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# In defence of minimalism: beyond a robust approach to citizenship education

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## Abstract

The maximalists would have us be ideal citizens if we conform – and learn to conform – to a number of precepts. We should be active citizens, we should value our community (and in particular our national identity) and we should take on the virtues that commit us to upholding the common good. For the maximalists, democracy's moral root lies in our civic ties to our community and to ensuring that the ideals of justice and equality are met. In many respects, the maximal project is admirable – but as an educational project it is flawed.

In this paper, I will argue that by filling in the details on how we ought to behave and what values we ought to have as citizens, maximal educators have slipped too far from education's role in developing autonomous individuals who are able to freely express themselves. We need an account of citizenship education that takes seriously the development of individuality, while at the same time contributing to the democratic project that seeks the common good. This is a fine balance. I will argue that it is in an education towards a minimalist citizenship that offers a way of achieving both these educational objectives.

## Introduction

It is perhaps unsurprising that South Africa, in the transition from apartheid to democracy, should be grappling with finding a prescription for citizenship. Indeed, there is much consensus that post-apartheid citizenship requires a determined effort to break with the racial and ethnic stereotyping of the past and to unite a society deeply divided along lines such as gender, class, politics, ideology and language. Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, previously deputy minister of education succinctly captures this: “. . . a democracy such as ours, which has emerged from the apartheid ashes, should be founded on sound moral values that will inculcate in each of us a sense of national pride, oneness and commitment to the common good” (DoE, 2000, p.2). Because apartheid's oppressive system enforced its own set of values on the education system and on individuals to buttress a racist ideology, a new value system is seen as needed to counter those of the past. It has been this injunction – to smooth

over past divisions and forge a common identity – that has favoured a robust definition of citizenship.

The robust citizen is characterized by a demanding account of what it takes to participate in the public arena. A typical example is the Moral Regeneration Campaign emanating from the office of the Deputy President of South Africa (DoE and SABC, 2000), which uses communitarian language and turns the clock back to “recover the long lost religio-socio-economic values by which pre-colonial communities of the continent lived” (MRC, 2000, p.7). But the robust citizen has also come to characterize liberal theories of citizenship. T.H. McLaughlin stretches liberal citizenship along a maximal and minimal continuum, defining each end according to how much (or how little if a minimalist) import they attach to the four features characterizing citizenship: the identity conferred on the individual, the virtues required by citizenship, political involvement and the social prerequisites necessary for effective citizenship. On one end of the continuum, and perhaps in caricature, the minimal notion of citizenship rests on a legal framework, advancing citizens formal, technical rights. Citizens are not obliged to become more politically involved beyond filling in ballot papers at election times (and presumably even this is not obligatory). The maximal approach, on the other end of the continuum, is a much bolder, substantial account of citizenship. As McLaughlin describes it: “maximal conceptions require a considerable degree of explicit understanding of democratic principles, values and procedures on the part of the citizen, together with the dispositions and capacities required for participation in democratic citizenship generously conceived” (1992, p.237). On this end of the continuum, liberal theorists view citizens as members of a larger community and actively involved in democratic decision-making.

The minimal notion of citizenship is described in rather unflattering terms: “formal, legal, juridical” (McLaughlin, 1992, p.236). Its ‘thin’ conception of citizenship is contrasted with the ‘richer’ ‘thicker’ account of the maximalists. Furthermore McLaughlin states that an education for minimal citizenship does not, “require the development in students of their broad critical reflection and understanding, informed by a political and general education of substance, or virtues and dispositions of the democratic citizen conceptualized in fuller terms. Nor is there a concern to ameliorate the social disadvantages that may inhibit the students from developing into citizens in a significant sense” (1992, p.238). Eamonn Callan’s description of minimalist education is similarly uninspiring. It includes only that which various groups within society can agree on and therefore “can include no more than the lowest common

denominator in a society's understanding of what its children should learn" (1997, p.170).

The maximalist's intention therefore is to build a much stronger identity for liberal citizenship and to root it in a moral cement that can explain the way we ought to behave towards others. In this paper I challenge the robust or maximal account of citizenship. I argue that by filling in the details of what it means to be a 'liberal democrat' maximal educators have slipped too far from education's other central role – that of developing autonomous individuals. Furthermore, I question the assumption that a maximal sense of citizenship necessarily leads to greater equality. In the final section of this paper, I note that as the maximal citizen has acquired more and more definition, its propagators have caricatured the very complex make-up of the 'minimal' citizen. It seems to me that maximal theorists have constructed an Aunt Sally of minimal citizenship, easily pummeled. As Callan points out, an education so bereft of controversial content is decidedly unsatisfactory and would, no doubt, fail to develop autonomous graduates. I then take some tentative steps to constructing a more sympathetic version of minimal citizenship education. But I begin by outlining the main features of a liberal maximal account of citizenship.

