
Statement on Civic Virtues in the Public Domain

“This statement has two aims. The first is to affirm the importance of civic virtues for democratic life today. The second is to prompt further discussion and deliberation about what civic virtues are, which particular civic virtues are relevant to democratic life, and how education can foster citizens of good character.”

Introduction: Civic Virtues and their Importance Today

Civic virtues are the character traits and dispositions that enable citizens to participate positively in the public life of their communities – local, national and global. Participation in the various institutions and organisations of political and civil society that comprise the public domain is central to their health, and provides an important mechanism for the expression and formation of character. Historically, civic virtues – such as civility, tolerance, neighbourliness and reciprocity – have been seen as the building blocks of character alongside three other kinds of virtue: moral, intellectual and performative/executive (Kristjánsson, 2015). Another way of looking at civic virtues is to consider them as a subclass of moral virtues; that is as moral virtues applied in larger societal contexts, as distinct from more intimate personal relationships.

Some are keen to point to a decline in civic virtue today. A number of influential sociological analyses published over the last thirty years have suggested that the commitment to public life has declined as societies have become larger, more market-oriented and individualistic (Sennett, 1974; Putnam, 2000; Marquand, 2004). According to Marquand (2004), for example, citizenship and service for the common good have become “hollowed out” as citizens retreat into the private realm in ever greater numbers. So too, over the last thirty years many commentators have identified a concerning trend towards incivility in political discourse, arguing that greater civility in public life can build greater trust between citizens and those holding public office (American Psychological Association, 2018; Phillips and Stuart, 2018; Boatright, *et al.*, 2019).

Whether this decline in civic virtue is real or not, it does seem that contemporary public life – a time in which concepts such as “fake news” and “post-truth politics” have become prominent and in which digital and online media are changing how news and politics are engaged with – holds many challenges for citizens. Within this context, a positive, renewed focus on the meaning, significance and development of civic virtues is vital for increased participation in the public domain and for the flourishing of healthy, liberal democracies.

Like all virtues, civic virtues are comprised of multiple components, bringing together reason, emotions, discernment, knowledge, judgement and action (Jubilee Centre, 2017). In stating the importance of civic virtues we do not want to suggest that they are necessarily separate from other “types” of virtues. Philosophically, as suggested above, “civic” virtues might best be considered as comprising the expression of moral virtues in the civic realm, coupled with the intellectual virtues in so far as they guide the moral virtues in the right direction. This noted, the use of the adjective “civic” is important for at least three reasons. First, it provides a reminder that the scope of virtues and character education should never be solely on the individual, and should recognise the social connectedness of humans to their wider communities. Second, focusing explicitly on the civic permits a particular vocabulary that might be otherwise missed or underemphasised within discourses of character and character development. Third, promoting the importance of civic virtues can act to re-affirm and reinvigorate the civic aims of education and schooling and the need to cultivate intentionally active, informed and responsible citizens of good character.

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The Public Domain

To understand civic virtues it is necessary to be clear about the spaces and associations that comprise the public domain. The public domain consists of the wide and vibrant array of institutions, organisations and processes that exist within communities and societies. For some, the public domain can be separated from the personal interests and lives of individual citizens. While not wishing to encroach overly into personal lives, the public domain should be understood as distinct from, but closely connected to, more intimate associations such as family and friends. Indeed, the public domain and the civic virtues central to it stem from these closer knit associations. In a flourishing public domain different interests, ideas and perspectives are shared and discussed. Where conflicts arise, remedies are sought. When interactions in the public domain become narrowly framed (by economic markets, for example), civic virtue suffers. Philanthropic and charitable activity provides an illustrative case in point. Where fundraising efforts are guided primarily or solely by economic goals, such as attracting ever greater numbers of donors or money raised, these efforts can become divorced from their wider social and political goals. In such cases, instrumentalism dominates, and the importance of viewing charitable activity as ‘an embodiment of a set of behaviours, actions and values that are rooted in ideas of fairness and empathy; the building blocks of social justice and democracy’ is undermined (Body, 2019). Through reconnection to their core purposes, civic virtues can provide an important anchor for more democratic forms of philanthropic and charitable activity. This is equally true for other forms of social and political participation.

Of course, the language of civic virtues may be new to some, or may be met with some hesitancy. Defining civic virtues today will therefore require some further clarification, discussion and research. In today’s plural, liberal democracies it is essential that civic virtues are not defined in a static, paternalistic or homogeneous way. How civic virtues are interpreted and enacted must also take account of changes within contemporary public life. Uses of digital and online media, for example, have raised serious discussions about whether, and how, “digital citizenship” might be changing the nature of democratic participation. It is only through engagement in the public domain that open, inclusive and responsive understandings of civic virtue can materialise. Such critical engagement is in turn crucial for a wider recognition and acceptance of civic virtues.

