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For-Profit Business as Civic Virtue

Jason Brennan

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Abstract According to the commonsense view of civic virtue, the places to exercise civic virtue are largely restricted to politics. In this article, I argue for a more expansive view of civic virtue, and argue that one can exercise civic virtue equally well through working for or running a for-profit business. I argue that this conclusion follows from four relatively uncontroversial premises: (1) the consensus definition of "civic virtue", (2) the standard, most popular theory of virtuous activity, (3) a conception of the common good widely shared by liberal political philosophers, and (4) the mainstream economic theory of for-profit business.

Keywords Civic virtue · Civic republicanism · Extrapolitical conception of civic virtue · For-profit business

Introduction

Most philosophers and laypeople are not civic republicans, yet they accept the republican conception of civic virtue.[1] The republican conception of civic virtue holds that the places to exercise civic virtue are largely restricted to politics and activities on the periphery of politics, including such activities as voting, running for office, campaigning for candidates, engaging in political deliberation, writing letters to senators and editors, volunteering, community organizing, serving in the military, and working at "public service" jobs.[2]

J. Brennan (✉)
Brown University, Box 2005, Providence, RI 02912, USA
e-mail: jason_brennan@brown.edu

In this article, I argue for a more expansive conception of civic virtue. I argue that citizens can exercise civic virtue not only through political activities, but equally well by working for or running for-profit businesses. I will not exactly try to refute the republican conception of civic virtue (Brennan 2011, pp. 43–67 and Brennan and Lomasky 2006 have already argued against it elsewhere). I will instead argue that if one accepts certain premises common to the liberal philosophical tradition, then one should also accept that stereotypically private activities, including running and working for for-profit business, can be just as good ways to exercise civic virtue as stereotypically political activities. Moreover, I will not make this argument by arguing for a deflated conception of civic virtue, or by trying to lower the standards for what counts as civic virtue.

On my view, Larry Page and Sergey Brin could exercise civic virtue by creating and running Google. Randall Smith (of Mesa Boogie) could exercise civic virtue by continuing to make good amplifiers. John Mackey (of Whole Foods) can exercise civic virtue by selling good food. Their employees can exercise civic virtue by showing up for

[1] "Civic republicanism", as used here, refers to a body of related political theories that hold that heavy political participation and political virtue are required from citizens in order to maintain a political order in which no one is dominated. (A related but distinct view, civic humanism, holds that such participation is constitutive of a good, fully human life.) Some republican theories can be regarded as alternatives to liberalism, while others are a variety of liberalism. I focus here only on the republican idea of civic virtue, taking no stance on republican theories of justice or liberty.

[2] For instance, the civic republican Oldfield (1990, p. 181) claims that citizenship is "a practice or activity…underpinned by an attitude of mind" and demonstrated by "public service of fairly specific kinds", including military service, political deliberation and participation, and raising children to participate in politics.

work and doing a good job. All of these activities can be ways to exercise civic virtue, even if people are rewarded with high profits or high wages for their actions.

My main argument has the following four sets of premises:

(1) The consensus definition of civic virtue: To possess civic virtue, a person must have a strong enough disposition and sufficient ability to promote the common good over purely private ends.
(2) The standard theory of virtuous activity: A person acts virtuously when she does the right thing (acts in way called for by the virtue) for the right reasons (out of virtuous motivations), feels the right way about it (i.e., is not overly tempted to act badly), and knows what she is doing (Hursthouse 1999, p. 12, passim; Annas 2000, p. 49).
(3) The liberal conception of the common good: The common good is a function of individual interests. Policies, institutions, and activities are in the common good provided that they serve most citizens' individual interests, by creating, sustaining, and improving conditions under which citizens become better able to realize their conceptions of the good life.
(4) The mainstream economic view of business activity: In general, in the proper institutional context, for-profit business activity strongly tends to create, sustain, and improve conditions of wealth and opportunity, under which people become better able to realize their conceptions of the good life.

From these premises, I will conclude (5):

(5) For-profit business as civic virtue: A person can exercise civic virtue by working for or running a for-profit business, provided she has the right motivations when she works, and provided her activities do tend sufficiently to promote the common good. In principle, for-profit business activity is just as good a way to exercise civic virtue as political activity.

(5) is controversial and would strike many people as paradoxical, and yet it follows rather straightforwardly from (1–4), most of which are largely uncontroversial. I will further explain (and to vary degrees defend) these premises (1–4) below, and show how they lead to my conclusion (5). Note that strictly speaking my argument may not depend on premise 3—we could substitute certain more constrained, less individualistic, or various non-liberal conceptions of the common good, and the argument might still succeed. However, I will not explore this point in this article, as I have argued for this point elsewhere (Brennan 2011, pp. 56–67).