## The maximal citizen

Recent liberal writers have accumulated an ever more detailed description of what is entailed in becoming a citizen. They have expected more from citizens than a basic commitment to adhering to democratic procedures and have begun to flesh out not just the skills and knowledge necessary to operate within a democracy, but also the values and indeed behavioural characteristics of *truly* democratic citizens.

The general revival in Aristotelian civic humanism, in stretching the scope of citizenship beyond the political is driven mainly by communitarian challenges, a sense that a narrow definition of citizenship is an unsatisfactory descriptor of our relationships with others. Richard Norman, for example, notes that rights and obligations do not in themselves explain why citizens should adhere to them. (The social contract theory is insufficient because it cannot account for citizens who default on obligations.) He argues that, "the only solution is to recognize that if there is such a thing as allegiance to the political community, it must rest on something more fundamental than a package of reciprocal rights and obligations. It must be a matter of deeper ties and loyalties" (1992, p.37). Furthermore, Callan argues that a liberal democratic education

inevitably spills over into private domain and once you acknowledge the need for certain basic liberal principles then you are unavoidably forced to define further characteristics. The classic liberal division between public and private is therefore untenable. For Tomasi: “the normative domain of liberal citizenship inevitably extends *beyond* the domain of public reason. For any self-aware political liberal, any theory of good citizen conduct must include considerations about the way public values impinge on non-public spheres, and how those values can be put to personal uses there” (2001, p.71).

A thick conception of citizenship is therefore embedded in a substantive normative theory of moral behaviour and development. Such a normative theory is necessary in explaining how and why citizens ought to behave as members of a community, especially if we are to maintain “a well-ordered society” (to steal a term from Rawls). It is a normative theory of moral progress that attempts to take us, in the title of Tomasi’s book, “beyond justice”. He writes: “Citizenship requires more of us than a freely given commitment to just institutions. To be a good citizen is to be a good *person*” (2001, p.71). Callan too describes his liberal politics as a “politics of virtue” which has as a legitimate goal “creating virtuous citizens” (1997, p.3). While still grounded in the traditional cluster of rights associated with justice – equality, non-racism, non-sexism and against other forms of discrimination – maximal citizenship demands a moral discourse that describes our relations with fellow citizens in more personal terms than legalistic definitions allow. For the maximalist theorists, a derivative account of citizenship, which takes a common set of values from a politically mandated constitution (such as Rawls’s overlapping consensus), must have deeper moral roots to explain why individuals come to co-operate. For Callan care underpins justice and care is in fact of higher moral value than the institutional arrangements that regulate justice (1997, p.79). Justice is second best, a “remedial virtue” when care is absent. He writes: “Once children learn to import justice into situations where a higher form of caring is psychologically feasible, they will give up on the best feasible moral response in favour of one that is inferior. A justice-centred approach to education may also foster a tendency to interpret all moral encounters in adversarial terms” (1997, p.79). Furthermore, a civic education requires that we engender “trust”, so that we do not dismiss other views as unreasonable, and “liberal patriotism”, an affinity that holds plural societies together (Callan, 1997, p.95). Michael Ignatieff too makes a case for a discourse that described the motivations for why people choose to behave in accord with the common good. Such a “language of the good” includes “fraternity, love, belonging, dignity and respect” (1986, p.14). These terms

help define our relationships with others, with the “strangers” (of Ignatieff’s essay title). There is in the Department of Education’s *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (DoE, 2001), a generally minimalist document, an echo of this ‘virtue’ discourse in its inclusion of *ubuntu* which presses citizens to practice “compassion, kindness, altruism and respect” (DoE, 2001, p.4).

The idea that we need “deeper ties and loyalties” to a political community also provides the motivation for political participation. Deliberative versions of democracy, in particular, require the active participation of citizens in political decision making at all levels – from voluntary community groups to central government. Indeed, the very legitimacy of political decision-making depends on all citizens engaging in public discussion. Callan (1997) argues that only a maximal concept of citizenship will save us from a liberal democracy devoid of lively politics (no one votes) and where different groups circle each other at a safe distance but never really interact. He paints such a democratic state, his “Brave New World”, as a bland society blighted by mediocrity. Democracy in the Deweyian sense, is more than just majoritarian procedures but a way of life and therefore requires of its citizens a commitment to the values that distinguish it.