Education for Civic Virtues

It cannot be assumed that the civic virtues needed for engagement in the public domain will develop without deliberate and reflective effort. Indeed, cultivating civic virtues is a core aim of education and schooling, and has always formed part of a good education. A worthwhile education in and for civic virtues is one that embraces the public domain as a vibrant and vital forum for the expression of character. This educational effort needs to be intentional, and is at its best when characterised by action, criticality and reflection in the pursuance of autonomous, wise judgement (Jubilee Centre, 2017). Using the vocabulary of civic virtues is also important for a well-formed approach to character education, enabling students to make connections between civic virtues and other kinds of virtues – moral, intellectual and performance/executive. Effective practice also requires that the meaning and relevance of civic virtues today are examined and discussed within educational settings, and that, through practical, reflective experience, children and young people develop their practical wisdom to make informed decisions about their civic engagement.

The focus on the importance and benefits of educating for civic virtue should be aspirational not remedial. It is not about apportioning or shifting responsibility and blame. Rather, cultivating civic virtue requires recognition that opportunities to learn and express civic virtues are not evenly distributed (Ballard *et al.*, 2015; Gaby, 2016; Hoskins and Melis, 2017). It is incumbent on educational settings and educators to provide practical opportunities for civic engagement,

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and also to appreciate where young people are already demonstrating civic virtues in their lives; effective leaders and leadership are needed to realise the educational goals of educating an active, informed and virtuous citizenry. As a previous statement issued by the Jubilee Centre in 2014 on [Youth Social Action and Character Development](#) made clear, concerted effort to engage with the local community and with external organisations plays a critical role in building connections for young people, helping to give them a sense of purpose.

The educational task of cultivating civic virtues is, of course, challenging, but with concerted effort schools, universities and other educational settings can succeed; indeed, some are doing so already. A number of practical steps can support the endeavour. These include having a positive vision and ethos that includes developing civic virtues, providing children and young people with opportunities to engage in social action, ensuring that civic virtues are taught throughout the curriculum (for example, through citizenship education) and ensuring that educators understand their civic role. Cultivating civic virtues also requires educators to engage with controversial and sensitive issues (Hess and McAvoy, 2014), and they need to be supported to do so through targeted initial preparation and continuing professional development. It should also be remembered that schools and teachers can only do so much to promote civic virtues within their wider character education provision, and they must be supported in doing so by government, policy, families and the wider community. It is a cause for concern, for example, that recent government education policy has sought to separate character education from citizenship education, and greater attempts should be made to recognise the civic within character education policy.

Affirming the Importance of Civic Virtues Today

Lives today, including those of children and young people, are subject to a range of demands and influences, some of which run counter to the common good. Civic virtues – informed and underpinned as they are by moral and intellectual virtues – have as their aim the cooperation and mutual goodwill so vital to living well, together. This affirmation of the importance of civic virtues as positive traits of character is particularly relevant given the challenges facing communities and societies today. It is only through working together as citizens – that is, through exercising civic virtue – that these challenges can be tackled and addressed. Fostering civic virtues within contemporary liberal democracies – including through education and schooling – is an important and pressing task, one which is crucial for the stability and sustenance of healthy, just and flourishing societies.

Some Questions for Further Discussion and Deliberation

While this statement has made a strong commitment to the importance of civic virtues in the public domain and for the role of education in cultivating civic virtues, it is recognised that more work is needed to examine and elucidate the precise nature and role of civic virtues today. Significant questions that could guide further work are:

- Are civic virtues best understood as a subset of moral and intellectual virtues, an expression of moral and intellectual virtues or as a type of virtue in their own right?
- Are civic virtues necessary for the flourishing life and, if so, why?
- What specific civic virtues are relevant for liberal democracies today? For example, is the ancient ideal of civic friendship impractical in large and plural societies?
- What do commonly cited civic virtues – such as civility, tolerance, neighbourliness and reciprocity – mean in liberal democracies today?
- How can inclusive forms of civic virtues be explicated that account for the existence of plural interests?
- How do we account for the relationship between civic virtues and multiculturalism?
- How do and can civic virtues connect to the purpose of education and schooling today?
- Which specific civic virtues do and should education and schooling cultivate in young people?
- What steps might be taken to ensure that civic virtues form part of the wider character education provided in schools, universities and other educational settings?
- How can it be ensured that education cultivates genuine virtues, rather than their semblances and mere ‘virtue signalling’?
- Do educational policies and practices that focus, for example, on well-being, mindfulness and resilience corrode the communal basis of civic virtues or do they provide internal resources needed to cultivate such virtues?

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This statement was developed through a consultation at St. George's House, Windsor on the 16th and 17th May 2019. The consultation was initiated by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and was attended by:

Dr. Ed Brooks, Executive Director
The Oxford Character Project

Dr. Ruth Cigman
UCL Institute of Education

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive
Humanists UK

Dr. Laura D'Olimpio
University of Birmingham

Fiona Ellison, Director
Partnerships and Operations - Step Up To Serve

Prof. Michael Hand
University of Birmingham

Prof. Angie Hobbs
University of Sheffield

Carole Jones, Headteacher
Yeading Junior School

Dr. Rania Marandos, Chief Impact Officer
Step Up To Serve

Louisa Searle, Director
First Give

Prof. Alessandra Tanesini
Cardiff University

Prof. Lorella Terzi
University of Roehampton

Bec Tighe, Head of School
University of Birmingham School

David Wright, Assistant Head Teacher
Character Education - Aylesford School

For more information about the statement please contact:

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

w: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

e: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk

t: 0121 414 4875

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



THE JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES