not necessarily lacking in admirable qualities or insight into the problems that confront democratic societies.

Democratic sympathy, as I understand it, does not expect survivors of torture, violence or extreme cruelty to empathize with those who have intentionally harmed them, as this is neither a fair nor a realistic expectation. Citizens are expected to make an effort to sympathize with each other because most human beings are not wholly foolish or depraved and because most citizens do not fully intend the harms in which they are implicated. In circumstances where harm is clearly intentional, sympathy may not be warranted.³⁰

Democratic sympathy also does not mean attempting to imagine how you would feel if you switched places with another person, as this exercise often does not result in the increased understanding that facilitates shared responsibility and cooperation. As Iris Young explains, people who imagine how they would feel in other people's shoes often fail to recognize that the circumstances that led other people to end up in a different social position may cause them to experience the world differently. Young illustrates this point with the example of how Oregon state officials justified their decision to compensate disabled people less for healthcare services by citing an opinion poll in which a majority of citizens claimed that they "would rather be dead than wheel-chair bound or blind." According to the officials, the opinion poll proved that the lives of the disabled are less valuable than the lives of the able-bodied. The problem with this exercise, Young argues, is that able-bodied people who

³⁰ Democracy may require citizens to make peace with those who have harmed them. The conclusion of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, for example, was only possible because a significant percentage of the population was willing to allow those who had previously been involved in or even organized violence to participate in democratic political institutions. Making peace with those who have committed violence and empathizing with them, however, are very different things.

imagine how they would feel if they were suddenly stricken with a permanent disability are unable to grasp the feelings of those who have actually lived with disability for some time. Discussions with people who have the experience of living with physical disabilities suggest that their lives are far more fulfilling than the able-bodied imagine.³¹

Rather than simply attempting to imagine what it would be like to switch places with other people, democratic sympathy means withholding judgment until one has made a genuine effort to learn about the circumstances that shaped *their* choices. It is, of course, impossible to completely understand how other people experience the world. Because we cannot read other's people's minds, projecting one's own opinions and feelings onto others cannot completely be avoided. We can, however, make an effort to withhold judgment until we have listened to other people talk about their choices and experiences. When talking with the women who come to Hull House to visit the devil baby, Addams did not simply envision how she would feel if she suddenly found herself elderly and not perfectly fluent in English, but instead appreciated that the women's experience of social life was shaped by beliefs in supernatural forces that she did not share. She was able to sympathize with the women because she took the time to listen to them, and because she did not assume that people who think differently from her are completely foolish or depraved; the women's belief in the supernatural, Addams recognizes, had played a useful role in their life. While it may be impossible to fully understand other people's experiences, those who make an effort to avoid projecting their own beliefs and feelings onto other people are more likely to gain insights into other people's experiences.

³¹ Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought," *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 38-42.

Understanding other people's circumstances will not necessarily lead us to endorse their decisions. One can understand why a battered woman continually returns to an abusive husband without affirming this decision. In many cases, however, making an effort to understand the circumstances in which other people live can yield politically relevant information; perhaps, by talking with the battered women, we come to understand the importance of ensuring that child-care responsibilities do not prevent women from obtaining employment. Attempting to understand why people make choices that seem misguided to us may also make it easier for us to cooperate with them on issues where we do agree; after all, it is difficult to work with people whom we consider to be wholly foolish or depraved, and hard to ask other people to work with us if we demonstrate no respect for their motivations or intelligence.

In an ideal polity, sympathy among democratic citizens would be reciprocal. In reality, many democratic citizens are unwilling or unable to listen sympathetically to others. If one believes in the importance of learning from those who have different experiences and perspectives, however, then one cannot assume that people with rigid or parochial worldviews have nothing to offer. In other words, democratic citizens should be prepared to listen sympathetically to those who will not listen sympathetically to them. Because sympathy entails reserving, not refraining from judgment, there will certainly be times where sympathetic listening does not significantly change our interpretations of other people's motives. Listening to people who insist that President Obama is a Kenyan citizen does not change my belief that their commitment to an easily refuted conspiracy is motivated primarily by ugly sentiments. On the other hand, upon reading Wendell Berry's account of life in rural Kentucky, I gain insight into a group of people who have largely been ignored by

progressive politicians and activists (indeed, the repercussions of the government's decision to stop subsidizing tobacco farmers in 2004 are almost never mentioned in American public life). It is unfortunate that Berry has little interest in learning about experiences that differ from his own, but democratic citizens can nevertheless benefit from paying attention to him.