In mainstream economics, premise 4, stated in its general form, is largely uncontroversial (Krugman and Wells 2009, Chaps. 1, 2, 4, passim; Mankiw 2008, pp. 8–12, Part III; Weil 2009, Chaps. 2, 10–12, 17; Ekelund et al. 2006, Chaps. 1–4, 12–13; Alston et al. 1992; McConnell et al. 2008, Chaps. 1–4, 7, 9, 11, passim; Schmidtz and Brennan 2010, Chaps. 2 and 4). My argument depends only on this uncontroversial general form. What mainstream economists do debate and find controversial are the extent to which there are exceptions to the general trend specified in premise (4), and how much regulation and oversight are needed to make the market function properly. My argument does not depend on any particular position on these issues. This article is compatible with a wide range of liberal economic arrangements, from the laissez-faire capitalist policies libertarians favor, to arrangements like those seen in Denmark or Switzerland, in which a highly free market (freer than that of the United States) is combined with ample social insurance, to more heavily regulated for-profit market systems (as in South Korea).[3] In saying for-profit business activity promotes the common good, I am confining my discussions to markets that have whatever amount of regulation, etc., are needed, according to mainstream economics, for markets to work adequately. I am thus taking no unusual ideological stance, nor I am expressing excessive enthusiasm for markets. I am instead resting upon mainstream economic analysis. I will illustrate and explain premise (4) more below, but I am not here trying to convince someone who accepts a heterodox economic theory (such as Marxism) to come into the mainstream. At any rate, someone holding a heterodox view (not I) bears the burden of proof if she wishes to dispute the general claim made in premise (4).

Having explained what this article is about, let me now explain what it is not about. I am not discussing whether corporations should regard themselves as citizens and thus conduct their behavior according to common standards of good citizenship. Nor will I attempt to defend a theory of corporate social responsibility or management ethics.[4] This is an article on being a good citizen, not being a good manager. I say that a businessperson can exercise civic virtue through for-profit activity, but I do not thereby reject stakeholder theory in favor of shareholder theory. I am also not just arguing that for-profit business tends to make people better off. That is a premise, not a conclusion. Also, I am not here trying to argue that any particular

[3] See the 2011 *Index of Economic Freedom*, published by the Heritage Foundation, at http://www.heritage.org/index/ranking.

[4] In particular, this paper should be contrasted with Friedman (1970). Friedman argues that corporate managers, in order to be responsible managers, have a fiduciary duty to their principals (shareholders) to increase profits, because the capital managers control belongs to the shareholders and is entrusted to the managers for the purpose of making profits. This paper makes a very different claim: a citizen can exercise civic virtue through for-profit business activity.

businessperson, or even that *any* businesspeople, have exercised civic virtue through for-profit business. I am arguing for the conceptual point that for-profit business is just as good a means as the voting booth to exercise civic virtue. However, whether any particular businessperson (or voter, for that matter) has ever exercised civic virtue depends upon facts about her motives as well as what she actually accomplished. My thesis would be unscathed even if we discovered that no one has ever exercised civic virtue anywhere, in politics or in business. Finally, this is not a manual for civic education, and I am not trying to provide an algorithm or decision-procedure for exercising civic virtue. I will not try to settle all debates about civic virtue, but will instead take stances on issues only when doing so is necessary to defend my thesis.

The second section explains the consensus definition of civic virtue, and why this definition leaves open whether political activities are necessary for civic virtue. It also explains the standard theory of virtuous activity. The third section explains the liberal conception of the common good. The fourth section explains the mainstream economic view of for-profit business activity, and then puts these premises together to show how they imply that for-profit business activity can be a way to exercise civic virtue. The fifth section responds to a number of objections.

The Concept of Civic Virtue

In this section, I will argue that the concept of civic virtue leaves open which kinds of activities can be ways of exercising civic virtue. Consider these three questions:

(A) Is political participation necessary for the exercise of civic virtue?
(B) Is political participation the best way to exercise civic virtue?
(C) Can working for a for-profit business be an excellent way to exercise civic virtue?

Because of the dominance of the republican conception of civic virtue, it may seem as though A–C are simply definitional or conceptual questions. That is, asking whether political participation is the best way to exercise civic virtue might seem like asking whether bachelors are unmarried.

In contrast, I argue that questions A–C should be regarded as interesting, substantive questions, and answering these questions requires real work. In this section, I illustrate this point by examining the definitions of "civic virtue" philosophers have put forward. I will argue that the concept of civic virtue does not settle what kinds of activities can be expressions of civic virtue.

