Responsiveness as a Democratic Virtue

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Democratic societies are fragile. They face the kinds of external and internal pressures all societies face: those brought on by new international and global circumstances, new technologies, new populations of immigrants and ongoing and new social tensions. But they also face two distinctive challenges that stem from being democratic.

First, a democratic society must respond democratically to the generic challenges listed above, which means that citizens must find a way to respond together. Responding together requires more than responding collectively. It requires responding to a challenge in a way that is also responsive to one another. Responses to social problems developed and enacted by well-trained administrators and officials fail this test even when they are wise, as they often leave ordinary citizens alienated.

Second, because a developed capacity for proper responsiveness to the world and to one's fellow citizens requires cultivation and training, democratic societies must educate their future citizens in these forms of responsiveness. This means that democratic societies face particular challenges in how they think about and design educational systems. Democratic societies that adequately meet the normal range of social challenges but fail in these further challenges will become increasingly less democratic, succumbing to what might be described as "democratic erosion."[1]

A society whose education system produces a class of brilliant scientists and engineers including social engineers may provide a society with the intellectual firepower to respond to any challenge it faces while simultaneously undermining the possibility that its responses could be adopted and enacted by all citizens, together. This is a democratic gap that cannot merely be closed by giving these intellectual leaders better moral and civic training. It runs deeper, into how we conceive of the role of experts in a democracy, what the skills and virtues of democratic citizenship are, and how widely they are cultivated. It requires transformations in how we understand democratic interaction, and how we educate our children to participate in that interaction.

What is particularly insidious about many of the challenges of democratic erosion is that they can be hard to see *as* problems of democratic erosion. They often affect what Danielle Allen calls our "democratic habits"[2] rather than directly challenging our laws or institutions, and whether they count as negatively affecting those habits depends on how we understand what those habits need to be in the

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[1] See my paper, "Taking the Engagement in Civic Engagement Seriously" available at http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/ipce/interior/TakingCivicEngagementSeriouslyFinalFY12.pdf

[2] Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

first place. Confronting these democratically corrosive challenges, then, requires clear vision: the conceptual frameworks necessary to see what makes certain habits democratically valuable, and what it takes to reproduce and sustain them.

Our aim with this project on the teaching of democratic virtues is to help one another clarify our understanding of such democratically valuable habits and the processes by which they can be cultivated in students. One guiding idea will be that the project of democratic societies is for citizens to work out together how to live together, and that this requires that we reason together in a particularly social sense of this term.

Consider the contrast between two kinds of activities that are routinely described as reasoning: In the first, people align the direction of their thoughts according to principles or standards (of logic, of rational thought, etc) in order to reach conclusions, whether beliefs or decisions, whether individual or collective. Someone who takes care to formulate beliefs on the basis of sufficient evidence or to make decisions rationally is involved in this first general activity of reasoning. In the other kind of activity, two or more people interact in a way that is responsive to one another. What makes what they do *reasoning* is in part the quality of that responsiveness. In particular, in order to be reasoning together, no one can be trying to manipulate or command the others, no one can be blindly deferring to the others. When we discuss important matters of the day, or the latest episode of our favorite TV show in a mutually respectful and interested manner, we are engaged in this second type of reasoning, even if we are not trying to reach a collective decision or convince each other of our point of view.[3]

What determines whether a group of people are reasoning together in this second, social sense is how they respond to each other, and not, first and foremost, whether their thoughts follow one another along rational pathways. That is, if we want to know whether they are reasoning together, we need to ask questions like: Do they respond to each other's invitations as invitations? In responding, do they issue invitations of their own? Do they act in a way that sustains their ongoing interaction or in ways that are designed to bring that interaction to a close? Thus, thinking about how we might live together guided by this social picture of reasoning shifts our attention in important ways: to our responsiveness to one another and the world, rather than to our skill at ordering our thoughts or words in accord with certain abstract principles.

It is a relatively small step from this general account of reasoning to a picture of democratic interaction characterized in terms of this form of responsiveness. The resulting vision of democratic society will, despite having deliberation at its core, nevertheless be distinct from that pictured by much work on deliberative democracy. Among other advantages, this approach focuses our attention clearly on

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[3] This contrast and the social picture of reasoning are developed in Anthony Simon Laden, *Reaosning: A Social Picture* (Oxford, 2012).

the quality of our habits of responsiveness along two broad dimensions. First, civic responsiveness involves responding well to our fellow citizens, and requires, among other things, the ability to listen, to hear unfamiliar ideas without being dismissive, and the ability and willingness to be moved by what our fellow citizens say. Second, world responsiveness involves responding well to the world around us: a care and sensitivity in shaping our ideas and actions to what the physical and social worlds call for as we interact with them. Meeting the challenges society faces through world responsiveness means developing the capacity and willingness to be moved by the world.

If responsiveness in both these forms is a necessary virtue for democratic citizens, and the cultivation of it is a bulwark against democratic erosion, the question arises how we can best cultivate it. Here, we need to turn from democratic theory to the philosophy of education. We need to ask how schools or school systems can cultivate both forms of responsiveness.

We hope to use the planned conferences as an opportunity to investigate this conception of democratic interaction and its implications for democratic education.