Flexibility

By now it should be clear that citizens who share responsibility for democratic political outcomes must be flexible in the sense that they are prepared to revise their own moral and political commitments as circumstances change. As I explained in the last chapter, responsible democratic citizenship, however, also requires that citizens cultivate a certain degree of flexibility towards their political goals and objectives. Making an effort to understand other people's perspectives and circumstances helps democratic citizens understand the complex problems for which they are accountable. However, increased understanding does not inevitably lead to agreement. Addams concluded that the men who frequented saloons were not wholly depraved, but this did not change her mind about the value of prohibition. Similarly, reading Berry's essays about tobacco farming might make it easier to understand why tobacco farmers want to preserve their way of life, but it will not inevitably change one's opinion about the merits of tobacco subsidies. Citizens cannot accept responsibility for shared problems unless they practice a certain degree of moral flexibility. This means that democratic citizens should be willing to settle for solutions that fall short of their ideals, and more importantly, work with people who fall short of their expectations.

Citizens who are in broad agreement with pragmatist moral intuitions and who accept the account of democratic self-rule and shared responsibility articulated in the last chapter will regard the willingness to settle for outcomes that fall short of one's own moral

standards as an ethical action. They will recognize that the contextual and experiential nature of political knowledge, as well as the fact that the policies rarely survive in the long run without significant public support, means that including diverse perspectives and experiences in the political process often does more good than harm. Furthermore, they will acknowledge that self-ruling citizens deserve to be given some input into political outcomes that affect their own wellbeing. Citizens who refuse to allow their desire to mould ideal citizens prevent them from cooperating with those who fall short of their ideals are often behaving in an ethical manner in that they are enabling others to be self-ruling.

Courage

Courage is not an attitude that is often associated with American pragmatism. To some extent, this is an oversight, as rejecting received practices and experimenting with new methods does require considerable fortitude. My emphasis upon courage, however, also reflects an understanding of human society and history that is more tragic than that of the classic American pragmatists.³² Because I am less confident that democratic societies are inevitably progressing toward greater social cooperation and harmony, I believe that democratic political action is a riskier endeavor than the early pragmatists recognized. Addams could console herself after difficult compromises by assuring herself that the harms caused by her compromise would eventually be addressed; such comfort is not available to democratic citizens. Moreover, unlike Addams, I do not envision a time in which broader social cooperation will become automatic; thus, in addition to making difficult compromises, democratic citizens must also be prepared to dissent from activities and outcomes that are not

³² Cornell West likewise seeks a pragmatist politics that has a greater appreciation for the tragic aspects of the human condition. See West, *American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison; University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

genuinely democratic. In a dangerous and unpredictable world, both principled compromise and principled dissent require courage.

Drawing upon Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of the virtues, Holloway Sparks defines courage as “a commitment to resolution and persistence in the face of risk, uncertainty, or fear.”³³ Courage, she stresses, does not entail a lack of fear, but rather the willingness to act in spite of fear. Fear is an appropriate response to risky and dangerous situations; those who lack fear either have a reckless disregard for the consequences of their own actions or a distorted perception of risk.

Democratic citizens are frequently called upon to make risky decisions. Not only are they called upon to dissent from policies supported by their fellow citizens and to work with people who do not share their own commitments, but they are expected to do these things without any guarantee of success. Fear is appropriate in such situations. Fellowship is conducive to human flourishing and those who risk losing the esteem of their friends and fellow citizens are by no means making a trivial sacrifice. Moreover, it is crucial that democratic citizens have an accurate perception of the risks of political action. Blind faith that everything will work as planned and confidence that any adverse consequences will be fixable is likely to result in reckless behavior. Citizens who have an accurate perception of the risks that political action entails will often make better political decisions; if the Bush administration had been less confident that the Iraqi people were going to welcome them as liberators, they might have made better post-invasion plans. Citizens who have a better understanding of the risks that political action entails are also likely to be more capable of admitting that their actions have not had the intended consequences, and changing course.

³³ Holloway Sparks, "Dissident Citizenship: Democratic Theory, Political Courage, and Activist Women," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1997), 76.