Concept vs. Conception

Many philosophers distinguish between the *concept* of something versus various *conceptions* of it. The concept of something captures that thing's essential traits, whereas various conceptions of that thing try to explain its full nature. For example, both a Christian and Muslim share the same concept of God (an omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent, etc., being), but have different conceptions of what God wants. Or, to take another example, Rawls says that (1) assigning rights and duties and (2) determining the proper distributions of benefits and burdens are built into the concept of justice (Rawls 1971, pp. 5–6). By definition, justice is about 1 and 2. However, different conceptions (theories) of justice fill in 1 and 2 in different ways. Utilitarians, modern liberals, classical liberals, neoclassical liberals, libertarians, communitarians, Marxists, conservatives, and so on, all disagree about what the various duties, rights, and proper distributions are. The Marxist thinks justice requires an equal distribution of wealth; the libertarian disagrees. However, the Marxist and the libertarian are not talking past each other. Though they disagree, they are both talking about the same thing—justice. Even though they have different conceptions of justice, they both agree that justice concerns duties, rights, and the proper distributions of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.

The Definition of "Civic Virtue"

With the concept/conception distinction in hand, we can ask, what is built into the concept of civic virtue, and what issues can different conceptions disagree about while still properly being conceptions of civic virtue?

There is a consensus among philosophers and political theorists about how to define the term "civic virtue". Nearly everyone writing today on civic virtue, regardless of her underlying political philosophy, defines the term the same way. For example, Burtt (1990, p. 24) defines "civic virtue" as the "disposition to further public over private good in action and deliberation." Dagger (1997, p. 14) uses this same definition in his defense of republican liberalism. Galston (2007, p. 630) defines a civic virtue as "a trait that disposes its possessors to contribute to the well-being of the community and enhances their ability to do so." Crittenden (2007) says that to be "civic-minded" is to "care about the welfare of the community (the commonweal or *civitas*) and not simply about [one's] own individual well-being." Brennan and Hamlin (1995) analyze civic virtue as the ability to determine the common good and the motivation to act appropriately toward it. In a popular encyclopedia article on republicanism, Lovett (2010) defines

civic virtue as "a willingness to do one's part in supporting the common good".

Thus, from the standpoint of contemporary political philosophy, premise (1) of my argument is largely uncontroversial:

(1) The consensus definition of civic virtue: To possess civic virtue, a person must have a strong enough disposition and sufficient ability to promote the common good over purely private ends.

Of course, the fact that this definition is widely accepted does not mean it is true. However, someone who wants to reject this view bears the burden of arguing against the consensus.

Open Questions About Civic Virtue

The consensus definition of civic virtue leaves the following questions open:

(a) What is the "common good"?
(b) What kinds of activities can be ways of exercising civic virtue?
(c) What is the relevant community (local city, nation-state, entire world) whose common good is to be promoted?
(d) In order to possess civic virtue, how strong must a person's motivation to promote the common good over purely private ends be?
(e) In order to exercise civic virtue, how *effective* must a person be in promoting the common good? (e.g., can a person exercise civic virtue when she intends to promote the common good but in fact, through no fault of her own, undermines it?)

Different conceptions of civic virtue will answer these questions different ways. Even though there is a consensus that civic virtue is the disposition to promote the common good, the concept of civic virtue does not answer questions (a–e) for us. Reasonable people can disagree about how best to answer these questions. In Sect. 3 below, I will offer a liberal answer to question (a) as I defend my thesis, which itself an answer to question (b). However, I will not try to answer questions (c–e), as my thesis does not depend on the answer to these questions. Both the republican and my conception of civic virtue are compatible with a wide range of plausible answers for (c–e), and so answering these questions does not help us decide between the republican view and mine.

Here is another important question:

(f) Which activities count as "political" and which count as "private"?

The commonsense/republican conception of civic virtue holds that voting, lawmaking, volunteering, writing senators, and similar activities are political, while making art (except for political art), making money, raising kids (except for civic education), and so on are not political. Given how the republicans divide political from non-political activity, they could be said to have a *political* conception of civic virtue. They hold civic virtue is normally exercisable only through political activity. In contrast, I endorse an *extra*political conception of civic virtue, since I hold civic virtue can be exercised through activities outside (what the republican considers) politics. When I say that liberals should embrace an "extrapolitical conception" of civic virtue, I mean just to adopt, uncritically, the republican's view of what counts as political and not political. I intend nothing substantive to turn on this. I argue liberals should hold that for-profit business is a way to exercise civic virtue. If someone wants to conclude from this that business counts as "political" for liberals, or the sphere of the political is broader than the republican thinks, then for the purposes of this paper, that is fine by me.

