

BRINGING CHARACTER BACK IN: FROM REPUBLICAN VIRTUES TO DEMOCRAT- IC HABITS*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to draw the attention of political theorists to the once popular and today too much neglected role of character in fashioning democratic politics. I do this through a discussion of what I consider the two most promising contemporary approaches: the republican theory of civic virtues and the pragmatist theory of democratic habits. My claim is that habits, more than virtues, provide a promising starting point for enriching our understanding of democracy. The paper proceeds as follows. After having clarified the philosophical grammars of virtues and habits and their stakes, I discuss at some length the republican theory of civic virtues, distinguishing its two main branches, the neo-Athenian and the neo-Roman, and showing that both run into significant theoretical troubles. I then proceed to examine the pragmatist account of political habits and show that it proves more successful than republican virtues in explaining how different trait of character could be integrated into a normative account of democracy.

KEYWORDS

Pragmatism, republicanism, civic virtue, habits.

1. THE PHILOSOPHICAL GRAMMAR OF VIRTUES AND HABITS

As scholars in the tradition of modernization theory among others have shown, in the last four decades emotions, affects, sentiments, and more generally human subjectivity have caught the attention of human and social sciences in unprecedented ways¹.

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¹ See in particular (Ehrenberg, 2010).

Political philosophy has progressively caught up, beginning a turn away from the rationalistic, epistemic, and justificatory styles of idealized theory that had become mainstream since the '70s². Important as this movement has been in recovering relevant factors of political experience, it has so far only minimally invested the narrower field of democratic theory where more epistemically oriented approaches continue to dominate. Yet, to a certain extent, political philosophy has always acknowledged the relevance of individual factors in shaping collective life, something that dates back at least to the Greek's theory of personal excellence and, later, to all those theories that have acknowledged the political priority of character over social structures and moral principles. One has to think only to Machiavelli's emphasis on the political role of elites' virtues, or to Alexis de Tocqueville's analyses of the democratic ethos, just to name two theorists that lay at the opposite sides of the political spectrum. Yet this view of political life, which has provided western theorists a shared background for centuries, has somehow fallen in disrepute, particularly in political philosophies directly or indirectly shaped by the analytical tradition, so that for the largest part of the 20th century character and related concepts have practically disappeared from mainstream political philosophy³. The only possible exception to this trend has been republicanism, with its reiterated emphasis on the political relevance of civic virtues, even though republicanism too has grown progressively uneasy with respect to its own core moral values, often in reaction to hegemonic liberalism.

While liberal criticism of thick politics and of what John Rawls has dubbed "the fact of oppression" has certainly played a salutary role in clearing the ground from paternalistic and oppressive conceptions of politics, the *de facto* ban on character has impoverished our philosophical conversation, and contributed to nailing down our theoretical agenda to legalistic and justificatory issues, that in no way should exhaust the scope of political reflection. Considering this trend unfortunate, yet hopefully reversible, in this article I plea for bringing this venerable tradition back into the political conversation. This goal will be pursued through a critical examination of two major concepts, civic virtues and democratic habits, that I will discuss with reference to the two political traditions that have mostly contributed to the understanding of the place of character in political life. On the one hand republicanism, the tradition than more than any other has explored the political function of virtues as bastions against social domination and the corruption of political life. On the other hand, American pragmatism, which more than any other 20th century philosophical school has contributed to

2 For a survey of this literature, see (Leys, 2011).

3 There are of course exceptions. They are however too sparse to provide significant counter evidence to this claim.

a philosophical theory of democratic habits whose political implications are as far reaching as they are neglected.

By reflecting upon differences and similarities between these two different philosophical grammars of political life, I wish to show that habits have a marked superiority over virtues when it comes to conceptualizing the place of character in politics. As I intend to show, pragmatists, like republicans, contend that appropriate traits of character are the backbone of a well organized polity, so that the pursuit of the normative goal these traditions posit – nondomination for the republicans and democracy for the pragmatists – requires also a specific cultivation of character. While the similarities between pragmatism and republicanism are more than episodic, the differences remain significant. The article reconstructs and compares the philosophical grammars of civic virtues and democratic habits. I begin by examining the republican theory of virtues, identifying two main conceptions of virtues which corresponds to the two major currents of republicanism, the so called neo-Athenian and neo-Roman. My claim is that both of them run into significant theoretical troubles precisely because they misconstrue the relation between character and politics. I then proceed to examine the pragmatist account of political habits and show that the concept of habit fulfills this task better than that of virtue.

2. THE REPUBLICAN GRAMMAR OF VIRTUES

Republicanism has gained new impetus in the political theory of the last four decades thanks to its capacity to reintroduce character into political discourse, a dimension of political life that political thought – particularly its liberal Anglo-American variants – had consistently neglected. This dimension has been articulated either in terms of a recovery of duties as a necessary complement to rights, or as a recovery of character as against formalistic, rule-based conceptions of politics. Indeed, as Richard Dagger has aptly summarized, the task of republicanism: “is to find a way of strengthening the appeal of duty, community, and related concepts while preserving the appeal of rights” (Dagger, 1997, 4). Since its beginnings, republicanism has pursued the goal of reviving forms of political thought that place civically oriented concepts at the centre of their vocabulary. This has been a commendable task, and one which has met with considerable success, if one thinks, for example, of the way in which liberals have been willing – to a significant extent – to accept the republican challenge and to allow conceptual room for virtue and duty besides rules and rights⁴. There are reasons, however, to suspect that the republican project has been pursued in a somewhat insuf-

⁴ For an informed discussion, see (Macedo, 1990).

ficient and sometimes confused manner. This leaves room for considerable improvement in the direction republicans have indicated, while relying instead upon conceptual resources derived from other philosophical grammars.

