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CHAPTER

42 Moral Character, Liberal States, and Civic Education

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Abstract

Ensuring a functioning and stable liberal society requires a variety of behaviours and attitudes from individual citizens, from paying taxes to tolerating diversity. Political philosophers largely accept that these cannot be achieved through the arrangement of institutions alone, and so propose the cultivation of civic virtues. Meanwhile, in moral philosophy, much has been written about the challenging implications of psychology for theories of moral virtue. This chapter examines what political philosophers might draw from the findings of psychology. I begin by presenting the challenge from psychology to the traditional model of civic education. However, this chapter's focus is on what political philosophers have to gain from psychological research: namely, a set of empirically superior alternatives to civic education as usual. I will outline three such alternatives—local traits, situational factors, and social norms—sketching their relative merits and the significant changes to civic education as usual that they would require.

Keywords: [civic education](#), [civic virtue](#), [situationism](#), [social norms](#), [local traits](#), [nudges](#), [situationist challenge](#)

Subject: [Moral Philosophy](#), [Philosophy](#)

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42.1 Introduction

ENSURING a functioning and stable liberal society requires a variety of behaviours and attitudes from individual citizens. For instance, the majority of citizens must for the most part pay their taxes, obey the law, participate in their society's political processes, and be tolerant of diversity.¹ Still more would be required in order for a society to attain the kinds of egalitarian goals that political philosophers often propose. To illustrate, citizens might have to vote for dramatic increases in taxation and refrain from using tax havens; choose occupations in accordance with what most benefits the least well-off; and cease attempts to advantage their own children over others, say, through their choice of school.

Political philosophers largely accept that behaviours like these cannot be achieved by institutional means alone—in other words, simply through the correct arrangement of a society's major social and political

institutions (e.g. Galston 1991; Kymlicka and Norman 1994; Rawls 1971; 1997: 788). To illustrate, a state needs not only a well-organized tax system but also a sufficient number of its citizens to be willing to pay taxes, since otherwise enforcing payment would be too costly for the system to function.² A liberal democracy will not function well, if it functioned at all, if the majority of citizens don't bother to vote or take seriously the task of considering who to vote for, or if they fail to participate in the broader democratic culture (Callan 1997: 1–3). So too, states can make some intolerant behaviour illegal, but for a society of people with diverse conceptions of the good to rub along, we need citizens to be tolerant in ways that are too widely dispersed across a life and too fine-grained for laws to cover everything.

To fill this gap between what institutions can do and what is needed, political philosophers generally appeal to citizens' character. A state should cultivate a cluster of liberal or civic virtues in citizens. In particular, the liberal state should focus on children, and use state education to teach children to internalize liberal commitments and to develop a set of virtues such as tolerance, open-mindedness, and law-abidingness (e.g. Downing and Thigpen 1993: 1046; Kymlicka and Norman 1994; Callan 1997; Galston 1991; Rawls 1971: esp. 467–79; 1997). This training will produce stable patterns of behaviour later on: it will 'create' the right kinds of liberal citizens (Callan 1997).

Political philosophers writing about civic education often pay little attention to the findings of psychology. Yet meanwhile in moral philosophy, much has been written about the implications of findings of psychology for theories of moral character and virtue (e.g. Doris 1998 2002; Harman 2000; Miller 2013; Snow 2006). This chapter examines what liberal political philosophers might draw from that parallel literature and from the findings of psychology more generally when considering how to secure patterns of behaviour from the majority of citizens required for a stable, functioning, or flourishing liberal state.³ I begin by presenting the challenge from the findings of psychology to the traditional model of civic education, with its emphasis on cultivating virtues like tolerance in children, as well as considering why some standard defences against the challenge from psychology offered by virtue ethicists can't save the political philosopher. However, the focus of this chapter is on what political philosophers have to gain from psychological research—namely, a set of empirically superior alternatives to civic education as usual. I will outline three such alternatives: of local traits, situational factors, and social norms.