Thus, while I largely accept Sparks's definition of courage, I am hesitant to equate courage with persistence. Rather, democratic courage is best defined as the willingness to take political action, despite risk, uncertainty and fear.

Conclusion

In the last chapter, I argued that democratic citizens share responsibility for the behavior of their political institutions and argued that shared responsibility cannot be discharged without cooperative effort. In this chapter, I have made an effort to clarify what kinds of practices and attitudes are conducive to democratic cooperation. I began by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of local civic engagement. On the one hand, local civic engagement enables citizens to address issues and events that their experiences have prepared them to understand. On the other hand, purely local civic engagement does not enable democratic citizens to address or even understand the problems for which they are responsible. Having discussed the limits of local knowledge and thinking, I developed an alternative political ethics, one that is indebted to the ideas of the American pragmatists. This is a political ethics that emphasizes the importance of attitudes that facilitate understanding and cooperation among people who do not share the same experiences and perspectives.

Pragmatism does not offer the moral clarity that some contemporary political theorists and actors seek. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why pragmatism encourages citizens to accept shared responsibility for democratic political outcomes. After all, in order to accept shared responsibility for democratic political outcomes, citizens must recognize that actions often have unintended and unpredictable consequences. Pragmatism does, however, provide moral resources that enable democratic citizens to resist unfounded prejudices and unjust power structures. Given that our understandings of democratic ideals are, to some

extent, influenced by contingent experiences and power relations, the pragmatists' insistence that these beliefs should be subject to re-interpretation offers a political ethics that is likely to unsettle complacent acceptance of unjust power structures. Democratic pragmatists will, however, be somewhat cautious about how they go about unsettling these power structures, as they recognize that the consequences of political actions cannot be predicted in advance.

7. Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I have sought to articulate an explicitly democratic theory of responsible citizenship. In this concluding section, I offer a brief summary of my argument. Having done so, I re-visit the examples I used in the introduction to illustrate why the responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship are often unclear. My theory of democratic shared responsibility does not dictate precisely how Brenda, Jacob, John and Gabriel should discharge their shared responsibilities, as any democratic political ethic must allow individuals to exercise their own discretion. My theory does, however, suggest that all of these people bear some responsibility for harmful political outcomes and provides some general guidelines as to how this responsibility might be discharged.

I. Democracy and Shared Responsibility

My exploration of the relationship between democracy and responsibility has focused upon a particular tradition of democratic thought, a tradition which believes that human dignity and flourishing demands that individuals be in some meaningful sense shapers of their own fates. In the first two chapters, I examined the writings of Thoreau and Addams, both of whom assumed that democratic citizens could not be shapers of their own fates unless they accepted some responsibility for political outcomes in which they are implicated. Addams and Thoreau had somewhat different understandings as to what self-rule and responsibility entail in a democratic society. Thoreau envisioned democratic self-rule as a heroic quest to ensure that one's actions conform to principles that one has consciously chosen. He believed that democratic citizens should accept responsibility for political outcomes by engaging in individual acts of dissent and pursuing personal projects of moral reform. Addams, on the other hand, argued that democratic citizens could not control their

own fates purely through individual effort; the problems that confront democratic citizens are shared and must be resolved through cooperative effort.

Despite such differences, there were significant areas of agreement between Thoreau and Addams; in particular, both thinkers assumed that agents who hold themselves accountable for their own actions must make some effort to critically reflect upon the ideals that animate those actions. The idea that human beings can be self-creating in the sense that they are capable of freely choosing the principles that animate their actions has been criticized by contemporary thinkers on the grounds that it ignores the fact that humans are social creatures whose purposes and moral intuitions are significantly shaped by the communities to which they belong. It is worth noting, however, that neither Addams nor Thoreau expected democratic citizens to completely cast aside received opinions and cultural norms; rather, they expected democratic citizens to seek out a diversity of experiences and to allow their moral understandings to be broadened by those experiences. Democratic citizens have, Addams and Thoreau believed, an obligation to seek out a diversity of experiences and perspectives, as doing so will enable them to better choose their own life plans and to better understand the problems for which they are accountable.

