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Commentary on Ben Berger's *Attention Deficit Democracy*

Ben Berger's *Attention Deficit Democracy* contributes to the scholarly and public debate about civic engagement by defending a conceptual thesis, an empirical thesis, and a prescriptive thesis.

The conceptual thesis can be paraphrased as follows:

The term 'civic engagement' should be abandoned in favour of a set of three more precise terms: 'political engagement', 'social engagement', and 'moral engagement'. Further, the term 'engagement' should be understood in three senses defined by reference to the notions of 'attention' and 'energy'. We should distinguish between 'engaging in' (which involves energy without attention), 'being engaged by' (which involves attention without energy), and 'engaging with' (which involves both).

The empirical thesis can be paraphrased as follows:

In order for a democratic society to function well, social and moral engagement among its citizens must be widespread and frequent, but for the vast majority of citizens, their political engagement need not be more than episodic.

The prescriptive thesis consists of four approaches to improve democracy:

"First, we citizens can ... mak[e] politics seem more attractive ... by appealing to citizens' existing tastes. Second, we can ... mak[e] our tastes more political through education and habituation. Third, we citizens can economize on existing political attention and energy, making them more efficacious by channeling them through more responsive institutions. ... [Fourth,] we can shift some of the resources from promoting political engagement among college students ... and instead target the attention and energy of specific demographic groups ... whose members are prone to political disengagement and mostly likely to be misrepresented when inactive."¹

In this commentary, I will discuss the conceptual thesis and the third approach of the prescriptive thesis.

The Conceptual Thesis

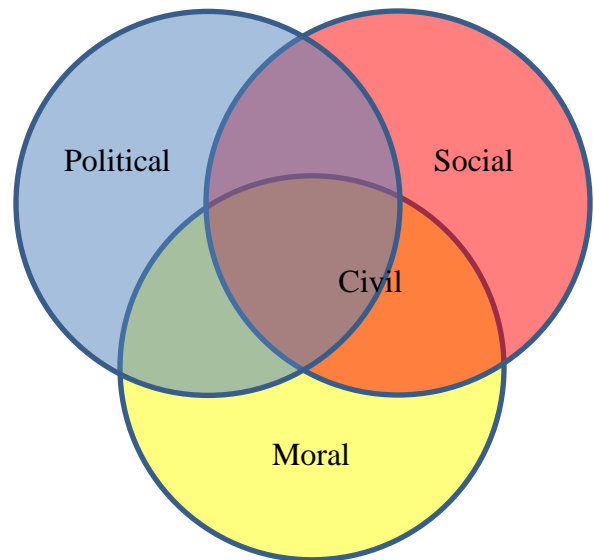
This is the heart and most distinctive contribution of Berger's book. With eloquence and an exceptional grasp of both academic and popular material on civic engagement he executes a

¹ Berger 2011, 147-8.

convincing rejection of the key term. He shows that, and explains how and why, ‘civic engagement’ has come to mean so many things to so many people that its continued use breeds harmful confusion even among researchers committed to precision and rigour. The term’s elasticity allows, for example, belonging to a bowling league and running for political office to be considered instances of the same phenomenon.

This creates problems for empirical studies of civic engagement, because the comparability of the results of any two given studies is questionable in light of the likelihood that the two studies use the term differently, or at least focus on different things that fall under the term’s far-reaching embrace. For example, consider the question: Does increased civic engagement improve economic efficiency? If one were to compare compulsory versus voluntary voting systems, one would likely answer negatively; but if one were to trace the effects of low versus high volunteer activity of the sort that creates social capital, one would likely answer affirmatively. For similar reasons, theorists arguing for normative claims concerning civic engagement are prone to talking past one another. We need, Berger rightly concludes, more precise concepts that take note of important distinctions between things that have been lumped together under the name of civic engagement.

To that end, he distinguishes between political, social, and moral engagement. According to my reading, Berger defines political engagement in terms of the instrument of the activity. Engagement is political if it seeks to make use of political institutions to achieve its goals. He defines social engagement in terms of the nature of the activity. Engagement is social if it is carried out in concert with others, whether in political parties, or civil society associations, or informal social groups, or circles of friends. He defines moral engagement in terms of the thought process behind the activity. Engagement, be it political or social or neither, is moral if it involves “attention to, and activity in support of, a particular moral code, moral reasoning, or moral principles.”² Each category overlaps partially with the other two. Engagement that is both social and moral is a special subcategory called ‘civil engagement’. However, political engagement can instead be individual (such as voting and consuming political advertising), and most social engagement is, according to Berger, apolitical. Both political engagement and social engagement can be moral, or not. Some moral engagement is neither political nor social, such as personal acts of impartial beneficence.³



Berger persuasively defends the usefulness of these distinctions. However, they do leave at least two issues unresolved.