Notice that the consensus definition of civic virtue—civic virtue is the disposition to promote the common good—does not imply that civic virtue requires political participation, nor does it imply that political participation is the best way to exercise civic virtue. It leaves open what kinds of activities are good ways to exercise civic virtue. If civic virtue requires political participation, this is an interesting, substantive philosophical claim, rather than a tautology. It is a tautology to say that bachelors are unmarried, but it is an interesting, substantive claim to say that bachelors tend to drive faster than married men. It is a tautology to say justice requires that we give people their due. It is an interesting, substantive philosophical claim to say that justice requires freedom of speech. It is a tautology to say civic virtue makes you a good member of a community. It is an interesting, substantive claim to say that civic virtue is best exercised through political means. Interesting, substantive claims need to be defended with arguments—we cannot show them to be true just by analyzing concepts.

While I will not here try to decisively refute the republican conception of civic virtue, it is worth noting why republicans accept their particular conception. Their argument looks something like this:

P1 The Consensus Definition of Civic Virtue is correct.
P2 The Standard Account of Virtuous Activity is correct.

So far, the republican and I are on the same page. However, the republican then typically argues:[5]

[5] For e.g., see Lovett (2010; Dagger 1997, p. 17, passim. Dagger argues that 1) it is part of the common good that all citizens be free, that 2) freedom is autonomy and self-government, and that 3) therefore freedom is participation in government.

P3 The republican conception of the common good: Good governance, in particular, a political system in which no citizens dominate one another, is the common good.

P4 Means-end claim: In order to achieve the common good as described in P3, most citizens must participate actively in politics.

From this, they conclude:

C5 Republican conception of civic virtue: Civic virtue requires and is exemplified by active, heavy political participation.

P1 and P2 are largely uncontroversial, but P3 and P4 are not. Republicans often employ controversial conceptions of liberty and domination in P3, and P4 rests upon disputed empirical claims.[6] P3 is also a rather restrictive notion of the common good—as I will explain in third section below, liberals have a more expansive idea of the common good. However, in this paper, I am not trying to refute the republican conception of civic virtue, but to explain why liberals should adopt a different conception, given their commitments. Most liberals dispute P3, and are ambivalent about P4.

The Nature of Virtuous Activity

Though most philosophers are not virtue ethicists,[7] most moral philosophers endorse something similar to the conception of virtuous activity defended by virtue ethicists Rosalind Hursthouse, Julia Annas, and Philippa Foot. This conception is captured in premise (2) of my argument:

(2) The standard theory of virtuous activity: A person acts virtuously when she does the right thing (acts in way called for by the virtue) for the right reasons (out of virtuous motivations), feels the right way about it (i.e., is not overly tempted to act badly), and knows what she is doing.[8]

For the purposes of this article, I will accept this analysis of virtuous activity uncritically. I will just note here that there are two main sources of skepticism about this analysis. First, some philosophers dispute whether a virtuous agent must know what she is doing in order to act virtuously. These philosophers argue instead that virtuous agents can sometimes act out of ignorance or misinformation. This dispute makes no difference to my argument. Second, some philosophers are skeptical about whether there are any such things as virtues, as they dispute whether people have or can have the stable dispositions and motivations that virtue requires. I will not try to defeat this skepticism here.

A Liberal Conception of the Common Good

Most liberals hold that common good is a function of individual interests. Policies, institutions, and activities serve the common good provided that they serve individual interests, by creating, sustaining, and improving conditions under which various citizens become better able to realize their conceptions of the good life.

In a recent article, Brennan and Lomasky survey a number of conceptions of the common good and of things that might be said to be in the common good. They note significant agreement between liberals and republicans. For instance, both liberals and republicans can accept that certain public goods—i.e., non-rivalrous, non-excludable goods like military defense—can promote the common good. They can both agree that one can promote the common good by increasing opportunities to enjoy "inherently social goods", i.e., goods that can only be enjoyed with others, such as the experience of watching a Metallica concert together. They can both agree that social capital is important.

What most liberals do not accept, but some republicans do, are what Brennan and Lomasky (2006, p. 223) call "strongly irreducible common goods". X is said to be a strongly irreducible common good for some society S just in case X is good for S, and X's being good for S is not conditional upon S's being good for any member of S. For instance, perhaps ancient Sparta's exceptional military prowess was a strongly irreducible common good. Maintaining its military prowess impoverished the city and stunted the moral development of its citizens, but perhaps it was good for Sparta, if not for any of the Spartans.

Instead, liberals tend to accept what we might call individualistic (or strongly reducible) conceptions of the common good. They hold that things are in the common good of some society because they are good for many, most, or all individuals in that society. I turn now to explaining this idea.

Different citizens hold different conceptions of the good life. Yet, despite their differences, they tend to need some amount of the same kinds of goods to achieve their different conceptions of the good life. They usually need personal and physical integrity, mental and physical health, some wealth, some degree of education, opportunities for economic and social advancement, some ability to influence others, etc. It would be unusual to find someone who did not need these things at all. So, there are certain kinds of goods that tend to be instrumentally valuable to each of us.

[6] For some liberal arguments against P3 and P4, see Brennan (2011, pp. 17–42, 2012d), Brennan and Lomasky (2006), and Patten (1996).

[7] See the Phil Papers survey at http://www.philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl.

[8] See Footnote 4.

We cannot get these goods on our own, but need to cooperate with each other to generate them. It is in our common interest—our common good—to live in, foster, maintain, and improve conditions that help us produce and obtain these goods. Generally, it is in our common interest to choose policies that increase rather than decrease our access to these goods.

There are certain background conditions and institutions needed for each of us to pursue and achieve our conceptions of the good. Linda Raeder says:

> …the common good in a "great society" such as an advanced liberal society—one characterized by an extensive division of labor and knowledge and integrated by common economic, legal, and moral practices—consists on the fulfillment of the fundamental value implicitly held by all its members: the preservation of the social order as a whole, the abstract, enduring structure within which all individual and organizational activities must occur (Raeder 1998, p. 525).

A well-functioning social order is part of the common good, because without it we cannot pursue and achieve our various ends.

Certain background institutions and policies tend to promote the private interests of all or at least most citizens. Some institutions, such as well-functioning markets, liberal democratic government, the rule of law, and a culture of tolerance and respect, tend to promote greater wealth, longer and healthier lives, and lives with more cultural, social, and economic opportunities (Schmidtz and Brennan 2010). Other institutions tend to demote these things. It is in the common good to promote the first kind of institutions rather than the second. Institutions, policies, and practices that are generally to everyone's advantage can be said to be in the common good.

Liberals generally accept each of these claims (Rawls 1971, pp. 217, 233, 246; Gaus 1990, p. 51; Gaus 1996, pp. 172–175). This does not mean they unanimously accept the same theory of the common good. After all, some policies, changes, institutions, etc., promote some people's interests but not other people's, or promote some people's interests at the expense of other people's. So, a *fully specified* liberal conception of the common good will need to explain how to deal with conflicts and issues of distribution (e.g., a fully specified liberal conception of the common good will need to explain whether something counts as promoting the common good when it makes most people richer but some people poorer.) My argument in this article is compatible with a wide range of more fully specified liberal conceptions of the common good—it does not depend on any particular fully specified liberal conception.

Some readers might find it helpful just to pick one particular fully specified liberal conception for now, just to see how the argument goes. (Even if one understands that an argument allows considerable variation in how a premise is interpreted, it can be easier to understand the argument by fixing on one particular interpretation.) So, those readers may assume that I am here borrowing David Schmidtz's liberal theory of the common good. For Schmidtz, something is presumed to be in the common good if it promotes the interests of most people either without harming others' interests or, if it does harm them, it does so without exploiting them.[9] If something promotes the interests of most people without harming others or exploiting those it does harm, then it is considered in the common good until shown otherwise. Again, my argument does not depend on this fully specified conception, but I will use it just as an illustration.

For-Profit Business and the Common Good

So far, I have explained how philosophers define civic virtue and shown that this definition leaves open which particular kinds of activities can be expressions of civic virtue. I have explained how liberals endorse an individualistic conception of the common good, in which things are said to be in the common good when they create, sustain, and improve conditions under which various citizens become better able to realize their conceptions of the good life. I will now turn to explaining, using premises from mainstream economics, how business activity promotes the common good so understood, and should thus count as a candidate for civically virtuous action.

Society is a Positive-Sum Game

Though the Soviet Union was a moral disaster, it had some insight into civic virtue. The USSR's constitution listed a wide range of duties held by citizens. Beyond the obvious political obligations (e.g., obeying the law, respecting others' rights), citizens were expected, in their capacities as citizens, to raise their children well, to "protect nature and

[9] Schmidtz 1995, pp. 169–170. Schmidtz understands exploitation as follows: Exploitative institutions, laws, practices, and so on, make some people worse off, or take unfair advantage of them, as a *means* or *method* of making other people better off. More specifically, exploitative rules, etc., make some people better off in virtue of the *existence* of the targets of exploitation. So a rule disallowing rape or mugging does not exploit rapists or muggers, because it does not improve people's lives in virtue of the existence of muggers and rapists. However, a rule allowing slavery does exploit the enslaved. It makes the enslaved worse off as a method of making the slave owners better off, and the owners are better off in virtue of the existence of slaves.

safeguard its riches", to promote friendship with foreigners, and *to do productive work that adds to the social surplus* (Becker 1980, p. 37). The USSR had an *expansive* conception both of civic duty and of civic virtue. I do not endorse the USSR's idea of civic duty (I do not think people have enforceable obligations to work), but I do endorse its expansive idea of civic virtue.

The USSR officially held that a citizen could act out of civic virtue by doing productive work that contributes to the social surplus. It held that doing productive work did not just benefit one's immediate employer, but that it systematically tended to promote most other citizens' welfare as well. Even though liberals advocate a different economic system from the Soviets, they should agree with the Soviets on this point. In fact, if mainstream economics is correct, this point holds much better for a market economy than for the Soviet economy.

I will illustrate this point with a thought experiment. Imagine you could wave a magic wand that would instantaneously make everyone 15 times richer, and to that extent dramatically improve everyone's standard of living. Clearly, on the liberal conception of the common good, you would thus be promoting the common good.

Now suppose your magic wand's power is not instantaneous, so that it takes 200 years for incomes to increase 15-fold. While this second magic wand is not as good as the first, it is still in the common good.

Now suppose the slow-acting magic wand is imperfect. Though it systematically improves conditions over time, it causes some important problems, people sometimes get hurt, and it needs to be supplemented by government activity to really maximize its contribution to the common good and to correct the problems it causes. Even then, the magic wand serves the common good.

Suppose instead of the slow-acting magic wand, we have a noble philosopher-queen, who determines that if we work together, divide up various tasks, and so on, we can increase our incomes by fifteen times over the next 200 years. The philosopher-queen issues various instructions and offers some rewards for good work and punishments for bad work. Unfortunately, the queen is imperfect in exactly the same way the magic wand was. Even then, the philosopher queen serves the common good. More importantly, those of us who follow her directives and work for her would, in general, be helping to serve the common good. If any of us have the goal of serving the common good, one strategy would be to work for the philosopher-queen.

Now suppose instead of the imperfect philosopher-queen, you have a market economy that issues the same directives, offers the same rewards and punishments, and has the same results. While the queen might have had written or verbal commands, the market economy uses prices instead. While the queen might have issued monetary rewards or fines, the market economy offers profits/consumer surpluses and losses. Yet, otherwise, the system is the same. Again, as with the queen, the market economy serves the common good. More importantly, those of us who follow its directives and work for it would, in general, be helping to serve the common good, just as we would have been in working for the philosopher-queen. If any of us have the goal of serving the common good, one good strategy for satisfying that goal would be to work for the market economy.

Mainstream economic theory claims the market economy is, fundamentally, the same as the imperfect philosopher-queen or the slow-acting, perfect magic wand. If so, then working for a for-profit business will generally promote the common good. That does not mean that every for-profit business serves the common good—some undermine it—but I am here discussing only a general trend, since this trend is all my argument requires.

Economists have long understood that in a market economy, the systematic effect of private citizens' pursuit of private ends is to create background conditions of wealth, opportunity, and cultural progress. Each of us does as well as we do because of the positive externalities created by an extended system of social cooperation. This extended system of cooperation explains why each of us in contemporary liberal societies have our high standards of living and easy access to culture, education, and social opportunities. We are engaged in networks of mutual benefit, and we benefit from other people being engaged in these networks. When we go to work in business, we help create, sustain, and improve these networks of mutual benefit. When things are going well—and overall they tend to go well—we create a series of positive externalities through our innovations, through the division of labor, and by helping to create economies of scale.[10]

The division of labor tends to free people to do what they are good at, or, at least, to allow them to become good at doing something useful. Suppose people need both fish and apples to live well. If Peter specializes in growing apples while Quentin specializes in catching fish, and they agree to trade, this typically allows them both to enjoy more apples and fish than they would were they working independently.

We can thus say that when Peter specializes in apple growing, he does not just produce apples. At the same time, he also *enables* Quentin to specialize in fish catching. Quentin does not just produce fish; he also enables Peter to specialize in growing apples. By specializing, Peter creates conditions that make it possible for Quentin to specialize and be more productive. Peter produces apples directly, but

[10] See citations in Footnote 6.

he indirectly contributes to the production of fish. Quentin produces fish directly, but he indirectly contributes to the production of apples. The reason citizens can excel at their separate tasks is that the others enable them to specialize.