As explained in Chapter Three, neither Thoreau nor Addams offers a political ethics that fully lives up to their own ideals. Both thinkers believed that democratic citizens must critically reflect upon their own actions and avoid making scapegoats of those who deviate from majority opinion. And yet, both discussions of responsible citizenship rely upon assumptions that enable political actors to avoid admitting that their own behavior might be a cause of harm. Given that political problems are rarely caused solely by blameworthy individual behavior, Thoreau's preoccupation with identifying and correcting blameworthy

individual behavior is particularly likely to result in unfair attributions of blame; it is also unlikely to result in effective political action. Addams generally avoided these mistakes and for this reason my own account of responsible citizenship borrows more from her than from Thoreau. Her faith that shared problems can be resolved in a consensual manner, however, means that her political ethics offers little guidance to citizens who find themselves in situations where cooperation is neither possible nor desirable. More worrisomely, the moral status that Addams bestowed upon consensual solutions threatens to discourage political actors from identifying cooperative endeavors as a potential source of harmful political outcomes.

In chapters Four and Five, I articulated a theory of democratic shared responsibility that is consistent with the democratic aspirations endorsed by Thoreau and Addams, but which avoids the problems discussed above. The ideal of individual self-determination that provides one of the moral foundations for democratic regimes, I argue, requires individuals to accept some responsibility for political outcomes that affect and are affected by their behavior. Responsibility for political outcomes should in most cases be regarded as shared; not only are political outcomes caused at least partly by large and complex processes, but solutions to political problems that reflect only the perspectives of individual citizens or groups are not consistent with democratic norms.

My understanding of shared responsibility is influenced by Larry May's social existentialist account of shared responsibility. I draw upon May because the understanding of moral agency that underpins his understanding of shared responsibility is very similar to democratic understandings of self-rule. A theory of shared responsibility that stresses self-rule is, I think, less likely to over-emphasize the moral worth of cooperation, as Addams's

theory does. At the same time, May's theory must be modified in order to be applied in democratic contexts. More so than May's existentialist moral agents who are primarily concerned with protecting their integrity in a hostile environment, democratic citizens are expected to accept some responsibility for their own wellbeing. Democratic citizens share responsibility for political outcomes not simply because political outcomes are affected by their behavior, but also because political outcomes affect their own wellbeing.

Democratic shared responsibility is a middle ground between individual and collective responsibility, which applies to outcomes that result from a combination of individual behaviors and structural processes. Because responsibility is shared, political actors cannot assume that personal projects of moral reform are the only appropriate solution to complex political problems and they should be skeptical of analyses that single out particular individuals and groups as solely responsible for those problems. At the same time, individual behaviors do contribute to harmful outcomes and citizens are obligated to change behaviors that contribute to harmful outcomes when it is possible to do so.

Because the problems that confront democratic citizens cannot be addressed solely through individual effort, democratic societies cannot survive without cooperation. Unlike Addams, however, I resist the idea that the shared responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship must always be discharged through cooperative endeavors. Citizens share responsibility for democratic political outcomes because their fates are intertwined with that of their political institutions and with each other; the fact that citizens share a common fate, however, does not mean that they will always be able to address shared problems in a consensual manner. In certain situations, refusing to cooperate with people whose objectives are fundamentally flawed and dissenting from popular opinion may actually be the best

means by which citizens can confront shared problems, so long as these activities are part of a political strategy that is designed to persuade other people to participate in meaningful reforms.

My account of responsible democratic citizenship does not require martyrdom or extraordinary deeds. At the same time, it is not undemanding. Citizens must be prepared to make some sacrifices in order to protect their own long-term interests and to stand up for democratic principles. In particular, they must be prepared to sacrifice the satisfaction that comes from associating only with those who live up to their own moral standards.

Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by citizens who accept shared responsibility for democratic political outcomes is the fact that political outcomes are large, complicated and difficult for individual citizens to fully understand. In many cases, democratic citizens are not fully unaware of the harms in which they are implicated. In part, the problem results from the limited nature of individual experience. Citizens often do not confront the consequences of problems such as global warming or deteriorating infrastructure in their daily lives and they therefore may not be aware of them. And even when they are aware of those problems, their experiences often do not prepare them to understand the complex behaviors and processes that cause these problems. There are also deep-set anxieties and desires that make it difficult for humans to identify and understand problems in which they are implicated. Very few of us want to believe that our own behavior is the cause of harm. As I explained in Chapter Five, democratic citizens who seek to recognize and resolve shared problems must cultivate attitudes that enable them to resist self-righteous narratives and to learn from the experiences and perspectives of other people. These attitudes are probably conducive to shared responsibility in a variety of contexts; they are, however, particularly necessary in

large, pluralistic democracies, where solutions to shared problems are expected to reflect the diverse needs and perspectives of citizens.