Contemporary scholars of republicanism⁵ tend to agree that the republican tradition in political theory is roughly divided into two main strands, one referring directly to Aristotle and sometimes called 'neo-Athenian', and the other referring to the Roman tradition and usually called 'neo-Roman'. This division is particularly relevant for our purposes as the divergences among the two strands concern precisely the political relevance of virtue. Both strands of republicanism acknowledge the irreducibly social nature of human beings, yet they draw different normative conclusions from it. Moreover, they both admit that the central task of politics consists in shaping the collective project of a polity, but conceive of the task and scope of government in quite different ways. Another feature shared by both strands, and one which distinguishes them from pragmatists, is that republicans tend to limit the scope of character to activities directly tied to the social role of citizenship. Consequently, their concern for human character is limited to virtues which are relevant to this role. This is the reason why for republicans the only virtues that matter are civic virtues.

While neo-Athenian republicans' emphasis on character or virtue may lend credit to the idea that the notion of virtue is incompatible with the basic assumptions of a liberal society, a significant consensus exists today, even among significant strands of liberalism, on the fact that virtues should be accorded a place in any account of political life. Significant disagreement remains, however, when it comes at specifying the normative implications one could or should derive from it.

Neo-Athenian republicans are the most explicit about the formative and self-expressive role of political participation, proposing an image of democracy based on the idea of citizens' commitment to active participation fostered by a deep sense of civic virtue, which in turn is constantly renewed and animated by the activity of the state. As Michael Sandel has remarked: "given our nature as political beings, we are free only insofar as we exercise our capacity to deliberate about the common good, and participate in the public life of a free city or republic" (Sandel, 1998, 26). In agreement with a tradition dating back to Aristotle, they maintain that active involvement in public affairs has an intrinsic, or constitutive, not merely instrumental function in human life. Indeed, to participate in public actions oriented towards the common good is considered to be an activity with intrinsic worth, as it is conducive to a better and fuller realization of individual life. For this reason, this strand of republi-

5 See works by Dagger (1997); Maynor (2003); Burt (1993); Honohan (2003); Peterson (2011).

canism is sometimes called 'intrinsic', as opposed to the 'instrumental' variant, which roughly corresponds to the neo-Roman alternative.

Neo-Athenian thinkers often associate politics with morality, and the language of virtue is expedient to reinforce this link. Republicans of both stripes tend to favor a moral reading of virtues because they think that the greater threat to good politics is moral and political corruption, conceived as the prioritization of one's private interest to public concern. Morality is therefore politically relevant insofar as it helps individuals to subordinate their private interest to the pursuit of the common good.

Republicans have been surprisingly elusive in their effort to theorize civic virtue. The best account to date remaining Alasdair MacIntyre's, I will refer to it to articulate the republican conception of civic virtue. I find particularly helpful MacIntyre contention that the concept of virtue has a teleological structure and is therefore inseparable from the normative ideal of a good, or *telos*, which provides the benchmark for assessing the degree to which a virtue is effectively exercised as well as justifying its worth. Hence specification of the *telos* is expedient in deciding which virtues are most appropriate to a given situation. As a matter of fact, virtues have traditionally been conceived as means towards ends, and we can distinguish an intrinsic and an extrinsic interpretation of the means-end relation. According to the intrinsic conception, whose main representative is Aristotle, the exercise of virtues is part of the good they are conducive to, whereas, according to the extrinsic model, the exercise of virtue is a mere instrument that is valued and prized for the external outcome to which it is conducive. In both cases, political activity can be understood as a kind of practice, by which MacIntyre means "a coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (MacIntyre, 1981, 187). While not all that MacIntyre says about virtue is relevant in this context, a selective reading of his analysis provides a useful starting point to examine the function of virtue in a republican theory of politics. Moreover, the definition of virtue through the notion of practice has the advantage of making explicit key features that republicans consider necessary ingredients of their virtue-based conception of politics. Below I describe seven traits MacIntyre associates with the concept of practice, and relate them to themes in the republican tradition:

1. *The idea of a common end which orients the exercise of the practice.* This idea is clearly expressed in the republican rejection of liberal neutrality and in the understanding that citizenship is defined in terms of an obligation towards

the community which derives from awareness of our dependence upon it: “The guiding principle for [civic republicanism] is the existence of significant moral obligations which citizens, as human beings, have to each other as members of political communities. In this sense, civic obligation is viewed as a fundamental feature of, and as being essentially rooted within, the polis. Civic obligation is embedded and, crucially, is prior to the individual” (Peterson, 2011, 58).

2. *The idea of competence or excellence in exercising a given role.* Whereas liberals assume that adult human beings dispose of the basic competences to be citizens, republicans consider that these competences exist only when trained. Hence the indispensability of the notion of virtue for most, if not all, republicans, as well as the general tendency to conceive of virtues as role-based.

3. *The indispensability of processes of social learning in acquiring the status of citizen.* To practise citizenship, some prior requirements must be fulfilled, that is, citizens have to be empowered to act: “What this means is that the habits, customs, and traditions of a community, its *moeurs*, its codes of moral and civil conduct, have to be such that there is within them a secure place for the practice of citizenship” (Oldfield, 1990, 184). The republican claim is that the practice of citizenship is unnatural for human beings, hence without training it is unlikely to occur.

4. *The bi-univocal relation between virtues and institutions.* The exercise of a practice can satisfy given normative standards only if institutions and virtues are balanced. Institutions must be sustained by virtues and they must contribute to the formation and maintenance of virtues. On the one hand: “the ability of a practice to retain its integrity will depend on the way in which the virtues can be and are exercised in sustaining the institutional forms which are the social bearers of the practice” (MacIntyre, 1981, 195). On the other hand: “the virtues are ... themselves in turn fostered by certain types of social institutions and endangered by others” (ivi). As authors such as Philip Pettit and John Maynor have emphasized, the republican polity presupposes that political institutions and individual virtues are successfully integrated. The attainment of political goods such as non-domination is clearly and explicitly dependent upon the joined operation of both institutions and virtues.