First, the definitions of political engagement and social engagement are silent about the ends of such engagement. I suspect this is intentional, since Berger wants to point out that neither type of engagement is valuable *per se*. For example, the political engagement of the Ku Klux

² Ibid., 43.

³ Ibid., 46.

Klan and the social engagement of misogynistic social groups do not help to make democracy work better; indeed, such instances of engagement have negative value. In my view, there are at least three types of ends to be distinguished in connection with this. Some ends should simply not be pursued at all. I expect that Berger would identify these as being those that fall outside of moral engagement. I will refer to them as immoral ends. They are ends that cannot morally be pursued either socially or politically. Among morally permissible ends, we should distinguish between ends that can appropriately be pursued politically (most of which can also be pursued socially) and ones that ought to be pursued only socially. I will refer to the former as politically legitimate ends. Berger's theory does not seem to offer a way to distinguish between politically legitimate and other moral ends. It would be worthwhile for Berger to extend his theory to address this.

Rawls's political liberalism could be drawn upon for that task. He, like many liberal theorists, discusses the moral importance of the coercive and involuntary nature of political membership as compared to social membership in order to argue in favour of the need to distinguish politically legitimate ends from other moral ends. Using Rawls's conceptual framework, we can say that an end is politically legitimate if it can be defended by means of public reasons supported by political values, where political values are values that have been 'worked up' from the political conception of society (as a fair system of social cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal, and reasonable and rational, from one generation to the next) and that can be part of a political conception of justice that can become the site of an overlapping consensus. While political values so defined are clearly moral values, equally clearly there are other moral values that fail to qualify as political in Rawls's sense. This set of ideas allows us to identify moral yet politically illegitimate ends, which should, therefore, be pursued only socially. In the absence of this distinction, democratic political engagement is open to the risk of politically powerful groups advancing and/or imposing their private moral beliefs using state power. In order to identify good political engagement from bad, asking whether it counts also as moral engagement is not enough: we must also ask whether the political-moral engagement pursues a politically legitimate end.

Second, Berger is largely silent about the content of the moral domain. I believe this too is intentional, the aim being to accommodate the diversity of moral beliefs within and across countries. I agree that we should be careful not to understand morality, or even justice, too restrictively. However, being silent is not the only way to accommodate moral complexity. I suggest, instead, that we try to develop a conceptual framework that makes room for different types of moral considerations. The aim of such a framework would be to articulate a set of moral distinctions that aim to be principled and coherent, while still being sensitive—though not uncritical—to the diversity of moral reasoning. I believe further moral analysis of this sort is called for in order for citizens to be able to identify which ends should be pursued politically and which socially, and why. Whether or not my particular framework is attractive, the general point remains: more should be said about the moral domain in order to help distinguish between politically legitimate and other moral ends, so that we can better understand which ends should be pursued politically and which only socially.

The first distinction within moral reasoning that I think matters is between what I will call ethical reasoning and justice reasoning. A distinction of this sort can be found, for example, in Nagel's 2005 article on global justice, where he contrasts humanitarian obligations and

political obligations.⁴ Ethical (or humanitarian) reasoning stems from recognition of the intrinsic importance of each person’s well-being. Considering any person individually, it matters, morally and objectively, whether his or her life goes well or poorly; and this gives every person a reason to seize opportunities to help other people, especially when the recipient is in need and the benefactor can act without significant sacrifice. No special relationship need exist between them, except both being persons (or, better, what Tom Regan calls ‘subjects of a life’).⁵ Justice (or political) reasoning is more complicated. It is based on an understanding of the moral significance of different kinds of voluntary and involuntary relationships that are created as a result of the use (or abuse) of collective power to shape the (physical and social) world. My understanding of justice departs from some (perhaps many) others, in that it is not limited to perfect moral obligations; rather, I hold that the core feature of all demands of justice is that they must be explained by reference to morally significant power-born relationships. Rawls focuses on one such relationship, which he calls ‘the political relationship’ and which is created by the use of government power to shape the world by means of societies’ basic structures. He notes, however, that this is not the only such relationship, and consequently that what he calls political justice is not the only kind of justice. He speaks also of global justice and local justice. I don’t find Rawls’s tripartite division satisfying, and so I will an alternative division. I believe this will be useful for the task of identifying which moral ends are politically legitimate.