The arguments in favour of a maximal notion of citizenship can be categorized according to the economic, social, moral and political claims that are made. Firstly, maximal citizenship professes to take society closer towards egalitarianism. Secondly, individuals are primarily identified by their social relations with others. Thirdly, maximal citizenship rests on a desire for active citizenship. And finally, the maximal accounts are grounded in a normative argument of the specific virtues that hold together individuals and communities in a plural society. For South Africans, this is certainly powerful motivation for an extended scope of citizenship given our urgent need to overcome a divisive and racist history.

In many respects, the maximal theorists’ project is admirable in its attempt to deepen democracy and to achieve greater equality. However, I think there are some dangers inherent in the maximalist’s educational project. In the discussion that follows, I claim that the maximal concept of citizenship drifts towards ideology. A liberal education should be distinguished by its commitment to encouraging young people to find their individual voice.

## The trouble with maximalism

In broadening out the concept of citizenship from the confines of political liberalism, maximal theorists claim that a much more robust education is required to surface liberal attributes within learners. As McLaughlin points out, these features of maximal citizenship place fairly heavy burdens on schools and educators. He writes: “‘Heavy’ burdens arise for the common school from conceptions of common education which embody *inter alia* an account of public values and the public domain which is articulated in terms of (often complex) matters of principle which need to be understood by students, an expansive view of the form and scope of personal autonomy and of democratic citizenship, a view of diversity and its implications which is sensitive to complexity and subtlety, and an ambition to engage educationally in a significant way with the ‘non-public’ domain” (2003, p.130). Despite this buoyant description, it is here, in the educational implications, that I think the maximal project is flawed. In defining the moral (liberal) motivations young people should demonstrate as citizens, the maximal theorist has ironically narrowed the scope of education to autonomy in its positive sense.

What is important to the maximal theorist is that learners gain the skills, knowledge and, crucially, values in order to engage in liberal, democratic societies. Individuals come to be autonomous when they are able to participate in democratic processes and have internalized the values that such participation was conditioned on. An individual’s identity is therefore shaped in the construction of their social relations. The maximal theorist worries that if we do not clearly instill values then anti-liberal values may fill in the vacuum, and such values are easily pumped through powerful media such as television and advertisements. This approach strains against the more traditional liberal idea of education’s primary task as cultivating the autonomy of individuals apart from a socially or culturally defined role. What is crucial here is that individuals eventually develop the capacity to be self-reflective, to find their own voice, even if such personal development begins within some social community. As Kymlicka explains: “The defining feature of liberalism is it that ascribes certain fundamental freedoms to each individual. In particular, it grants people very wide freedom of choice in terms of how they lead their lives. It allows people to choose a conception of the good life, and then allows them to reconsider that decision, and adopt a new and hopefully better plan of life” (1995, p.80).

These differing conceptions of autonomy echo Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative liberties. Negative liberties describe freedom as

the absence of external constraints, including freedom from arbitrary interference, freedom of opinion, association and speech. The positive liberties portray the liberties necessary for the exercise of individual capacities. The ability to act autonomously, in accordance to individual beliefs, relies on certain conditions to be in place, such as the freedom to work, to access welfare and education. Berlin, however, makes a case for emphasizing negative liberties. He points out that positive freedom involves self-control, focusing on overcoming the internal forces that threaten the rational self. The idea that we need to overcome internal weaknesses and desires in order to become autonomous leads to a division between our higher and lower natures. Berlin worries that if we acknowledge some higher self, then we open the space for some external source (such as a political authority) to intervene and define for us the nature of this higher self. They may do this reasoning that such a move will facilitate our attaining “freedom”, but as Berlin points out, having someone define who we can or should become is coercive and takes us down the slippery slope to totalitarianism.

Berlin’s warning points to the irony in the maximal theorists’ project. While they claim that defining “democratic dispositions” more clearly will strengthen democracy, they may in fact simply be shaping our “higher nature” in the name of democracy. Maximal theorists seem to want to coerce young people into the mould of the ideal citizen. Education’s role is to lead learners to fit the image of an active citizen, with loyalties to the community, someone who, as Ignatieff wants, “cares for strangers”, if we are to truly enjoy freedom under democracy. Since these values apparently do not arise naturally, it is the state’s duty to encourage their formation. Berlin’s objection to such a definition of the hypothetical ideal is that it leads, inevitably, to manipulation of individuals, no matter how just the cause may be.