5. *The idea of an explicit normative standard or value shared by the participants to the practice and agreed as a criteria for assessing the quality of individual's contribution to the practice.* Republicans translate this idea in terms of a

normative standard of citizenship, or of distinctive civic values related to a duty to comply. This idea is embedded in the image of the common good to which each citizen is committed.

6. *The idea of practice as defining the social space within which virtues are exercised.* “In the civic-republican conception of citizenship, the emphasis on practice gives rise to a language of ‘duties’, whose discharge is necessary to establish individuals as citizens among other citizens. It is thus a communally based conception of citizenship: individuals are only citizens as members of a community. They need ‘empowering’ in order to be able to act as citizens, and they can retain their autonomy, but only if it is exercised not just with respect given to others’ autonomy but also in accordance with a practice which is socially defined, and which they have a duty to engage in. The social bonds between citizens are not, thus, contractual, but are based upon sharing and determining a way of life. It is shared commitment to the practice which makes individuals citizens, and in the process creates and maintains the social solidarity and cohesion of the community upon which the practice rests”, (Oldfield, 1990, 178). By acting, by public service of fairly specific kinds, individuals demonstrate that they are good citizens. This public service relates to what is necessary for citizens to do in order to define, establish, and sustain a political community of fellow-citizens. Military service, rearing of young, and deliberation are typical activities that are constitutive of citizenship because these activities are constitutive of the life of the community itself.

7. *The idea of an internal relation of virtue to good.* Part of what it means to engage in a practice is to excel in achieving (or contribute to achieving) the goods which define the practice itself. To be a virtuous or civic citizen means to take a certain pleasure in doing the kind of thing that is expected of a citizen, that is, pay the taxes, monitor state activities, restrain from exercising domination etc. It also means to believe that engaging in these activities is not a mean for an external good, but it a part of the good itself.

While MacIntyre’s definition best suits neo-Athenian or ‘intrinsic’ republicans, it also applies to neo-Roman or ‘instrumentalists’, as they too consider the cultivation and exercise of some specific civic virtues a necessary condition for achieving highly desirable political goods. Even a liberal republican such as Richard Dagger believes that we “must find some way to restore a sense of common purpose to civic life” (Dagger, 1997, 4), and that this requires “to find a way of strengthening the appeal of duty, community, and related concepts”. Indeed, even for liberal republicans such as

Dagger, the very idea of virtue makes sense only in connection with that of end, good, or *telos*. As he explains: “[s]omeone exhibits civic virtue when he or she does what a citizen is supposed to do. In this respect civic virtue is like the other virtues, which typically relate to the performance of some role or the exercise of a certain skill” (Dagger, 1997, 13). A virtuous person is someone who performs well with respect to a given end. In the case of ‘civic’ virtue, this given end is the common good. Indeed: “[c]ivic virtue is the disposition to act for the good of the community as a whole” (Dagger, 1997, 128).

The second most important feature in the republican appraisal of virtue after the means-end relation, is the sharp separation between the public and the private sphere, which republicans express in the idea that civic virtue is the capacity to renounce personal attachments, interests, desires to serve the common good. The republican discourse on virtue requires the acceptance of a sharp separation between the private and the public. At its core lies the question whether to reach common goods human egoistic impulses should be expelled from the public domain, or whether institutional solutions can be found to extract public benefits from them. Shelley Burt has nicely captured this internal tension by distinguishing three main types of virtue-based republican psychology, which are worth mentioning. They are: (1) the education of desire; (2) the accommodation of interests, and (3) the compulsion of duty (Burt, 1990). Emphasis on desire implies a focus upon passions and appetites in the cultivation of civic virtues. According to this view, it is not by sacrificing personal interest or private advantage that the common good is achieved, but by attaching personal rewards to actions conducive to the common good. The second psychological model emphasizes the rational accommodation of interests and assumes that at the basis of individual behavior there is a rational calculation of personal advantage. The idea is that this selfish orientation can be conducive to the common good when it is structured by the norms and institutions of the commonwealth. More than civic virtues, it is then the virtuous republic which is crucial. This approach closes the gap between republicanism and liberalism as it puts the weakest premium on individual character. The third model, the compulsion of duty, rejects both previous psychologies and introduces the idea of a rational motive that is independent of any kind of individual drive. According to this quasi-Kantian view, passions, appetites and any form of self-interest are all obstacles to achieving the common good, and need to be curbed and replaced by reason.

Whereas models of the education of desire and the compulsion of duty all place a heavy burden on citizens’ responsibility to achieve the common good, and in so doing legitimate interference of public institutions in shaping citizens’ attitudes, the model of the composition of interests relies rather upon the capacity of institutions to mediate

among competing private interests. In its most radical form, this instrumentalist view can renounce any appeal to virtues, and precisely for this reason it has been charged with throwing the baby out with the bath water, as it were, since no specific republican trait remains.

A third aspect to be noted is that republicans tend to offer a restrictive view of virtue as *civic* virtue, that is to say, that set of virtues that are most directly related or conducive to goods that have to do with communal life, to common goods. According to this perspective, there has hardly been any systematic effort to draw up a list of civic virtues: either civic virtue is considered in the singular as the proper kind of political virtue republicans promote, and in that sense it corresponds to the willingness to subordinate private to public interests, or it has been identified, in the wake of Pettit, with the virtue of non-domination, to which I will return. As Dagger states it, “[s]omeone exhibits civic virtue when he or she does what a citizen is supposed to do” (Dagger, 1997, 13). Civic virtue is then defined through the opposition between the personal or individual and the common good: “Virtues are valuable because they promote the good of the community or society, not because they directly promote the good of the individual” (Dagger, 1997, 14). Civic obligation comprises the duties expected of a citizen within a particular political community. No clear definition of the precise tasks required by civic obligation exists, and indeed these are likely to differ according to the particular political community, but they can usually be understood to refer to certain civic, social, and economic activities. Hence the idea of self-renunciation for the sake of a common good that is higher because related to the life of the community is clearly inscribed in the republican tradition.