In my view, there are four power-born relationships, and so four kinds of justice: protective, economic, personal, and communal. They are defined by means of two distinctions. First, there is the question of the origin of the power-born relationship: is it natural or anthropogenic? A power-born relationship is natural if it is created by the use of collective power to meet a need or desire that is an inevitable part of the human condition. If, instead, the need or desire was created and shaped by human choices over time, the relationship is anthropogenic. Second, there is the question of the end of the relationship: does it aim to bring about freedom or flourishing? The notion of freedom I have in mind is a substantive one that is essentially equivalent to genuine opportunity. A use of collective power aims to achieve freedom if it seeks to achieve material and social conditions that have (perhaps in addition to intrinsic value) instrumental value for a wide variety of world views. A use of power may, instead, directly aim to achieve things of intrinsic value (i.e., constituents of the good life) and so promote flourishing. This leads to the following division.

		END	
		Freedom	Flourishing
ORIGIN	Natural	<i>Protective Justice</i>	<i>Personal Justice</i>
	Anthropogenic	<i>Economic Justice</i>	<i>Communal Justice</i>

The protective relationship aims at freedom and is natural in origin. People, aware of their vulnerability to human aggression, animal predation, and environmental dangers, use collective power to create systems of authority to coordinate joint security efforts, such as improvements to human habitats, more reliable food production methods, collective defensive action, and so on. The basic needs addressed by protective justice are natural because inevitable. The ends of the protective relationship are likewise basic and of all-purpose value.

⁴ Thomas Nagel, “The Problem of Global Justice,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33/2 (2005): 113-147.

⁵ Tom Regan, “Animal Rights, Human Wrongs,” *Environmental Ethics* 2/2 (1980): 99-120.

With security achieved by means of the protective relationship, human beings further develop their cooperation to satisfy acquired desires that are less vital. The economic relationship is similar to, but narrower than, what Rawls calls the political relationship. People seek to enhance their substantive freedom by using collective power to create systems of productive cooperation and to infuse them with authority so that such systems can operate in the absence of personal trust between participants. This relationship is anthropogenic, because it is concerned with material and social conditions that could be and sometimes are forsaken. Prosperity, unlike security, is an acquired desire, not an inevitable one.

Security needs, however, are not the only natural ones we have. There are also needs for friendship and intimacy. These are equally inevitable, and yet, unlike security needs, they are neither uniform (i.e., the same for everyone) nor primarily instrumental. Rather, intimacy and friendship are constituents of the good life important for flourishing. People use collective power, whether intentionally or not, to create and reshape social norms in ways that deeply affect patterns of and opportunities for friendship and intimacy. The personal relationship and personal justice are concerned with our collective responsibility for these social norms and their effects on individuals.

The good life is pursued not only in personal life, but also in larger social groups. People use collective, usually non-state, power to fashion and pursue ways of life together. Culture, understood in its broadest sense, is surely anthropogenic and equally clearly aims at flourishing. The communal relationship and communal justice are concerned with our collective responsibility for our cultural world and its effects.

Is this fourfold framework helpful for questions about political and social engagement?

The distinction between freedom and flourishing provides a conceptually clear way to identify politically legitimate moral ends of engagement. Ends that can be defended as freedom-enhancing are politically legitimate, since, according to this broad sense of freedom, such enhancement is valuable to all members of society regardless of their worldview, and so can be supported by public reasons and political values. Conversely, since conceptions of the good life are diverse and divergent, ends of engagement that are exclusively associated with flourishing ought to be pursued only socially without harnessing the coercive apparatus of the state.

The usefulness of the distinction between natural and anthropogenic relationships is less clear. The primary implication of this distinction concerns the question of how widely a given moral obligation extends. The security needs associated with protective justice and the social needs associated with personal justice are ones that all human beings have in common. Because of this, these two moral relationships are global in scope. Human beings anywhere are required by protective justice to pursue their own security needs in ways that are compatible with the achievement of security for human beings everywhere. This is practically quite significant because the state actions of one society in protection of its members regularly have profound effects on outsiders. Social norms affecting friendship and intimacy have less transnational impact, but the point applies equally there as well. Societies' pursuit of prosperity and culture, however, is less universal and much more the product of geographically limited choices. The extension of economic justice and communal justice depends on how a society has chosen to pursue economic and communal ends. It is possible, in theory, to pursue these in ways that do not impose adverse effects on other societies. In such a case, economic justice and communal justice would not extend across societies. However, in fact, economic activity, at least, is thoroughly transnational, and so the scope of economic justice is correspondingly wide. Still, there remain important differences between the depth of the economic relationship between co-

citizens and human beings generally, which results in differentiated economic claims and obligations.

Much more ought to be said on this, but it would take us too far away from the main issue. The relevance for social and political engagement is the following. Engagement is almost always directed towards an audience that one hopes to enlist or convince. When the engagement is also moral engagement, the audience may require an explanation of why the points raised apply to them. This is the question of the extension of moral claims. Having a clearer understanding of different kinds of moral considerations and the basis of their different extensions should be helpful in this regard.

The Third Approach

In the book's final chapter Berger suggests four approaches for helping to make democracy work better in light of his analysis of political, social and moral engagement. The third approach is described in a few different ways. Berger initially says that it is about "changing our institutions."⁶ He then elaborates, saying that "we citizens can economize on existing political attention and political energy, making them more efficacious by channeling them through more responsive institutions."⁷ In earlier chapters, he argues for the importance of responsive political institutions "that channel, process and respond to [political engagement]".⁸ Without responsive institutions, there is a risk that either "high political engagement and mobilization may promote destabilizing violence" or "elites may be able to capture government and twist legislative agendas to favor their own narrow interests".⁹ And so it initially seems that the third approach will be about how to change certain features of government institutions in order to make it politically necessary for politicians and other government officials to listen more to, and be more influenced by, politically engaged working- and middle-class citizens whose voices are currently too often drowned out by corporate lobbyists and campaign donors from America's super-rich. However, instead of focusing on how government institutions could be made more responsive by changing laws and practices to make politicians and politics less vulnerable to financial capital, Berger mainly discusses activist strategies to improve the ability of non-state political institutions to channel and process existing political attention and energy.

There are two problems with this. First, many of Berger's phrases suggest that the institutions that could better channel and process are the same (type of) institutions that should be more responsive.¹⁰ Although non-state political institutions should be perhaps more responsive, it is far more important for government institutions to be more responsive—or, more precisely, for government institutions to be changed to make it in the best interest of members of government to be more responsive. Berger's discussion of these issues could be improved by more clearly specifying which (types of) political institutions he has in mind in different cases of channeling, processing and responding to political engagement.

⁶ Berger 2011, 147.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For instance, on page 147, he advocates "channeling [existing political attention and energy] through more responsive institutions."

Second, the minimal discussion of campaign finance reform and rules and practice about lobbying makes Berger's defence of the third approach excessively one-sided. Consider the situation the approach is supposed to help fix: non-super-rich Americans have inadequate political influence in American politics, which means that the areas of political decision-making that ought to be democratic are not sufficiently so, and the public perception of this poses a risk of leading people to politically disengage, especially the poor and members of other marginalised groups. Ordinary Americans rightly fear that they cannot compete with the political influence of the financial capital of the super-rich (and the corporations the super-rich control). It is a competition for politicians' ears between the social capital of the many and the financial capital of the few.

Berger focuses almost exclusively on improving the social capital of the many. What he says in that respect is very good. I agree that it is important to create and strengthen institutional linkages between existing local community organisations (whether political or non-political) and national organizing associations that can channel and process the political attention and energy of the many working- and middle-class members of the local organisations to exert political pressure for change on issues of shared concern. This increases the ability of the many to compete with the few in two ways: (i) the evidence of how many citizens are committed to a particular issue may be enough to convince politicians that responding to expressed preferences in this instance will likely translate into more votes than the alternative (namely, taking the other side in return for money for political advertising); and (ii) the many can pool their financial capital at the national level to pay for their own lobbyists and advertising to try to compete directly with the financial capital of the super-rich.

The worry is that as the gap between the super-rich and the rest of America continues to widen, (i) may be less often a good bet and (ii) may be increasingly futile. To disarm that worry Berger could show that it is empirically mistaken, if it is, or he could defend ways to narrow the gap, or he could defend ways to reduce (or even remove) the ability of Americans to buy political influence. Increasing the social capital of the many will work only if there really is a chance of being stronger than the financial capital of the few. If this is not the case now, discussion of the issue should include arguments about how it could be made so. Doing that would require tackling question like: Why shouldn't elections be financed completely with public funds? What is the purpose and value of private political funding? What is the purpose and value of lobbyists? Is it possible to fulfill the purposes and preserve the value of private political funding and lobbyists in way that, unlike that current system, doesn't trample on equality of opportunity in politics (or what Rawls calls the fair value of political liberties)? If it is not possible to do so, should the value of equality of opportunity in politics win out? If it shouldn't win out, what is more important?

Recap

In a spirit of sympathetic critique, I have suggested ways to further develop Berger's conceptual distinctions—by considering the significance of the difference between ethical reasoning and justice reasoning, as well as my fourfold distinction between types of justice—in order to help identify which moral ends are suitable objects of political engagement and which other moral ends ought to be pursued only through social engagement. I have also suggested that more emphasis be given to the government side of the task of making political engagement more

efficacious. In addition to Berger's worthwhile recommendations for increasing the social capital of the many, we should also be concerned to determine how best to limit, or, better, remove, the now massive political influence of the financial capital of America's wealthiest. Ben Berger's *Attention Deficit Democracy* is an empirically rich and conceptually insightful contribution to the scholarly and public debate about civic engagement. His distinction between political, social and moral engagement should be taken up by all involved, and his prescriptive recommendations are no less deserving of our attention and energy.