Campus Perspectives

Ethics and politics: Individuals' responsibilities to communities

Roundtable Ethics
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Given our highly individualistic culture, we tend to suppose that each of us should have our own reasons for important judgments, like voting, and that taking over someone else's opinion, whether from a friend or an opinion poll, is an abdication of responsibility. Is that necessarily right?

Aristotle argued that language is an essential human attribute because it allows us to advance the common good through the process of learning from one another. That is to say, each of us makes judgments about what is best for "us as a community" not just on the basis of our instincts, like hunger, or just on the basis of our own personal experience of the world, but also by considering the experiences and judgments of others.

Aristotle noted that a large body of people can judge some matters better than any one individual. His example was the judgment of musical drama: some people, he suggested, appreciate a certain part — for example, music or staging — so that all of them together appreciate the whole thing. He meant that each of us counts on the expertise of others about parts in making our judgments about the whole. I may have a tin ear, but my friend with perfect pitch lets me know if the orchestra was in tune. Whereas my friend, with little experience of live theater, depends on my sense of what counts as great staging. If not accompanied by friends whose capacities I know, I can still ask, "Why are others in the audience booping or cheering?" And so, through shared learning, "a large body of people" is able to make a good overall judgment.

Politics is admittedly more complex; there are no precise ethical rules. But the judgments that most of us make on most matters — including how we vote in elections — operate in an analogous fashion. We learn by thinking about the reactions of others. This need not be ethically worse, indeed. You will be able to contribute more to the common good if you do not need to make "completely independent" judgments on all matters, but rather can learn from the judgments and experiences of others.

In order to be considered a good voter, one must be a free rider on other's labor and deny yourself moral agency. But if you do express yourself upon matters in which you have bothered to inform yourself more carefully than others, you become part of the cycle of reciprocal learning that characterizes flourishing political communities.

Does the political lethargy of the typical college student today, in contrast to the student activism of the 60s and 70s, harm the American political system? Realistically, what positive effect could a student activist have?

In response to these last two questions: activism, whether by students or others, can be a highly relevant input into the judgment that people make about political matters. Activists often seek, in the first instance, to influence policy-makers. But their actions — based on their having gained special knowledge and/or based on a sensitivity to injustice — are relevant to the judgment of the community as a whole. Members of the community who do not know as much about the matter, or who are less morally sensitive, are provided the critical opportunity to ask, "Why are those members of my community (in effect) cheering or booing?"

Seeking to answer that question becomes part of how each of us makes our judgment on relevant political matters, including voting. Whether you end up embracing or rejecting the activists' agenda, their political activity, if it is accepted as seeking a common good, should help you to formulate a judgment. Thus, whatever one thinks about the agendas of activists of the 60s and 70s, the very fact of their presence in activism, whether passed on or not, is a relevant input into the judgment of the community as a whole.

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