Iseult Honohan is among the very rare republican thinkers to attempt to draw up a coherent list of republican virtues, among which she mentions (a) awareness, (2) self-restraint, (3) deliberative engagement, and (4) solidarity (Honohan, 2003). It is worth pausing to examine them before passing on to the discussion of pragmatist habits. *Awareness* refers to the fact of being sensitive to mutual interdependencies and common concerns in a world shared with others. Honohan describes it in terms of what we owe each other as *citizens*, and not as individuals who belong to a social unit defined in non-political terms, such as gender, race, religion, or other. *Self-restraint* refers to virtuous citizens as refraining from pursuing their own self-interested goals in wealth, power, and status. It is the classical idea of putting the common good before the private. It implies the acceptance of individual costs to promote the common good in terms of money, time, status, and other individual achievements. “This is implied in taking responsibility as a citizen for what happens in the common world rather than focusing on personal integrity alone” (Honohan, 2003, 161). *Deliberative engagements* refers to the deliberative attitude consisting in adopting the standpoint of others. Politics is a process whereby the common interest is first defined and then

pursued. Thus willingness to deliberate is a central virtue of civic republicanism. *Solidarity* refers to a direct concern for our fellow citizens which is not captured by the liberal command of abiding by laws.

With the exception of the most radical strand of instrumentalist, republicans believe that good politics requires practices of self-restraint as means to pursue the common good, and this fact explains why civic virtues are so important. Virtues are then a proxy for 'duties'. Yet this view puts republicans in an uncomfortable theoretical position, as their political project depends upon a foundational conception of politics which, in the anti-foundational temper of our culture, lacks the normative resources upon which the ancient republican ideas were founded. On the one hand, they need virtues to complete their normative account of social life. On the other hand, they are aware that the liberal temper of our societies is decidedly impatient with the idea of the good citizen as well as with its related injunctions of political participation participation and commitment.

3. THE THIN CHARACTER OF EXTRINSIC REPUBLICANISM

It is having these difficulties in mind that so-called neo-Roman republicans have tried to refashion republicanism in more liberal friendly ways. Instrumental republicans retreat to a thinner, and apparently less controversial, conception of virtue. In so doing, they hope to have the cake – keep in touch with the venerable tradition of republicanism and its original political language – and eat it too – escaping the troubles into which this tradition runs. Yet the solution is far from being entirely convincing.

To achieve their goal, neo-Roman republicans have shifted their attention to two apparently less controversial sets of virtues – those related to deliberation and those related to non-domination. Neo-Romans generally place a premium on the epistemic virtues of good deliberators on the ground that these virtues are directly related to participation, conceived as an essential ingredient of citizenship. Hence good citizens are re-described as good deliberators. In this view, traditional virtues of love of country, self-renunciation, passionate patriotism, public-spiritedness are replaced by virtues which emphasize critical distance and objectivity, and in that sense instrumental republicans promote a detached rather than a passionately involved model of citizenship. It is, however, unclear how purely instrumental deliberative competences can overcome the structural tension between private and common goods, which is the self-confessed goal pursued by republicans. Burt has, for example, suggested that focusing upon deliberative procedures as they take place at a more local and decentred level, which are in turn more directly focused upon citizens' real interests, can be conducive to the republican good. Indeed, a central notion of this strand of

republicanism concerns precisely an institution's capacity to track citizens' interests, and in so doing arouse in them a sense of obligation towards the polity. What remains unclear, however, is how a concern for the public good may be generated out of individual private interests. The problem is, however, that de-centring the level of analysis merely begs the question rather than solving it. Stating things otherwise, deliberative competence does not belong to the grammar of virtue. There is nothing in that notion that is capable of motivating an individual's concern for the common good. As a consequence, the central republican question how to restore a sense of common purpose to civic life remains unanswered. Deliberative competences do not enable republicans to have their cake and it.

Let us now turn to an apparently more promising attempt within the camp of intrinsic republicanism. Pettit has notably proposed an alternative strategy which attempts to reconcile a distinctive republican take on politics with the preservation of some central tenets of a liberal culture. This approach maintains an important role for virtue in politics, defined this time even more restrictively by its relation to the common good, now identified as non-domination. Pettit's account of civic virtues or, as he prefers to call it, civility, derives from his selective orientation to non-domination as the overarching goal of the republic. To be effective, institutions require that they: "win a place in the habits of people's hearts" (Pettit, 1997, 241). To achieve this goal, institutions should be supplemented by social norms: "the laws must be embedded in a network of norms that reign effectively, independently of state coercion, in the realm of civil society" (Pettit, 1997, 241).

Pettit articulates this concern for virtues in terms of civility, by which he does not refer to a list of virtues but rather to a general attitude of positive orientation toward the common good, articulated in terms of non-domination. Civilities are needed for several reasons. First: "people enjoy a higher degree of non-domination under a regime where there are norms to support republican laws", (Pettit, 1997, 246). Social norms tend to have a strong influence on an individual's compliance with law. Second, republican civility enables individuals or groups to identify interests that are not tracked hence not protected by law. Activists display republican civility when they raise questions of justice or respect and struggle to change laws. Third, civility helps in the "effective implementation of legal and related sanctioning". Enforcement of law and sanctioning presuppose not only that people approve compliance with law, but also react against non-compliance, for example, identifying and reporting offenders. Police alone can do little if society does not assist. Ordinary people must be active in sanctioning infractions and calling in the legal authorities. This is the basic republican idea that "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance", (Pettit, 1997, 250). Pettit's emphasis on vigilance is consonant with the classical tenets of the republican tradition, as vigilance is the antidote against corruption. Pettit speaks in this sense of a "virtuous vigi-