The idea that we need to educate for maximal citizenship – that we need to fill in the vacuum with liberal rather than illiberal values – smacks oddly like an illegitimate tactic, especially given the comprehensive account of values maximal theorists would have instilled. Melissa Williams notes that in moulding citizens to feel an affective attachment to the principles of the regime, civic nationalism (that is a shared commitment to a democratic system) is not much different from ethnic nationalism (2003). Although the former would reject ethnic nationalism’s focus on culture as the basis for citizenship, both have as a legitimate role for education inducting young people into the virtues of the nation state. With a focus on a single political identity, civic humanism therefore cannot escape the same criticism leveled at conservative communitarians: that it impinges too much on individual

freedom and fails to take diversity sufficiently into account. As Williams puts it: “Although defenders of citizenship as identity acknowledge individuals as bearers of multiple and often conflicting identities, they tend to argue that *political* identity depends on a *particular* political community and only one such community” (2003, p.216).

The second difficulty I have with the maximal account of citizenship is in the assumption that moral association will promote co-operation between people and so lead to greater equality. If we are able to evoke in young people a sense of care for strangers, then the argument follows that they will support the social practices and political instruments that lead to justice. For the maximal theorist, greater equality is achieved because the citizen recognizes that their fate is tied in with those of others and therefore she sees the benefits of redistributive justice for all. There are two practical problems with this line of logic. The first, as both Williams and Brighouse point out, is that in an increasingly globalised world, economic relations are no longer bounded by local or national borders (Williams, 2003; Brighouse, 2003). While redistributive mechanisms may well have the support of citizens and may bring about greater equality at a national level, the real threat to equality is on a global scale as the neo-liberal policies of powerful multinationals and institutions such as the World Bank take effect. In other words, the growing inequalities between the First and Third Worlds overshadow national inequalities. The international pressures to open up markets and to encourage free trade, hamper national efforts to direct economic trends.

The second problem with the assumption that moral association will promote co-operation between people and so lead to greater equality is in the tendency for the maximal theorist to use the language of charity or ‘care’ as a moral root for justice. The trouble is that caring responses slip easily into paternalistic (even patronizing) ways. The charitable actions of the middle-class in assistance of the poor may be commendable, but the acts themselves simply confirm (may even perpetuate) unequal power relations. Justice, on the other hand, requires a more fundamental shift in the economic and social relations of society. Callan makes a similar mistake when he writes that “people who champion the right to subsistence are talking about the same thing as people who insist on the responsibility of those who are not destitute to meet the needs of those who are” (1997, p.73). Though I agree with Callan that rights have reciprocal responsibilities, the discourse for rights is not “the same thing” as an argument for responsibilities. The rights lobby is appealing to the state’s responsibility to ensure that the practice of justice is upheld, while the petition to responsibility seems to be directed to individuals. Teaching young people to



care or take responsibility for the strangers in their community does not, therefore, lead naturally to greater equality. As Melissa Williams notes: “From an empirical standpoint. . . the connection between an educational project of civic identity and national loyalty, on the one hand, and the ends of distributive justice and political stability, on the other, are highly dubious” (2003, p.223).

In sum, then, the two main concerns I have with the maximal approach to citizenship is, first its substantive definition of what values we ought to adopt detracts from an educational aim to develop negative autonomy; and second, even if we were to encourage grounding liberalism’s moral root in civic humanism, this would not inevitably lead to liberal justice. Will minimalism, then, provide a sufficient account of liberal citizenship? If maximal citizenship is inappropriately deterministic, the counter charge against minimalism is that of moral relativism (and the danger that illiberal doctrines will influence liberal-democratic states). I want to argue, however, that minimalism’s fencing of the fundamental values required for liberal citizenship, leaves open the space for education to develop self-reflective individuals, while at the same providing the skills and knowledge for democratic practice. Such autonomous individuals are no less robust citizens than those described by the maximalists – neither is their education any less intricate. In fact, it might be argued, that a minimal concept of citizenship obliges even more effort from educationalists, for it does not provide them with a list of definitive moral characteristics to teach on. Rather, it requires that we balance carefully negative and positive autonomy, that we recognize the attachments learners have to a multiplicity of communities while at the same time taking seriously their development as individuals. In other words, minimalism creates the educational opportunity for individuals to learn to participate in a liberal democracy without circumscribing their moral attachments according to the comprehensive liberal ideal.