Markets are not perfect. Still, the overall effect of business activity, especially for the past few hundred years, is to make the overwhelming majority of people vastly wealthier than they otherwise would have been. Being wealthier does not just let us buy more trinkets and baubles. It makes it easier for us to realize our conceptions of the good life. It expands the options available to us. As the western world got wealthier, people began living longer, even before the invention of vaccines and other medical advances (Schmidtz and Brennan 2010, p. 156). Even today, life expectancy strongly correlates with GDP-per-capita, and this correlation is not accidental.[11] Wealth buys us more stuff, but it also apparently buys us more time. Wealth also apparently makes us happier. People's self-reported life-satisfaction and levels of happiness strongly correlate with their country's GDP/capita (Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). Wealth also buys us more culture. It is no accident that historically a civilization's commercial centers have also been its cultural centers.[12] When societies are poor, the average person has little money or leisure to spend on culture, and so the society's art, music, and literature tend to be aimed at the tastes of the elite. But one effect of increased wealth is to expand the market for culture, and so to make it so that wider, more diverse forms of art are made (Cowen 2000). Finally, as the Marxist philosopher Cohen (1995, pp. 58–59) notes, money is like a ticket, and there are things we can do if have a ticket but not otherwise. Thus, to have money is to have an important kind of freedom. The average person today has more real options available to her about what kind of life she will to lead, whom she will be, and what she will do at any given moment.

I am not arguing that for-profit business (whether regulated or not) is an unmitigated good. (Notice that republicans need not argue political activity is always good in order to argue that one can exercise civic virtue through politics.) Even classical liberals such as Hayek and Smith believed that the pursuit of profit promotes the common good only in the right institutional framework. Indeed, Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations* (especially book IV) in part as a reaction to destructive instances of the profit-motive, as in his time, business and government were colluding to destroy wealth. He might see the recent U.S. housing crisis as another chapter in that same story.[13] Rather, my point is that the institution of the market, with competition between for-profit businesses, is overall a strong tool for promoting the common good, on the liberal understanding of the common good. If so, then this opens up business activities as an avenue for a citizen to exercise civic virtue.

Business and Civic Virtue

Having explained and to various degrees defended my premises (in some cases defending them simply by showing how the premises are widely accepted), I can now complete my main argument for my conclusion. According to the consensus definition of civic virtue and the standard theory of virtuous activity, a person acts out of civic virtue when she is sufficiently motivated and able to promote the common good over purely private ends. According to the liberal theory of the common good, promoting, sustaining, and creating conditions of wealth and opportunity tend to serve the common good. And according to mainstream economics, working for or running a for-profit business in a market economy tends to promote the common good (as understood by the liberal). From this, it follows that for-profit business activity is potentially a way of exercising civic virtue.

This does not yet prove that any particular instance of business activity exercises civic virtue. According to the standard theory of virtuous activity, for an action to be virtuous, the person performing the action must have the right motives (Hursthouse 1999, pp. 124–126).

Civic virtue (like other virtues) has a motivational component. A businessperson (or anyone else) can greatly contribute to the common good but still lack civic virtue. For a citizen to exercise civic virtue through business activities, contributing to the common good must be one of her principal goals, if not her only goal. (At least, this claim is true if the standard theory of virtuous activity is true.) A person indifferent or antagonistic to the common good cannot have civic virtue, even if she in fact greatly advances the common good. To have civic virtue, a citizen must be disposed to promote the common good even at the expense of her self-interest. Note that just how strong this disposition must be—i.e., how much self-sacrifice a person must be willing to bear—is up for debate. My thesis is this article does not require me to settle this debate, anymore than the republican has to settle this debate when she says voting can be an act of civic virtue.

To have civic virtue requires one be disposed to bear certain costs in order to promote the common good. That

[11] See the data available at http://www.bit.ly/cbe3Bf

[12] Schmidtz and Brennan 2010, p. 121 say, "… the most commercially advanced societies of any given age produce not only the widgets and the food, but also the artists, poets, and inventors. It is no accident that, historically, cultural hubs have also been commercial hubs: Athens in ancient Greece, Venice, and Florence in Renaissance Italy, or New York today."

[13] Thanks to David Schmidtz for this point.

does not mean that one must actually bear these costs. Someone can have civic virtue without ever sacrificing her interests on behalf of the common good. In parallel, to have parental virtue requires that one be disposed to bear certain costs in order to promote the interests of one's children. However, a dad who is disposed to sacrifice his interest to his children's might (thanks to good fortune) never have to make any such sacrifices. So, if we see that some citizens never bear any significant personal costs when they promote the common good, and if they instead profit from promoting the common good, we cannot immediately infer they lack civic virtue. It might be that they are properly disposed to promote the common good, even at their personal expense, but circumstances have not required this of them.