lance” when he refers to citizen practices of whistleblowing. Being a good citizen requires possession of three clusters of virtues all directly or indirectly related to the achievement of non-domination both in interpersonal relations between citizens and in political relations. The first cluster includes *deliberative virtues*, that is, those virtues that are required to articulate one’s own and others’ interests with the aim of tracking them. Consonant with Pettit’s proposal, Maynor has identified the following (open) list of deliberative virtues: “listening to the other side; respecting the ‘other’; solving matters in a conversational manner; and being able to accept decisions that one is opposed to with the understanding that they do not constitute arbitrary interference” (Maynor, 2003, 171). The second set includes the *virtues of duty*. These express the central republican intuition according to which citizens should do their best not only to comply with laws but also to make others comply. The third set of virtues includes *virtues of contestation*, that is, citizens should engage actively in practices of vigilance and contestation of state power in order to monitor State’s tendency to adopt dominant positions⁶.

Pettit makes explicit that the reference to social norms cannot be explained in purely instrumental terms, as it implies a process of identification with a community, the idea of social norms being inseparable from the existence of the social group which acknowledges such norms. Hence to adopt a norm is to endorse the standpoint of the social group that supports it. Civility is the process whereby an individual identifies himself with a larger group and subordinates his/her own selfish interests to those of the group. Here Pettit draws consistently upon the classical republican idea according to which, without the idea of a common good, there is no good politics, that is, the republican state needs republican social norms, and compliance with social norms requires in turn recognition that that ‘the good’ is the good of the social group whose members share these norms. ‘Norms’ refers to a plurality of social identities (woman, citizen, human being...) and the capacity to take on these plural identities is part of what it means to be a citizen of a republican state. Civic virtue or civility is the virtue which refers to that specific social role which is citizenship. Hence civility is the consequence of “the irrepressibly social nature of our species” (Pettit, 1997, 260), and civic virtuous behavior is not the result of self-obligation but rather of identification with a particular social group, the political community. For Pettit, this identification requires the awareness that the state provides us with the most important good – non-domination. Trust and vigilance are then introduced as a necessary integration of civility. Without trust, individuals remain confined to the restricted circles of family and friends, whereas for a republican polity to thrive, there should be shared trust – of

⁶ See (Maynor, 2003, 42) and (Pettit, 1997, 207).

other citizens as well as public officers. In addition, republicanism requires that trust be combined with vigilance, so that to be vigilant towards public officials does not mean mistrusting them but: “maintain[ing] a demanding pattern of expectations in their regard: to insist that they should abide by certain procedures, for example, that they should accept challenges to their actions in parliament or in the press, that they should allow access to information on relevant aspects of their personal lives, and so on” (Pettit, 1997, 264).

While convincing for several reasons, Pettit’s account of civility does not offer an updated discourse on civic virtues, and his preference for the less evocative and less contested term of civility is telling. The uncoupling of virtues from goods he accomplishes is such that civilities resemble competences or skills more than virtues, that is abilities that can be put in the service of this or that external end, hence of either good or bad ones. The republican rehabilitation of virtue is, therefore, caught in an insuperable dilemma. Either republicans remain faithful to the original program of a virtue-based conception of politics, then expose themselves to well-known liberal critiques. Or they opt for a thinner conception of virtue-as-competence, but then lose the theoretical grammar of virtue, so that their account falls back on a rather standard rule-based conception of political action in which human character plays only a limited role. In conclusion, we can say that, whereas neo-Athenian republicans succeed in connecting individuals and society but do it in the wrong way, neo-Roman republicans fail to explain the connection between character and politics, precisely for the same reasons liberals fail. A habit-based theory of politics aims precisely to solve this contradiction by replacing the philosophical grammar of virtue with that of habits.

4. PRAGMATISM AND THE REDISCOVERY OF HABITS

I have indicated above that pragmatists take their starting point in political theory at a place that is at the same time close and distant to that of republicans. This theoretical starting point is epitomized by the notion of habit. Whereas the concept of virtue has a direct political bearing, habits are a much broader concept, which covers the entire domain of human action. The notion of habit is the building block of the pragmatist theory of action, and it is central to the pragmatist account of how individual actions contribute to the democratic quality of a polity⁷. As such, the notion of habit

⁷ The most comprehensive study of the notion of habit in the pragmatist tradition is (Kilpinen, 2000). In this valuable book, the reader will find plenty of information concerning the theoretical function this notion has played in the thought of the main figures belonging to this tradition, with an empha-

plays a central function in the general philosophical outlook of all the main figures of the pragmatist tradition. Charles S. Peirce relies upon this notion to define the central categories of epistemology, such as meaning (the meaning of a concept is the habit it entails), belief (the essence of belief is the establishment of a habit), reasoning (reasoning is the self-controlled practice of adopting a habit), and symbol (the interpretant of a symbol is a habit). Habits are for Peirce generalities, and a habit is “a tendency to repeat any action which has been performed before”, (Peirce, 1998, 223). But the notion of habit plays also a decisive role in William James’ psychology. As James’ often quoted sentence says: “Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread there” (James, 1950, 121). Finally, John Dewey saw in habits the cornerstone of social psychology, as the dialectic between habits, instincts, and intelligence defines the basic human way of functioning. Indeed “[h]abit is the mainspring of human action, and habits are formed for the most part under the influence of the customs of a group. The organic structure of man entails the formation of habit, for, whether we wish it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, every act effects a modification of attitude and set which directs future behavior”⁸.

Habits are given priority over intentional states in shaping human conduct, and intentional activities are seen as being only secondary to habits. This fact not only means that the network of intentional states can function only on the basis of, and be applied in the context of, a background of dispositions, but also that intentional states are dependent upon processes of habituation and have to be logically explained in terms of these. The general idea is that social behaviour is essentially shaped by the interaction of individual habits with the contingent and ever-changing demands of contextual situations, with reflexivity intervening only as a second order steering mechanism. So conceived, habits exercise an important explanatory role almost in any field of social theory, politics included. This in contrast to the notion of virtue, and in particular that of civic virtue, which makes a direct call on an individual’s willingness or orientation towards values which are of direct political importance.