II. Case Studies

In the introduction, I used several examples to emphasize that the responsibilities that accompany democratic citizenship are more complicated than is often assumed. The extent to which Brenda, an anti-war activist, Jacob and John, two parents who send their children to a public school that devotes more attention and resources to college-bound students, and Gabriel, a coalminer and anti-environmental activist, bear responsibility for political outcomes was, I argued, unclear. Nor was it clear how such responsibility would be discharged. The theory of responsible democratic citizenship articulated in the previous chapters, however, helps resolve these perplexities. Brenda, Jacob, John and Gabriel all share responsibility for political outcomes, not necessarily because they have behaved in a blameworthy manner, but because they affect and are affected by those outcomes. Even if she did not vote for the political leaders who started the war, Brenda still pays taxes that contribute to the war effort; furthermore, her own wellbeing is affected by the war, when political policies that she supports are cut in order to fund military endeavors and her ability to travel in certain regions of the world is hindered due to hostility toward Americans. Similarly, Jacob and John share responsibility for the school system's inequitable treatment of its students and Gabriel bears some responsibility for the failure of state and national institutions to effectively confront global warming.

My theory of shared responsibility does not offer a detailed set of instructions as to what political actors should do in particular situations. To some extent, the responsible course of action is dependent upon the particular context in which democratic citizens find

themselves. Moreover, any political ethics that values self-determination must leave significant room for individual discretion. Certain ways of responding to political problems are, however, more consistent with the ideas and assumptions that underpin my theory of shared responsibility. Thus, it is possible to provide some general guidelines as to how Brenda, Jim, John and Gabriel might respond to the problems in which they are implicated.

If Brenda concludes that the war constitutes a serious violation of democratic principles, then she is obligated to voice her objection. She is not expected to devote her life to speaking out against the war; indeed, individuals who have no interests or commitments outside politics are not necessarily ideal democratic citizens. Human flourishing, at least for societies that value self-rule, requires the ability to pursue one's own projects, even if those projects do not have clear public benefit. It is also not clear that democratic societies could survive if their citizens neglected their own wellbeing and that of their families in order to secure the best possible public outcomes. Brenda should, however, make an effort to ensure that her objection is heard by those who have some impact over the political process; simply sharing her feelings with her diary, dog or therapist is not sufficient. Nor is expressing her outrage to foreign nationals who have no ability to influence government policy. Writing letters to her representatives, trying to persuade her friends and perhaps even attending protests are all ways in which Brenda might discharge her shared responsibility.

Brenda may find it difficult to identify with a government whose behavior conflicts with her own views. She may be tempted to see herself as a completely disaffected citizen who has no particular connection to the government or concern for its behavior.¹ If she

¹ An anti-war protester once informed me that she did not want to carry an American flag at her rally because she was not interested in persuading middle-class Americans to join her cause, but rather wanted to form a coalition with "oppressed peoples everywhere." My theory of shared responsibility does not require protestors to carry particular flags or symbols. It does, however, require citizens to make some effort to persuade their

values democratic principles and aspires to be in some meaningful sense a shaper of her own fate, however, she must resist this temptation. As a law-abiding citizen, Brenda benefits from government services such as police protection and helps maintain the government with her tax dollars. Brenda's connection to the government may not be wholly voluntary; nevertheless, as a self-ruling creature she has an obligation to do her best to protect her own wellbeing and to minimize the extent to which her actions implicate her in causes that she does not support. While Brenda may believe that her government is a source of significant evil in the world, she cannot completely ignore its behavior. Moreover, her political activities should not consist solely of opposition to the war. While she wants the government to end its military campaign, Brenda also has an interest in ensuring that the war is carried out in a way that minimizes human casualties. This means that she has an obligation to remain informed about the war effort and about the opinions of her political leaders, so that she can support the leader who is likely to do the least harm.

Brenda also has an interest in securing good outcomes on a wide range of domestic policy issues. Because securing good outcomes in a democratic manner requires cooperative effort, Brenda must make an effort to remain on good terms with her fellow citizens, including people who support the war but agree with her on other issues. It is not Brenda's fault if supporters of the war refuse to work with her because they believe that all anti-war activists are traitors bent on subverting democratic principles. Brenda should, however, make an effort not to unnecessarily antagonize her fellow citizens. She should refrain from burning the flag, if there are less offensive means of calling attention to her position and she should

fellow citizens to stop supporting unjust and ineffective policies. While democratic citizens may feel solidarity with "oppressed peoples everywhere," they bear a special responsibility for the behavior of their own political institutions and therefore have an obligation to enter into dialogue with political actors who have some influence over those institutions.

be hesitant to accuse her fellow citizens of being “fascists,” “little Eichmann’s” or “servants of Satan.” Not only are such labels not conducive to effective political discourse, but they are rarely accurate. Most democratic citizens are not completely foolish or morally depraved, though they may support foolish or unjust causes. If she is going to be able to work with her fellow citizens, Brenda must make an effort to understand their virtues as well as their faults; she should therefore strive to interpret others’ motivations sympathetically and to interact with those who do not share her opinions about the war.

Like Brenda, Jacob and John are implicated in harmful political outcomes, as both parents are involved in a local school system that does not treat its students equitably. Unlike Brenda, however, both parents are engaged in behaviors that exacerbate the problem. Jacob is involved in a parent-teacher association that cares primarily about the needs of college-bound students. John, on the other hand, is completely uninvolved in his child’s education and therefore has made no effort to ensure that his child receives an education that prepares him for success. While both parents are behaving in ways that are less than admirable, it would be unfair to hold either fully responsible for the school system’s neglect of certain students. The way in which the school allocates resources is shaped by a complex set of factors, many of which are not within John and Jacob’s control; they cannot control the fact that some teachers prefer to teach classes for college bound students and therefore put more energy into those classes. Nor can they control the fact that public schools feel compelled to devote resources to college bound students in order to prevent more affluent parents from choosing private school. Because John and Jacob do not bear full responsibility for the school district’s behavior, they should not be condemned too harshly for their shortcomings in this particular instance and they should not be wracked with guilt over their failings. Nevertheless, as

citizens who share responsibility for public institutions in which they participate and which affect their own fortunes, both parents have an obligation to change their behavior. Jacob has an obligation to make a greater effort to consider the needs of all children at the school, regardless of whether they are candidates for a college degree, and John has a duty to advocate on behalf of the children who are not receiving fair treatment.

Discharging their shared responsibilities is likely to be difficult for both Jacob and John. John may find it difficult to speak in front of parents and teachers who have significantly more education than he does, and Jacob may find it challenging to work with parents whose goals for their children are very different from his own. Furthermore, Jacob and John are likely to have difficulty reaching a consensus about the best way forward for the school system. They may disagree about the percentage of resources that should be devoted to children who are likely to attend college and pursue professional careers; John may believe that his children deserve greater resources because they generally have fewer opportunities for social advancement, whereas Jacob may feel that democratic societies have an interest in ensuring that their future leaders receive a high-quality education. Jacob and John may also disagree about what is best for the students who are not deemed by the school district to be college material. Upon further examination, Jacob may conclude that the school gives up too easily on students who initially show little academic promise, particularly if they do not have parents to advocate on their behalf. He therefore becomes convinced that the school should make an effort to prepare all students for post-secondary education. John, on the other hand, does not share Jacob's appreciation of the importance of a college-education. The purpose of a high-school education, he believes, is not to produce the greatest number of potential college students, but to ensure that all graduates are capable of being productive members of

this society. For this reason, he wants the school to significantly expand its vocational training programs.²

Because Jacob and John share responsibility for the school system, they must be prepared to work together despite their disagreements. Neither parent is obligated to support an outcome that they think is likely to do more harm than good; Jacob cannot be criticized for refusing to go along with a plan in which the school system singles out sixth-graders that it deems unsuited for college and provides them with a primarily vocational education. Similarly, John cannot be criticized for drawing a line in the sand against a plan that requires all students to participate in intensive SAT preparation. Both parents must, however, be willing to compromise their own objectives and listen to the other's point of view. For example, they might end up agreeing to a compromise in which the school requires all students to take classes that will prepare them for college through tenth grade and then gives them the opportunity to pursue vocational training. This process will hopefully be easier if John and Jacob keep in mind that they have an interest in ensuring that the other's children are prepared for adult life. It will also be easier if they recognize that by participating in cooperative endeavors, they are engaged in practices that are essential to democratic flourishing. John and Jacob may desire uninhibited freedom to remake the school according

² I am drawing this example from my own high school experience in New York in the nineties. At that time, New York State did not require all high school students to pass the Regents examinations, but students who expected to attend college (particularly schools in the SUNY system) were expected to pass the examinations. Beginning in eighth and ninth grade, my school district placed some students in classes where they would be prepared for the Regents examinations, whereas other students were put in classes where they learned "basic skills." Given that my high school had 3,000 students and 8 guidance counselors, it was not clear to me at the time that the school district knew enough about individual students to determine which students might have been able to pass the Regents examinations if they were pushed a bit more by teachers and placed in a different classroom environment, and which students simply lacked the motivation and ability. Nor was it clear to me that the students in basic skill classes received equal treatment and resources from the school system; indeed, I remember hearing teachers mock their skills-level students. This is, I think, a good example of a situation where citizens failed to accept responsibility for public institutions. It is, however, a somewhat outdated example, as New York State now requires all high school graduates to pass the Regents exams. Furthermore, the increased testing mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act gives local school districts less control over graduation requirements.

to their own vision, but they should also acknowledge that such freedom would be incompatible with democratic ideals. Ideally, each parent would also acknowledge that given significant limits to individual knowledge and experiences, it is generally better that more perspectives be included in efforts to solve shared problems. Jacob's experiences as a college professor do not necessarily enable him to understand what is in the best interest of all high school students; and while John's experiences as a parent of a student who will be seeking employment after graduation gives him a perspective that is under-represented at school board and PTA meetings, these experiences do not give him insight into the needs of all students.

The case of Gabriel, the coalminer and global warming skeptic, is especially perplexing. While all citizens share responsibility for ensuring that their political institutions effectively confront global warming, Gabriel bears more responsibility than the average citizen. As a coalminer, he is both more directly connected to the problem and more likely to be impacted by potential solutions. Indeed, it is precisely for these reasons that Gabriel feels a special obligation to take action on this issue. The question, however, is whether his activities on behalf of the anti-global warming movement are a legitimate means of discharging shared responsibilities. On the one hand, a political ethics that values self-rule must allow individuals to exercise their own judgment about the problems in which they are implicated. On the other hand, accepting shared responsibility for political outcomes is not a matter of simply protecting one's own short-term interests; it instead entails recognizing that one's fate is intertwined with that of other people. Furthermore, the ideal of self-rule that underpins my theory of shared responsibility requires citizens to make some effort to reflect critically upon their own actions and principles.

Whether Gabriel's anti-global warming activities are a means of discharging shared responsibilities depends upon the manner in which those activities are performed. If Gabriel views environmentalists as enemies who must be crushed, then he is not behaving like a political actor who recognizes that responsibility for political problems is shared by all citizens. Furthermore, if Gabriel refuses to seriously consider arguments in favor of global warming, then he is also not behaving in a responsible manner. There are many reasons why Gabriel may not want to consider such arguments. He may simply be too lazy to follow an argument that is not immediately intuitive to him. He may worry that efforts to address global warming pose a serious threat to his own lifestyle and financial security. The existence of global warming may also threaten Gabriel's sense of moral superiority. The idea that coal burning has harmful consequences challenge Gabriel's view of himself as a hardworking, god-fearing person whose contribution to society is entirely positive. Admitting that his behavior contributes to public problems might also make it more difficult for him to accuse his political opponents of being solely responsible for all public evils. One can sympathize with Gabriel's reluctance to seriously consider arguments in favor of global warming. At the same time, citizens who accept shared responsibility for public life must be prepared to consider arguments that are not intuitive and to make some sacrifices in order to secure their own long-term wellbeing and preserve their own integrity. They must also be capable of recognizing that public problems are caused by a complex set of factors and that few citizens are wholly innocent or wholly blameworthy.