## Reconsidering minimalism

On McLaughlin’s continuum, minimal citizenship is distinguished from its comprehensive counterweight by its limited political formulation. Less concerned with liberalism’s moral underpinnings, minimalism describes the basic institutional conditions of a liberal democracy and the corresponding skills and knowledge that citizens need. It is minimal in that it places “light burdens” (McLaughlin’s term, 2003) on citizens, not strictly requiring them to take an active role in decision-making, nor necessitating that they exemplify

liberal virtues/traits. Unlike maximalism, minimalism holds fast to the public-private divide. Taking from Rawls's "overlapping consensus", individuals come to accept the values regulating public goods not from some shared moral grounding, but from a plurality of "comprehensive doctrines". We can agree to a number of public values – and in particular, justice – even if we disagree on some fundamental, but private, principles. As Crittenden puts it: "A pluralist society. . . can justifiably be referred to as a liberal democracy, as long as 'liberal' does not go beyond the recognition of freedom, tolerance and fair procedures for settling on necessary common practices, and equality as citizens for all the individuals as well as distinct groups – who are members of the 'nation state'" (1999, p.48). While the maximalist argues that this position is untenable because of the spillover effect of liberal democratic principles into comprehensive doctrines, I think the slide from a political liberalism to a comprehensive liberalism is too quick. It results in the emphasis on positive autonomy, and the prescriptions for how we ought to behave as liberals, without sufficiently taking into account individual autonomy or the complex negotiation between background culture and the liberal democratic culture.

My quarrel is with attempts to cement character norms and behaviours. The idea here is to pull back from the maximalists' prescription for citizenship, to contest their project to define who we ought to be and how we ought to behave. To describe in too much detail the proper moral choices individuals should take, is to deny individuals their liberty to exercise their choice of the good life. If we reclaim the space maximal citizens have taken in fixing the definition of citizenship, then we allow for education a role beyond a merely instrumentalist one in support of some notion of the public good (though I think this is an important role). Education also has a more expansive job in encouraging in young people a coherent sense of self. As Peters notes, education "consists essentially in the initiation of others into a public world picked out by the language and concepts of a people *and* in encouraging others to join in exploring realms marked out by more differentiated forms of awareness" (1996, p.52, the emphasis is mine).

For classical liberals such as John Stuart Mill, individual development was an essential condition for liberty. Individuals are recognized by their ability to make choices based on their "faculties of perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference" (1996, p.121). But in inculcating individuality or "self-regarding virtues" (as Mill describes it 1996, p.125), social values are not ignored, and Mill thinks that education should persuade young people of the benefits of taking into consideration the welfare of others. And therefore, as Mill points out: "It

would be a great misunderstanding of this doctrine, to suppose that it is one of selfish indifference, which pretend that human beings have no business with each other's conduct in life, and that they should not concern themselves about the well-doing or well-being of one another, unless their own interest is involved" (1996, p.125).

Yet, negative autonomy has often been accused as the bedrock of neo-liberalism. For the maximal theorist, autonomy in the sense of negative freedom has become aligned to the *laissez-faire* market, to freedom of choice, and has therefore propped up individualism and inequality. However, the minimal citizen I want to defend does not take as its hero the enterprising capitalist who sees her success and fabulous wealth as a result of her individual genius and drive. It remains very much within the liberal tradition which values democracy and is therefore underpinned by notions of equity, non-racism and non-sexism. Do these concepts require the moral discourse that maximalists argue is necessary? I believe that a rights-based approach is sufficient. These are concepts that have legal import and have historical, social and political contexts that need to be deconstructed. That through such an enquiry, learners may come to 'care' is a 'spillover' effect, but it is not the purpose of education to elicit such a response.

## Conclusion

McLaughlin stretches citizenship education along the same continuum as that of the maximal-minimal notions of citizenship. In other words, a maximal notion of citizenship requires a conscious effort to inculcate maximal virtues, while a minimal notion of citizenship needs no more than a bland and rather blind socialization of learners into people who "vote wisely for representatives" (McLaughlin, 1992, p.237). While I take that teachers who have in mind developing maximal citizens will need an explicit, forthright approach in teaching the dispositions and virtues of such a citizen, I am not convinced that a minimal notion of citizenship requires a minimalist education. Even the example taken from McLaughlin, that minimal citizens need to know how to vote "wisely", assumes that the simple act of marking a ballot paper involves careful consideration of candidates and their policies – a task which surely requires "broad critical reflection and understanding" (McLaughlin, 1992, p.238). An education for minimal citizenship requires much the same as an education for maximal citizenship. On both ends of the continuum, learners need to be able to engage in public debates, to make

reasonable arguments, to recognize their interdependence and to value diversity.

My main objection has been with the checklist approach to teaching citizenship values. Instead, I have argued, we need a far less deterministic portrait of citizenship and to reconsider the importance of education in encouraging individual autonomy. This may, ironically, be more (maximally) demanding on education than the maximal approach to citizenship.

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