The weaker and indirect connection between habits and politics is probably responsible for their less successful career in political theory. Equally relevant for their neglect in democratic theory is the fact that historically there has been a tendency to

sis on theories of action. For a political account of the place of habits in a pragmatist theory of democracy, see Frega (2019a).

⁸ (Dewey, 1927, lw2.334-5). For a fuller examination of Dewey’s perspective on virtues and habits, see Frega (2019b).

interpret habits in terms of the unreflective and routinized repetition of the same, whereas virtue has traditionally been associated with individual autonomy and self-sacrifice. Indeed, considered from the standpoint of the opposition between repetition and autonomy, habits have little to offer democratic theory, precisely because they lack the basic ingredient required by any normative project, that is, the capacity to ascribe responsibility to the bearer, so as to be able to engage in normative evaluations, which is what the notion of virtue precisely aims at. Moreover, partially at least, pragmatists can be seen to subscribe to a variant of what German philosophical anthropology names the “Entlastung” (facilitation), which is to say the idea of habits as being essentially in the service of freeing higher human capacities, an idea clearly stated by James and by Dewey. From this perspective, the political relevance of habits becomes secondary and indirect at best. As long as habits are appraised, as is, for example, the case in Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus*, as structuring patterns which play actors behind their backs, so to speak, treating them as mere cultural or sociological dopes, it is difficult to see how they can be put to use in theoretical projects other than those of a structural, sociological, or genealogical explanation of why things are as they are and people behave as they behave. Normativity, in that perspective, is simply explained away.

Yet for the pragmatists habits are far from being blind and conservative structures, they are indeed endowed with a creative potential that makes them essential factors not only for social stability but also for social change. They are “judgments of the body”. Habits as well as emotions incorporate a reflective dimension which is however not cognitive or symbolic but rather operational and embodied. As Peirce already acknowledged, even logical inferences can be seen as being operated unconsciously through perception (Hookway, 1990). Far from being unconscious and repetitive, habits have a rational content precisely insofar as rationality has a habitual dimension, so that habits incorporate perceptive, affective, and reflexive features that are the basis on which social interactions are built. In so doing, they play a fundamental function in giving shape to our interactions with the social world. Hence, in order to understand the role habits play in democratic politics, we should resist too hastily adopting a list of pragmatist habits by way of comparison with a list of republican virtues. I suggest instead that we focus on how the logical grammar of habits differs from that of virtues.

Three main differences between republican and pragmatists need to be emphasized. The first and more obvious is that pragmatists explain the political relevance of character in terms of habit rather than virtue. The second is that pragmatists have articulated a general theory of habit which renders republican efforts at articulating a concept of virtue pale. The third is that habits which are relevant to politics are not specifically political – or civic – so that pragmatists tend to consider habits in their broad context rather than focusing upon a limited sub-set of specifically political hab-

its. Whereas republicans tend to reduce virtue to selected virtues directly oriented – and supposedly conducive – to the common good, pragmatists focus on those ordinary habits which are the backbone of social interaction, to concentrate only at a later stage on the political consequences of these same ordinary habits. As a consequence, whereas for republicans civic virtues are mainly resources to be used in moments of direct political involvement, as the model of contestation shows, pragmatists emphasize the tacit and ordinary structure of the democratic way of life. We see emerging here, to a certain extent, the difference between a conception of politics as specialized practice, and of politics as an ongoing form of social interaction.

So what is a habit? Habits are tendencies to reproduce the same type of behavior when the same circumstances occur. “The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response, not to particular acts” (Dewey, 1922, mw14.32). In other words, a habit is a disposition to face similar circumstances with similar patterns of response, it is not the blind repetition of the same behavioral sequence. Habits define the basic structure of behavior by specifying the patterns of interaction between an agent and his/her environment. On the one hand, they “incorporate” the outer environment through processes of socialization. On the other hand, they shape it by producing regular and expectable patterns of action. Social action is, therefore, essentially shaped by habit. This fact explains why habits must matter to democratic theory, because if the political quality of a community depends to a significant extent upon the kind of habits shared by its members, then the question which habits promote and which hamper democracy becomes relevant.

Habitual tendencies or dispositions are neither rigid nor blind, and the feedback produced by their exercise leads to their modification. Peirce has insisted that habits embody generalities and to that extent have a meaning which largely exceeds mere repetition. That each habit is a general means in fact that it incorporates an idea which it translates into action. Or, as Dewey writes: “thought which does not exist within ordinary habits of action lacks means of execution” (Dewey, 1922, mw14.49). This is valid also for democracy considered as a general concept and as a system of values. Its existence is evanescent if detached from concrete ways of interacting among individuals, and from the habits that sustain these interactions. From this quick account is evident also why for pragmatists the relevant question is not that of which virtues make us good citizens, but which habits make us good social actors. Indeed, the broader scope of the concept of habit does not only serve to provide a more solid ground to a character-based conception of politics. In addition, it fosters an enlarged conception of democracy conceived as a “form of society” or “way of life”⁹.

⁹ See Frega (2017).

