

The paradox of citizenship

Who is a proper citizen, and why? A Neo-Hobbesian approach

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Discussion note (460 words)

Who is a proper citizen, and why? From a fundamental philosophical point of view these questions are easily answered: He is a proper citizen *who knows best what is good for him*. He is so precisely *because* he so knows. The prospects of painting this out in detail are, among others, being in a position to explain

- (i) why *contractarianism* is a respectable position in political philosophy
- (ii) why it solves the problem of *political legitimacy*
- (iii) what makes *paternalism* inadequate
- (iv) what is at odds with theories of *democratic education*

Instrumental in this inquiry is reverting to the anthropology and political philosophy of the *Leviathan*. All the answers are anticipated in *Thomas Hobbes'* epoch-making contribution to modern political philosophy. If we *do not* follow Hobbes on all counts, however, our thinking must inevitably result in *the paradox of citizenship*: We would render the subject sovereign and the sovereign subject. One way or the other a contradiction. However, if we *do* follow Hobbes on all counts that does not seem overly attractive either. His political philosophy suffers from an underestimation of the power of co-operation, and it ultimately entrusts us with a commonwealth too reprehensible to adopt. So, adjustments are in order anyway.

The upshot of the discussion is that there are several adjustments feasible, but that one is *not*: Relinquishing the idea that he is a proper citizen who knows best what is good for him. If that idea is not relinquished, however, government must neither act paternalistically nor must it educate its citizens, whatever the adjustments made are. But surely no modern government conforms to this line of thought. On the one hand, government paternalism was never really absent yet it still managed to forcefully resurface in the guise of consumer protection around the globe. On the other hand, despite starting out as a humble educational ideal democratic education managed to be regarded as a political necessity, often elevated to the heights of constitutional law and sometimes even treated as a human right. Also, since the days of Plato, political theory and philosophy constantly made a point of emphasising the many beneficial aspects and consequences of education for citizenship, not rarely finding it a political, or even moral, obligation.

Where does this leave us with the paradox of citizenship? It seems that the options we are faced with are either to live with it or to live with governments out of bounds. The first option is unsatisfying from the perspective of proper theorising. The second is unsatisfying from the perspective of practical living. Do we want both proper theorising *and* practical living? That would seem like a new way of making the liberal case of keeping government in check. A far stronger case, however, than many will feel comfortable with.

References

To be added