In addition, the arguments of this chapter present a methodological challenge to those political philosophers who write on civic education, yet are happy to overlook the details of the empirical findings. The nature of the task at hand—getting the majority of citizens to behave reliably in certain ways—dictates that one be interested in what people are actually like. As a result, one's proposed ways to make citizens behave ought not to contradict the general trend of scientific research regarding what people are like; better still, these ways ought to be supported by what we know about how we are able to shape people's behaviour. But liberals face a further constraint in choosing a route by which to make citizens behave—namely, that such strategies ought to cohere with liberal values. To illustrate, brainwashing citizens would be rejected even were it an empirically well-supported approach to securing stable patterns of behaviour. As a consequence, I demonstrate in what follows that not only the general trend of the psychological research but also its details are crucial within discussions of civic education.

42.2 A situationist challenge to the traditional approach

I start with the challenge to the traditional approach to civic education. This approach appeals to civic virtues, which are taken to be stable dispositions to behave in particular ways, out of particular motivations, and across different kinds of situations. So, the tolerant citizen is disposed to act in tolerant ways towards those with whom she disagrees, both when engaging in political debate and when encountering them in the public sphere. Further, she is disposed to act tolerantly because she believes tolerance is an important liberal value. Citizens will acquire these stable positions through their education as children, and from living within a society that has the right laws and institutions (on the latter, see e.g. Cohen 2001).

Educating children likely appeals to liberals not only given the common view that children are particularly susceptible to interventions in their character formation, but also because seeking to mould children looks less illiberal than similar interventions in adults. Children are not yet at the age of reason, or at a point where we ought to respect their conceptions of the good. Instead, often it is taken to be permissible to influence children through state education, insofar as that does not interfere with appropriate parental discretion over how to raise that child.⁴ In addition, attempting to cultivate virtue produces an attractive vision of civic education. Take Eamonn Callan's description of a component of cultivating the virtue of open-mindedness: 'ensuring that all children read books that are intellectually provocative and have an opportunity to think aloud about what they read with well-educated teachers' (2015: 499).

However, with this description of civic virtue in view, the relevance of the challenge to virtues from psychology within moral philosophy should be evident.⁵ The findings of personality and social psychology suggest that the kinds of trait that people possess—especially given the way in which these traits interact with situational factors—are unlikely to fill the role that the liberal virtues are supposed to—namely, ensuring a stable pattern of behaviour from citizens across different situations that supports liberal institutions (McTernan 2014). There is little evidence to be found that people possess the kind of stable character traits leading to robust cross-situational consistency that virtue ethicists and political philosophers have supposed they do (e.g. Doris 1998; 2002; Harman 2000; Miller 2009). Instead, experiments suggest that very minor variations in the situation significantly affect our behaviour.⁶ For instance, whether subjects help someone apparently having a heart attack depends on whether they are in a hurry, and not on their moral commitments (Darley and Batson 1973). Or, whether subjects help someone pick up papers varies with whether they have just found a dime in a phone booth (Isen and Levin 1972). The most troubling aspect of social psychology's findings is just how minor are the features of situations that can make a difference, such as being in a hurry, not finding a dime, background noise (Matthews and Canon 1975), or being in a dirty environment (Stapel and Lindenberg 2011). A person working towards virtue may avoid situations in which they are likely to fail. Yet how could they avoid such pervasive, minor features of situations?

Further, the findings of psychology create, if anything, an even more pressing challenge for political philosophers than they do for moral philosophers. First, despite being defenders of civic virtue, Sigal Ben-Porath and Gideon Dishon admit that, while moral virtues are often practised in limited contexts where we have some control, in contrast: 'civic participation can be seen as a real life equivalent of the experimental literature [...] only this time it is political actors and institutions, instead of social psychologists, which orchestrate the situational cues' (2015: 25). Second, a political philosopher's interest is squarely in the majority. If cultivating virtues is the way in which we try to secure a stable, functioning society, the hope that some people can manage to be virtuous sometimes, but will often fail in ways we do not anticipate, will not suffice. As such, while the situationist attack has not gone unchallenged in moral philosophy (I consider some of these challenges below), many of the suggested solutions for a virtue ethicist will not work for political philosophers. What a political philosopher wants is not merely an ideal to aim for, but a way to secure stable patterns of behaviour from the majority. So, too, the political philosopher, perhaps unlike the

ethicist, cannot claim to have never thought that most could be virtuous; for a liberal society the majority of citizens must be reliably tolerant, say, across most situations, not only a few (see also McTernan 2014: 88).

Some have sought to defend liberal virtues in particular from this instantiation of the situationist challenge with variants of the line just described, which seeks to diminish the degree of consistency required of a virtue (e.g. Callan 2015; Ben-Porath and Dishon 2015). For example, it seems that a person could be civic-minded and yet not always vote (e.g. Ben-Porath and Dishon 2015: 29). On a similar line, one might insist that the behaviours and attitudes required are not so demanding in the civic case as in the moral case, and so more likely to be consistently attainable by citizens (e.g. Callan 2015). Yet for a society to function well, let alone flourish, civic behaviours must be largely consistent, say, of being tolerant or law-abiding. That isn't to say that one needs citizens to always vote or be tolerant or pay tax, but rather that the vast majority must perform these behaviours most of the time, and across settings that are noisy or quiet, smelly or not, and so forth. So, too, recall that the situationist experiments suggest that it is minor situational cues that shape behaviour—not only significant tests of virtue. Thus, political philosophers require consistency enough for the situationist challenge to bite.

p. 867 As a last point on the situationist challenge, I offer a caveat. The recent replication crisis in social psychology might give some hope to proponents of civic or liberal virtue: it turned out that rerunning some experiments did not always return the expected results (Open Science Collaboration 2012; 2015; for one response, see Maxwell, Lau, and Howard 2015). However, one should not draw too much hope from this crisis: a failure of some studies to replicate does not show that global traits exist after all, nor that situational factors lack profound influence on our behaviour. Rather, the crisis casts doubt on how reliable some of the experiments were. Even if that weakens the evidence base for situationism somewhat, one does not need anything as strong as situationism as a fully explanatory theory about human action for the challenge to traditional civic education to hold: still, studies demonstrate that often our behaviour depends on situational features; and, further, the replication crisis does nothing to support the idea that the civic behaviours of interest to political philosophers are immune to such situational influence.⁷ So, for the rest of this chapter, I will suppose that the above challenge to global, cross-situationally consistent character traits holds. I ask: how then could political philosophers secure the desired patterns of behaviour from citizens required for a stable, functioning or flourishing liberal state?⁸

42.3 Virtue revised: local traits and composite virtues

The first response to the situationist challenge is simply to revise the model of character traits. Rather than regarding the relevant traits as cross-situationally consistent or global, like honesty, one can see the traits in question as more specific, say, akin to 'honest-in-exam-settings' (e.g. Doris 2002). This is the strategy that Callan urges, were one to make any concessions in the face of the situationist challenge in political philosophy. Callan argues that ensuring the stability of liberal states makes only 'light and predictable' demands on citizens, easily met by possessing composites of local traits (2015: 496; see also Ben-Porath and Dishon 2015: 27–9). Further, Callan is hopeful that the local traits will look somewhat familiar. We could, for example, work up from compassion to siblings, to compassion to fellow pupils, and out to the broader virtue of compassion, as a 'composite' virtue made up out of these local traits (2015: 495). Likewise, one supposes, for the more traditional liberal virtues.

However, this picture is less intuitive when one considers the features of situations that appear to make a difference. To say that we need to build up more general virtues out of habits restricted to particular relationships sounds plausible. But to hold that virtue-building goes via local traits like being compassionate, say, when something smells nice, there are no distracting noises, and there are no passive bystanders, sounds less so (for psychology experiments on the relevance of such factors to behaviour, see,

on smell, Baron 1997; on noise, Matthews and Canon 1975; Cohen and Spacapan 1984; on bystanders, Latane and Darley 1968; Fischer et al. 2011). More pressingly, the very attractiveness of the notion of 'composite' virtues seems to rest on our assuming that it gets easier as we progress in building up these virtues from local traits: that each habit formation will contribute to the next. That assumption looks less plausible if traits are local to situations like clean rooms and a nice smell: the nature of what makes a difference makes it harder to see how we are supposed to expand our traits from one setting to the next. Being compassionate towards one particular person might help us learn to be compassionate to others, but how would learning to be tolerant when things smell nice help with learning how to be tolerant in public debates?

p. 868 The fact that this 'local traits' form of trait acquisition sounds unfamiliar or strange, though, does not settle the question of whether appealing to such local traits could provide an empirically sound account—although it does suggest that character formation might not happen in the way that is commonly supposed. However, Christian Miller offers more pressing problems for a proponent of local traits. First, he observes that from the existing studies we lack evidence that people do in fact possess local traits, although it is possible that they might (Miller 2009: 165). Second, virtues are supposed to motivate people to act for the right reasons. Yet Miller argues that mood effect studies suggest not only that many fail to act as a compassionate person would, or even as the locally compassionate person would, but that even when they do act compassionately, we have reason to be sceptical about their motives: the positive affect from smelling something nice, or finding a dime, might be what motivated the compassionate behaviour (2009: 164). Likewise, liberal virtues were supposed to motivate us to act from the right reasons—namely, our liberal values—but situational factors might be what do the motivational work.

The above suggests that the political philosopher who adopts local traits as their route to make citizens behave faces a dilemma. Either local traits are sensitive to fairly broad situation types, such as being compassionate towards one's siblings, or local traits are relative to minor situational factors, such as being compassionate when there are pleasant smells, you are not in a hurry, and the lighting is right. In the first case, it is unclear how local traits help to produce stable patterns of behaviour, even in restricted contexts. And again, there is little evidence that people actually possess such traits. Further, it is unclear what response endorsing such local traits would offer to the fact that minor situational factors influence behaviour, undermining consistency. Yet in the second case, it is unclear that there is any trait which does the motivating of the behaviour, rather than the situational features.

This argument is insufficient to conclude that cultivating composite virtues is impossible. But it is sufficient to show that more work would need to be done by a proponent of local traits as the way to reform or adapt the traditional picture of civic education. In particular, one would need to determine to which features of situations the local traits are relative. Further, insofar as appealing to local traits is supposed to provide the closest account to a traditional approach of cultivating global virtues, one would need to examine why exactly we should be hopeful that constellations of such traits will secure stable patterns of behaviour from the majority in the ways liberals desire, where the behaviour is motivated by the trait. Finally, we should not be misled into thinking that it is obvious and so needs no evidence that cultivating one local trait helps with the cultivation of the next, making composite virtues fairly easy to attain.

42.4 Embracing situationism: the fine-grained details of institutions

p. 869 Civic virtue was intended to secure from citizens what arranging the major social and political institutions alone could not. Yet liberals often hope that much can be done through such institutions, since the more that the institutions do, the greater the extent to which citizens can pursue their own projects and goals assured that the structure of their society is such that justice is done regardless (Rawls 1971; Julius 2003). Hence, one response to the situationist challenge might be to embrace its implications about the importance of minor details of situations as simply one more facet of institutional design. Rather than focusing only on the overall structure of a society, one would also address the various minor details that affect the desired patterns of behaviour. Maybe our polling stations would be designed to ensure citizens feel cooperative and compassionate, rather than angry—painted blue-green, or with the smell of baked goods—to encourage citizens to vote for more egalitarian policies (on colour and emotion, see Valdez and Mehrabian 1994; on baked goods, see Baron 1997). Perhaps a state would examine what situational factors boost tolerance, ensuring that arenas of where citizens debate with one another be designed accordingly. For instance, to avoid stereotyping, a state might ensure that such arenas were clean rather than dirty (Stapel and Lindenberg 2011). While the first option sought to rescue traits, this option would abandon traits in favour of a greater emphasis on people's situations.

Recently, this approach of embracing the difference made by minor features of situations has appeared in political philosophy under the guise of 'nudging'. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008) present 'nudges' as minor changes to the structure of people's choices that prompt them to choose the option deemed more desirable, but without removing or blocking any of their options. As examples, they suggest that opt-out systems increase the number of people who contribute to pensions as compared to systems where people have to opt in (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein 2008), and that how we order food in a canteen affects what people choose to eat (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein 2003: 175; 2008: 11).

Thaler and Sunstein attempt to sell nudging to liberals on the grounds that it preserves a person's option set, so cannot count as a form of coercion (e.g. 2003; 2008). Yet it has been criticized by liberals, often for the ways that it differs from the more usual coarse-grained or large-scale institutional design. One crucial issue is whether nudges can meet a publicity condition, such that citizens can satisfactorily come to know what the state is doing and why (e.g. Hausman and Welch 2010: sect. 3; Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Large-scale institutional design tends to be fairly apparent to citizens, or easily made public. But with nudges, it may be less apparent how the state is influencing us, although some publicity may be possible; for instance, signs like 'This canteen has been arranged to promote healthy eating'. Alternatively, some object that nudging sometimes manipulates citizens (e.g. Wilkinson 2013) or argue that it undermines citizens' control over their choices through bypassing their rational decision-making capacities (e.g. Hausman and Welch 2010). Rather than choosing to be tolerant, say, citizens would be 'nudged' into doing so by the careful arrangement of their environment. Some think that nudging is thus incompatible with the respect that governments ought to show their citizens, given that citizens have the capacity to make rational decisions (e.g. Hausman and Welch, 2010).

p. 870 The success of the criticisms above would be determined by a mix of, first, conceptual analysis—for instance, of what counts as wrongful manipulation or adequate publicity—and second, a detailed understanding of psychological findings about the precise mechanisms by which nudging succeeds when it does—for example, how it involves our rational decision making capacities.⁹ However, rather than getting into such debates, I return to the psychological findings that underpin nudging in the first place. To adopt nudges is to take the insight of situationism to be, primarily, that a range of situational factors make a difference to behaviour and we could take advantage of these, from dimes, to room colour, to pleasant smells, to the ordering of choices. Then the debate is over whether the government ought to deploy these ways of shaping our behaviour. But I have reservations on the grounds that this way of framing the dispute

over nudges may simultaneously under- and overestimate what psychological research is available for us to use.

The worry about overestimating stems from the recent replication crisis within social psychology, discussed in §4.2.2 (e.g. Open Science Collaboration 2012; 2015). The failure to replicate some experiments might provoke doubt over the strength of the very findings that support situationism: perhaps situational features do not shape behaviour in the ways that have been supposed. However, on a more generous reading of the implications of this research for the success of a situationist approach, what the failure to replicate results reveals is that what does the work in shaping behaviour is even more fine-grained than initially thought, and/or that we are not yet able to track all the situational factors that make a difference in a particular setting.¹⁰ Yet, if we can't successfully track such factors, then we can't be sure of our ability to use nudges to secure stable patterns of behaviour.

On underestimating the consequences of findings about how situations shape choices, Susan Hurley (2011) argues that psychological research into the impact of environment on behaviour might alter the very conception of a liberal state's relation to its citizens. That alteration is not because a state could use dimes, smells, or choice ordering to nudge our behaviour in the desired directions. Rather, if our decision-making capacities are so profoundly shaped by how options are presented, along with other quirks in our rational capacities, then the state is unavoidably shaping the entire 'ecology' of our decisions and capacities for rationality even if it does not intend to do so. As a consequence, Hurley argues, traditional liberalism needs to revise its normative ideals around when to hold citizens responsible and around its role in individual's choices. In short, then, to embrace situational factors as the solution to fill the gaps in what is required of citizens threatens to be both insufficiently effective—since we don't know enough about what factors make a difference—and insufficiently revisionist when it comes to what taking situationism seriously requires of political philosophers conceptualising the state's role.

42.5 Social norms: collective, not individual

The third option turns from disputes over character as compared to situations to an alternative route by which to secure stable patterns of behaviour: namely, social norms. Social norms have wide-ranging support for their effectiveness in shaping behaviour (for examples, see Hechter and Opp 2001). Precisely how to define social norms is the subject of ↪ some disagreement, likely due to the varying disciplines that have taken them to be an object of study. But, roughly, social norms are expectations or standards of behaviour held by a social group, to which members hold each other accountable and may sanction those who fall short, and where members assume that others generally follow the norm.¹¹ Norms vary, and they can be changed (for instance, on 'norm entrepreneurs' see Sunstein 1996).

Further, social norms are effective in arenas that matter for political philosophers. They support the success of a taxation system (e.g. Lederman 2003). They support or obstruct the rule of law (on the relation of the law to norms, see R. Posner 1997). Changing social norms can create pressure to change laws and institutions in more liberal and/or more egalitarian directions—and a change in social norms is often required for institutions and laws to succeed in their aims. To illustrate, consider the progress in civil rights and social equality in the last hundred years or so, including diminishing racial segregation; the increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships; and women's growing economic and social independence. These forms of progress have involved changes in both social norms and laws, in concert with each other (Brennan et al. 2013: sect. 5.6; for an example of barriers to same-sex adoption, see Lin 1999).

Thus far, social norms seem a promising candidate. Appealing to virtues relies on behaviour producing traits of a kind that people may not possess given the situationist challenge. In contrast, we know that social norms profoundly shape our behaviour. Further, the liberal virtues, once cultivated, are supposed to

motivate an individual to act in accordance with, and as a result of, that virtue. Then, supposing that people possess this sort of trait, the task left undone would be to determine the various minor and subtle situational factors that might undermine a virtue's effectiveness in producing behavioural consistency, and how to handle these: beyond claims that virtues will be sensitive to situations, we need to know which situations. By contrast, many of the key situational factors that make a difference in the effectiveness of social norms are known. For instance, shaping what people perceive to be the social norm for their group, or reminders of a norm, can affect behaviour (see also McTernan 2014: 98). Consider experiments where people were informed that their energy use was higher than that of their neighbours, and most lowered it, or where hotels put signs noting that most guests reuse their towels, encouraging more people to do so too (Schultz et al. 2008).

p. 872 But some might worry that social norms are not an adequate replacement for liberal or civic virtues. Another key difference from virtues is that there are a variety of potential motivations for following a norm, from the threat of social shaming or ostracism (e.g. R. Posner 1997: 365–6), to accepting the norm as authoritative, or expecting that others in one's group will follow that norm (Bicchieri 2005). In the face of that variety, some political philosophers might object to adopting social norms. What was desired was a way to ensure that citizens act directly for the right reasons. By contrast, some might follow a social norm simply because of social pressure. Further, doing things for the right reasons might seem a more effective motivation than relying on the cluster of motivations for following a social norm. Callan (2015) suggests, for instance, that social norms will be far less stable if people follow them for non-moral reasons, such as fearing what others will think.

However, consider the Good Samaritan experiment (Darley and Batson 1973). Many who held deep-rooted moral convictions grounded in religious belief about the importance of helping, and who were on their way to give a talk on that very subject matter, stepped over a man apparently having a heart attack if they were in a hurry. Compare this to experiments on the bystander effect, such as where subjects were unknowingly surrounded by confederates and then the room filled with smoke. When the confederates did not move, often the subject did not move either (Latane and Darley 1968). Non-moral reasons, such as social pressure, the desire to conform, and the like, are very powerful. Given that social norms tend to combine various types of reasons to motivate, they seem more, rather than less, likely to produce the right kinds of behaviour.

Yet one might further object: still, wouldn't it be better if citizens did act out of the right reasons? At first glance, inculcating social norms in a society may not seem as satisfying as ensuring that all citizens are virtuous, acting out of the right reasons and in the right ways. An easy response is that the fully virtuous society doesn't seem concordant with facts about human psychology. But there may be another way to defend inculcating social norms as an attractive basis for a liberal egalitarian society. We follow the norms that our groups deem authoritative, and these norms can come to form a part of our identity and sense of belonging (see e.g. Lessig, 1996). To internalize the liberal and egalitarian norms—and to know that others who are like us do the same—could be a promising way to shape a liberal society, if not one focused on individual dispositions but rather on a collective ethos. Take Cristina Bicchieri's evocative description of the role of norms as 'the language a society speaks, the embodiment of its values and collective desires [...] the common practices that hold human groups together' (2005: ix).

42.6 Reforming civic education

The aim of this chapter has not been to convince the reader that one of three routes to securing patterns of behaviour from citizens laid out above is always the best. Most likely, different methods would best fit different tasks. To illustrate, to prompt people to drive more responsibly, nudges may be the way forward, but to undermine gender inequality, one might tackle social norms around division of labour in the home. But whichever route one takes, the traditional picture of civic education has to change. In the face of the situationist challenge, cultivating global civic or liberal virtues in children should no longer be regarded as the obvious way to ensure citizens behave in the ways required for functioning or flourishing liberal states. Further, adopting any of the routes above would differ from civic education for such virtues.

p. 873 In the case of situationist nudges, the difference is obvious: we would shape option sets rather than educate children. The classic examples of nudges have little to do with education, including instances like pension schemes, canteens, and organ donation (Thaler and Sunstein 2008).¹² But even the route apparently closest to cultivating virtues—turning to ↪ local traits—promises to look unlike the existing picture of civic education, given the minor features of situations to which these traits seem to be local. To illustrate, consider the earlier suggestion from Callan (2015) that reading provocative books as a child helps to cultivate open-mindedness. That form of education might not be a route to anything other than open-mindedness about what books to read.

More promisingly, Ben-Porath and Dishon suggest that schools are a public, civic institution. As such, children's experiences there would shape their behaviour in other public forums later on. What we need to do, then, is ensure that we 'nurture a *constancy of situations conducive to citizenship*' (Ben-Porath and Dishon 2015: 32, original emphasis). Students could, for instance, be offered plenty of opportunities for participation in democratic systems. However, one might still doubt that what is learnt in a school context will transfer easily outside it. There are a great many highly specific features of life in a school that might threaten any easy claims to similarity of context—not least the persistent hierarchy in child–adult relations and the relatively low stakes in a school as compared to voting on government policy.

When it comes to cultivating social norms, the task is to shift the norms that a group of people, or society as a whole, take to be authoritative. That happens across a life. Thus, in contrast to traditional civic education, it is unclear that childhood, let alone the formal education of children, is the most promising or obvious place to focus. First, at the very least social norm change continues into adulthood. For instance, consider the research into changing social norms amongst students starting university, who tend to change peer groups and whose norms often shift accordingly (for an example of alcohol consumption, see Borsari and Carey 2001). Teaching children to follow norms, then, might not suffice.¹³

Further, consider the mechanisms by which social norms change, such as the emergence of social norms from social conventions or practices, where we start to take as normative what we tend to do; from 'bandwagon or cascade processes' where those with low thresholds in adopting norms start to change, with those with higher thresholds following in turn; from top-down imposition of norms by groups with high standing; or from old norms being perceived as no longer being followed (see, for a discussion, Brennan et al. 2013: ch. 5; for another, Bicchieri 2017). To address change in social norms, then, our interest is in the social group in question as a whole and how such processes take place within it. When cultivating liberal or egalitarian norms, that social group is far wider than children alone. So, too, deploying such mechanisms would look very different from civic virtue as normal.