The added value of introducing a habit-based theory of behavior in political theory depends also from the fact that from an action-theoretic standpoint the concept of habit offers a larger explanatory basis of human behavior than the kind of purposive theory of action which is generally presupposed by virtue-based theories of action. And indeed republican conceptions of politics usually conceptualize virtue as a conscious, intentional, rationally chosen basis for action. A politics of virtue, like a politics of will, desires, and interests, will therefore tend to focus nearly exclusively upon the conscious dimension of individual life, hence blinding itself to the powerful political effects of those aspects of individual life that are not within direct control but which nevertheless dominate our lives. Pragmatists such as Peirce, James, and Dewey have all emphasized the rational nature of habit conceived as embodied generality, by which they mean that a habit incorporates and translates into action a general idea or value. Debates in critical race theory have shown for example that most of the time racial and discriminatory attitudes are tacitly inscribed in ways of acting of which the agent is often unaware, so that an individual may combine the abstract endorsement of anti-racist ideas with deeply engrained racial habits¹⁰. The obvious consequence is that undemocratic values continue to persist under the guise of tacit and non-problematized habits. We know today beyond reasonable doubt that forms of privilege and discrimination such as that associated with gender, race, religion, social status operate as unseen, invisible, even seemingly nonexistent determinants of action. Given their hidden mode of operation, something more indirect than and much different from conscious argumentation is required. Emphasizing the democratic relevance of habits goes therefore well beyond a mere moral exhortation to mobilize public and private energies to build a democratic character. Several studies as shown for example that when moral norms such as those that stigmatize racial discrimination coexist with contrary habits, high levels of discrimination may coexist with they overt denial.

Recognition of the habitual dimension of action bears tremendous consequences not only at for our understanding of how everyday undemocratic interactions undermine the democratic aspirations of a society as injustices continue to be perpetrated without often even being acknowledged. In a more dramatic way, also institutions may become blind to them and consolidate tacit discriminatory procedures, especially when only overt or intentional discrimination is admitted. The example of racial discrimination is telling. As Michelle Alexander impressively documents (Alexander, 2012), denial of implicit racial bias, i.e. refusal by courts to admit that judiciary decisions may be determined by racial habits, is the greatest cause of racial discrimination

10 See for example (Sullivan, 2006; MacMullan, 2009), both explicitly relying on habit as a key concept to analyze and criticize contemporary forms of racism.

and denial of justice in the U.S. legal system. Because only intentional discrimination is considered relevant, actions based on racial habits that do not explicitly admit racial grounds are extremely more difficult to sue. Under these circumstances, acknowledging the political relevance of habits would amount not only at concrete attempts at improving social relations throughout society, but also to achieve a far greater level of legal justice as is the case today.

A politics of virtue, like a politics of will, desires, and interests, will focus nearly exclusively upon the conscious dimension of individual life, hence blinding itself to the powerful political effects of those aspects that are not within direct control but which nevertheless dominate our lives. A habit-based political theory, on the other hand, shows that eradicating forms of social injustice such as racism will inevitably fail if the main lever upon which it relies is the moral injunction to become decent citizens. What is required, rather, is a critique and a social practice that directly target tacit undemocratic habits. The political consequences which stem from a habit-based approach to democracy are, therefore, momentous. A habit-based theory of action has therefore better chances than a virtue-based to help us conceptualize the broadest possible spectrum of attitudes which are required for a democracy to thrive.

5. DEMOCRATIC HABITS

Within pragmatism we find reference to three distinct classes of habits which, while not being exclusively political in kind, are necessary prerequisites for the existence of a democratic society. Their exercise is expected to shape human behavior in all spheres of social life, and not only in those activities we undertake in our capacity of good citizens.

The first group includes habits which promote and sustain cooperative relations and nonviolent conflict resolution. Habits of cooperation are those which take our mutual dependence into account, rather than stressing independence and isolation. Cooperative habits involve an inclination towards social action and privileging the common good, but also require a cognitive openness and a capacity to sustain and manage uncertainty, because cooperative solutions to social problems are usually not easily found and require that all participants engage in collective processes of inquiry. Habits of cooperation take our mutual dependence into account, rather than stressing independence and isolation, so as to incorporate the outer society in our own identity.

As sociologists in the tradition of social capital¹¹ and political scientists working on cultural politics¹² have long shown, willingness to cooperate, mutual trust, openness to strangers correlate positively with the democratic quality of a society. Habits of cooperation define the basic patterns of interaction within a society, and to that extent are constitutive also of its political compact, without being in themselves specifically political. Pragmatists have continuously stressed that politics as a specialized system is but a phase in the functioning of society, and that it will always reflect the system of mutual expectations and the patterns of interaction that take place among social actors at all levels of social life. As Dewey reminded at the outset of the Second World War, “Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation—which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition—is itself a priceless addition to life. To take as far as possible every conflict which arises—and they are bound to arise—out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree—even profoundly—with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends” (Dewey, 1939a, 228).

The second dimension of democratic habits emphasized by pragmatists is epistemic. The willingness and capacity of individuals to assert their beliefs according to the experimental method rather than by relying upon other non-rational methods of belief is a central element of the democratic ethos. Epistemic habits refer to how we engage in discussion with others and to check facts, test our convictions, or listen to others. Pragmatists insist that, to be a deliberative citizen, it is not enough to be proficient in logic and argumentation. In addition, it requires the adoption of an open and fallibilist attitude. Emphasis on the epistemic dimension of democracy was a standard argument in the pragmatist tradition since Peircean claims in support of the general diffusion of the “laboratory habit of mind”, and is consonant with the enlightenment tradition of faith in the emancipatory function of reason. This epistemic understanding of democracy is, however, very distant from the kind of rationalist interpretations of democracy to which contemporary political philosophy has accustomed us. For example, when Dewey defines democracy as a moral idea what he has in mind are not Kantian or religious ideals of respect and human dignity, but rather an *ethic of scientific inquiry*, what he also called a “scientific morale”, by which he meant the “extension of the qualities that make up the scientific attitude” to the domain of moral facts

11 See in particular the classical works from Robert Putnam, (Putnam, 1994, 2000). More recently, Danielle Allen has brought attention on the correlation between the fall of interpersonal trust and the embittering of racial relations in the U.S. See (Allen, 2009).

12 See the classical works from Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, in particular (Almond and Verba, 1963, 1980).