If Gabriel does not treat environmentalists as public enemies and if he is willing to seriously consider the case in favor of global warming, then he can be considered a responsible political actor. I suspect that few anti-global warming activists meet these

criteria. At the same time, it is worth noting that environmentalists do not automatically meet these criteria either, as many environmentalists are inclined to view all participants in the coal industry as enemies whose interests and concerns do not deserve consideration. Moreover, many environmentalists fail to consider the effects that their proposed efforts to address global warming might have on coal-workers such as Gabriel. Environmentalists who recognize that responsibility for public life is shared will make an effort to ensure that particular groups do not end up bearing a disproportionate share of the burdens of switching to a clean energy economy; they will therefore be prepared to listen to and incorporate the concerns of people like Gabriel, regardless of whether they deem them to be responsible political actors.

III. Concluding Thoughts on the Risks and Rewards of Civic Responsibility

My theory of responsible democratic citizenship is rooted in a particular tradition of democratic thought, one that assumes that human flourishing and dignity requires that individuals be in some meaningful sense shapers of their own fates and which insists that individuals cannot be shapers of their own fates unless they make an effort to engage in intellectually honest reflections upon their own actions and ideals. There are other traditions of democratic thought and these traditions likely have their own theories of responsible citizenship. I have chosen this particular tradition in part because I accept its central tenant that self-rule is essential to human dignity and flourishing. I also believe that understandings of responsible citizenship that are rooted in this tradition are particularly capable of producing political actors who resist political injustice and incompetence. Citizens who feel implicated in the behavior of their political institutions will, I believe, be more likely to protest injustice and incompetence than citizens who do not feel any particular connection to

harmful political outcomes. Furthermore, citizens who believe that they have an obligation to think critically about their own behavior will hopefully be more likely to recognize when they are implicated in harm.

While civic complacency is by no means the only cause of political injustice and incompetence, it is frequently a contributing factor to poor political outcomes. If more American citizens had felt accountable for foreign policy decisions made by the Bush Administration, it is unlikely that the Administration would have been able to pursue a failing counterinsurgency strategy for as long as they did. If American citizens had felt responsible for ensuring that public infrastructure is properly maintained, then recent tragedies such as the failure of the levies during Hurricane Katrina and the bridge collapse in Minnesota might have been avoided.

Those who worry about civic complacency are often accused of underestimating the threat that passionate and morally committed political actors pose to political stability, civility and basic human rights. Radical and reckless political behavior is not, however, the only alternative to civic complacency. There is no reason why citizens who feel morally obligated to do something about unjust and ineffective institutions will inevitably resort to radical and reckless behavior. Citizens who truly accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions will make an effort to engage in behavior that is conducive to good political outcomes; they may at times miscalculate the consequences of their actions, but they will not make a habit of standing up for their principles without regard for the consequences. Nor does my theory of shared responsibility suggest that citizens should abandon social norms and practices in favor of their own personal whims or fantasies; rather, citizens are

encouraged to evaluate existing norms and practices by exposing themselves to new experiences and perspectives.

A culture that discourages complacency and uncritical acceptance of received opinions will no doubt produce its fair share of reckless political actors who are unconcerned with the consequences of their actions, as well as a number of political actors who assume that critical reflection upon popular opinions entails complete dedication to one's own principles, regardless of whether they are supported by empirical evidence or seriously tested through dialogue with others. Such citizens are not however the ideal toward which democratic societies should aspire. Furthermore, the solution to reckless and foolish political behavior is not civic complacency, as complacent citizens often end up facilitating the designs of reckless and foolish actors. Rather, the solution is democratic citizens who accept responsibility for political injustice and incompetence, but who do so in a thoughtful, cautious and conciliatory manner.

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Biography

Born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1981, Hanagan spent most of her childhood in Poughkeepsie, New York. She graduated from Wesleyan University in 2004 with honors and distinction from the College of Social Studies. Upon completing her undergraduate degree, Hanagan entered the Doctoral program at Duke University, receiving a PhD in political science in 2011. While at Duke, she participated in the Kenan Institute for Ethics's graduate colloquium. She has published two book reviews for *Perspectives on Political Science* and has co-authored an encyclopedia entry with Mary Lyndon Shanley entitled "Feminism and Liberalism," forthcoming in the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Her research has been supported by the Earhart Foundation, the John H. Hallowell Fund and the American Association for University Women.