To give a more concrete example, take the role of the media, given its ability to alter what people perceive to be the relevant social practice or what is taken to be authoritative by one's group. What is perceived to be the social norm influences what people take to be the norm that should govern their behaviour. To illustrate the effectiveness of this strategy, consider the use of media campaigns to change norms related to people's

health behaviours or the acceptability of antisocial behaviours like drink-driving (e.g. Wakefield et al. 2010). Alternatively, consider the use of sitcoms and other forms of media to change perceived social norms and social attitudes; for instance, regarding what counts as a ‘normal’ family size (e.g. La Ferrara, Chong, and Duryea, 2012), or through its portrayals of same-sex couples (e.g. Bonds-Raacke et al. 2007; Calzo and Ward 2009).

p. 874 Some might object that virtue education too must continue across a life (e.g. Callan 2015). The wrong kind of media and culture might corrupt virtues that have been cultivated in children, just as they can corrupt social norms. After all, it is a familiar idea in virtue ethics that success in virtue cultivation depends, in part, on what one’s society is like. But the claim here is not that a broader culture can support or corrupt the emergence of social norms in individuals, but rather that if you start with social norms then there is little reason to think that schooling or parents are of special importance. Virtues are individual traits, and social norms are not, and what we focus on when seeking to create the right patterns of behaviour amongst citizens should shift accordingly.

This concluding section has only offered a sketch of how we might rethink civic education. In the light of a situationist challenge, there is a great deal of work left to do to provide any adequate account of how to ensure that citizens behave in the ways required for functioning—let alone flourishing—liberal or egalitarian states. Some might think that what is required is to rescue something resembling the original picture of civic education, perhaps by defending global traits or filling out the account of local virtues. Others might turn to shaping situational factors or inculcating social norms to guide citizens’ behaviours. But, whichever option one chooses, I hope that this chapter has demonstrated that the details of the findings of psychology deserve far greater attention from political philosophers concerned with civic education than they have hitherto received.

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Notes

- 1 For similar lists, see e.g. Callan (1997); Galston (1991).
- 2 On the relation between norms and enforcement, see Lederman (2003); for a wider discussion of tax compliance, see E. Posner (2000).
- 3 For existing discussions of that parallel, see McTernan (2014); Callan (2015); Ben-Porath and Dishon (2015).
- 4 For a discussion of children as an exception within liberalism of general rights to control one's own life, and the parent's role, see Brighouse and Swift (2006).
- 5 For a fuller account of the below, see McTernan (2014); this chapter offers only a brief summary. For objections, see Callan (2015); Ben-Porath and Dishon (2015).
- 6 This is not to deny the existence of any individual differences (see McTernan 2014: sect. II). So, too, the challenge is consistent with interactionism as well as situationism (again see McTernan 2014).
- 7 With thanks to Manuel Vargas for pressing this point.
- 8 I will not address the extent to which the options below are akin to the traditional liberal virtues. If the liberal responds to the options given, 'That is what I meant by virtue all along', the overall point still stands: we ought to pay close attention to the details of psychological research. At the least, these findings provide clarity as to what is, or ought to be, meant by terms like 'virtue'.
- 9 For a discussion of the idea that there could be two types of nudge, with differing involvement of our rational capacities, see Niker (2018).
- 10 In support of this reading, those embarking on rerunning experiments note that, if it turns out studies don't replicate, then, by seeing how they differ from the original, one can 'advance the theoretical understanding of previously unconsidered conditions necessary to obtain an effect' (Open Science Collaboration 2012: 658).
- 11 This definition closely follows Elizabeth Anderson (2000: 170). See also, for similar definitions: Brennan et al. 2013; or Cass Sunstein, who describes norms as 'social attitudes of approval and disapproval, specifying what ought to be done and what ought not to be done' (1996: 914). For definitions with a different emphasis, see Cristina Bicchieri, who offers a definition of social norms in terms of expectations and preferences (e.g. 2005: ch. 1); or Richard Posner's definition as

unofficial rules that are ‘regularly complied with’ (1997: 365). For a defence of the importance of the social meanings around particular norms, rather than focusing on action alone, see Lessig (1996).

- 12 However, for an account of the work that a subset of nudges might be able to do in educating adults’ discernment, see Niker (2018).
- 13 Of course, there could also be normative objections to inculcating norms in children—but just as one might have objections to inculcating virtues.