(Dewey, 1939b, lw13.170-171). Epistemic habits are so important for the democratic ethos that: “the future of democracy is allied with spread of the scientific attitude” (Dewey, 1939b, lw13.169). Reference to epistemic habits helps to overcome the shortcomings ensuing from the restriction of democracy to the procedural imperative of the uncoerced force of the better argument that is typical of so much contemporary deliberative theory. Moreover, it shows that going beyond pure epistemic proceduralism needs not necessarily postulating an ethical background. If theories of deliberative democracy over-emphasize the role of cognitive-rational processes, deeply underestimating the function played by habits and emotions in shaping these very processes (Adloff and Jörke, 2013), the solution does not consist in searching for ethical compensations, but, rather, in better understanding which habits and dispositions are required to engage productively in collective deliberation. The habit-based pragmatist account of democracy provides the resources to show that deliberation is a social practice rooted in individual habits, whose way of proceeding is inevitably misunderstood when reduced to its formal-linguistic dimension. Indeed, what classical pragmatists such as Mary Parker Follett and Dewey dubbed “the method of democracy”, refers precisely to all the predispositions and attitudes which deliberation requires. “Democratic debate, ideally, requires a willingness to listen to and evaluate the opinions of one’s opponents, respecting the views of minorities, advancing arguments in good faith to support one’s convictions, and having the courage to change one’s mind when confronted with new evidence or better arguments. There is an ethos involved in the practice of democratic debate. If such an ethos is violated or disregarded, then debate can become hollow and meaningless. We might even say that the practice of debate in a democratic polity requires the democratic transformation and appropriation of classic virtues: practical wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. Democratic versions of these virtues are required for engaging in democratic debate” (Bernstein, 1996, 1131).

The habit of taking habits denotes the third type of habit required by democratic life, which are necessary to develop an appropriate degree of sensitivity to the type of radical contingency and change which characterizes the social environment, particularly in modern societies. Habits are not only static properties defining agents, are also features which we adopt and change. Peirce and other pragmatists have rightly emphasized the priority of *habit-taking* and *habit-changing* over *habit-having*, showing that habituation and socialization reveal only a small part of the function of habits, that which can be accounted for in the Bourdieusian terms of *habitus*. For the pragmatists, the very fact of taking-habits and changing-habits defines the sphere of human action in a way that integrates the stabilizing function of habituation with the creative dimension of the instinctual and the reflexive dimension of critical thinking. William I. Thomas, a Chicago sociologist inspired by pragmatism, observed that “the habit of

change” – a linguistic variant of Peirce’s “habit of taking habit” – is a distinguishing feature of modern life and a characteristic feature of democracy: “which means at bottom that freedom of action and a reasonable protection in such a course secures more invention in every sense of the word, and a consequent increase in power” (cit. in Kilpinen 2000, 244). The fact of human plasticity shapes the pragmatist understanding of how a democratic society should address the problem of social change. Insofar as democracy defines a participated way of orienting collective life, it should also incorporate social strategies for changing habits consistent with its own basic principles. Rather than being drilled through social pressure, the citizens of a democratic society must be given the tools to independently adjust to changing outer circumstances. In other words, for the citizens of democratic societies, habit-taking or habit-changing must become a second-order nature. This has far reaching consequences on our understanding of the task of education and on the duty of public power to provide all citizens the adequate means to cultivate this second order habit. Our actual conversation about a democratic society should go back to progressive theories of education and bring central stage the question of second order reflexivity, seen as the indispensable tool whereby citizens learn how to adjust and refashion their own system of habits to cope in creative ways with social, economic, and environmental circumstances that change at such a pace that too many of them fail to catch up.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what this comparison shows is that when we look at the list of virtues/habits that republicans and pragmatists associate with good politics, there are several resemblances. For example, pragmatists and republicans both emphasize epistemic virtues related to deliberation. However, when we look at the theoretical framework which guides their respective understanding of the place of character in politics, significant differences appear, which depend from the different philosophical grammars of the concepts of virtue and habit. Particularly relevant is the fact that, whereas the scope of democratic habits is the totality of associated human life, republican virtues are essentially limited to the field of political experience. For this reason, republicanism runs into trouble when it seeks to explain the social roots of politics, something that it can do only by resorting to moral arguments, as can be seen from its struggle to rehabilitate the related notions of duty and common good. This difference has important political implications insofar as republicans have to stress the social role of citizenship, in contrast to other social roles, as the decisive factor in shaping individual identity.

As pragmatists, republicans generally accept the basic traits of a social ontology and consider that individual identity (character) is fundamentally shaped through social experience. Yet they tend to restrict the political relevance of socialization to experiences that are directly related to politics, that is to say, those which essentially concern the relationship of the individual with formal political institutions. While we can easily understand why, historically, this has been the case in the political experience of Athens and Rome, it is much more difficult to accept it as a viable understanding of politics today.

From this perspective, we can argue that pragmatism is better placed to understand how our political identity and experience is formed and tied to our experience of social life as it plays out in all spheres of social existence. This is so precisely because pragmatism distinguishes, and yet clearly articulates, the social and the political dimensions of democracy. According to this perspective, the social and political function of shaping individual character is distributed across a broad array of social spheres and practices, so that political experience is not overloaded with functions and meanings that it can no longer sustain, at least if we are to accept the basic features of modern societies, notably the rise of individualism, the undeniable priority of rights over duties, and the irreversible achievement of a sort of liberal right to be left alone.

If we admit that to renew the prospect of democratic theory we need to find a way to bring character back in, then the pragmatist approach proves more promising than the republican one, and a new theory of habits may well be a promising starting point to begin asking some of the most pressing questions of our time, such as why populism is rising in such a steady way, why social resentment and hatred of diversity are equally on the rise, and why citizens are becoming more and more skeptical of their elites as well as of their political institutions.

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