One might worry that the profit-motive is incompatible with civic virtue. In one sense, it is. Someone *exclusively* or *predominantly* motivated by profit cannot have civic virtue (or perhaps any other moral virtue), because civic virtue requires a sufficiently strong motivation to promote the common good.

However, to act out of civic virtue does not require that one be exclusively motivated by concern for the common good. On the standard theory of virtuous activity, for an agent to act virtuously, she must be motivated sufficiently by virtuous motives. However, this does not mean her motives must be exclusively virtuous. So, for instance, when I exercise the pedagogical virtues, I am strongly motivated by the desire to help my students learn. But I am also motivated by many selfish desires: to avoid humiliation for bad teaching, to improve my reputation, to keep my job and get paid, and so on. I have the pedagogical virtues because I am sufficiently disposed to promote my students' intellectual well-being, even at my personal expense. My pedagogical virtue is not impugned by the mere presence of other, selfish motivations.

Note that I am not arguing in this article that anyone has actually exercised civic virtue through business activity. I suspect that most people working in business (from janitors to CEOs) also want to make the world a better place. However, suppose my suspicions are completely wrong. Suppose instead that businesspeople, always and everywhere, are sociopaths. This would have no effect on my argument. This would just mean that while businessperson *could* conduct for-profit business in a civically virtuous way, no businessperson has or will do so.

Note that the profit-motive objection applies to political and quasi-political activity as well. Presidents, congressional representatives, community organizers, volunteers, military enlistees, civil servants, and so on, are not motivated exclusively by civic virtue, either. They also have selfish and self-centered motivations for what they do. Just like businesspeople, they often want fame, exciting and interesting careers, money, and power. We might even discover that people participating in politics are all sociopaths who merely feign public interest. Even if so, that would not impugn the republican idea (which I share) that a person *could* exercise civic virtue through politics. It would just mean that no one has or will do so. So, the profit-motive objection does not undermine my conception of civic virtue anymore than it undermines the commonsense, republican conception.

Objections

The commonsense, republican conception of civic virtue is restrictive—it holds that the places to exercise civic virtue are (at least normally) confined to political and quasi-political activities. I have argued that we should also include private activities, in particular, for-profit business activities, as means to exercise civic virtue.[14] This conclusion follows straightforwardly from four premises, two of which are uncontroversial among philosophers, one of which is uncontroversial among economists, and one of which is central to liberal political philosophy. To undermine my thesis, one will need to show one of these premises is false.

A Recipe for Good Objections

Suppose you favor the commonsense, restricted, republican conception of civic virtue over my new, expansive, liberal conception. You cannot argue for your view by raising difficult problems, questions, or objections to my view, when those very same problems, questions, and objections apply to your view. So, for instance, here is a hard question: Can a person act out of civic virtue if she sincerely wants to promote the common good, justifiedly believes her actions will promote it, but in fact her actions harm the common good? Whatever the answer to this question is, it will not differentiate between the republican conception of civic virtue or mine. (Both conceptions can accept the same answer.) Thus, I do not need to answer it here.

With that in mind, consider that someone might make any or all of the following objections to my thesis:

(1) Much business activity has only a tiny marginal impact on the common good.
(2) For business to serve the common good, it needs to be imbedded in the proper, well-functioning regulatory institutions.

[14] I have argued that a wide range of other private activities can be exercises of civic virtue in Brennan 2011, pp. 43–67.

(3) For business to serve the common good, business leaders need to behave rather well, practice some degree of social responsibility, and so on.
(4) For-profit business activity sometimes undermines the common good, sometimes greatly so. It can be difficult for a businessperson to determine whether she will serve the common good, undermine it, or have no effect upon it.

Notice that none of these are objections (1–4) apply only to or especially to for-profit business. They apply to political activities as well. E.g., voting, volunteering, running for office, working in a "public service" job, community organizing, and serving in the military can all greatly undermine the common good—history books are filled with tragic examples.[15] The marginal impact of most individual instances of these political activities is tiny. Political activities need to be imbedded in the right regulatory institutions and require good behavior from agents. So, if 1–4 are reasons to hold that business activity is cannot be a way to exercise civic virtue, then 1–4 are at least equally good reasons to hold that political and quasi-political activity cannot be ways to exercise civic virtue.

Objecting to the Consensus Definition

My argument began by noting that the consensus definition leaves open whether civic virtue must be (or are best) exercised though political means. Someone might complain that consensus definition must therefore be mistaken.[16] Suppose one pounds the table and insists that to exercise civic virtue, *by definition*, requires significant political engagement. The person making this objection just insists that it whether civic virtue involves political engagement is not an open question.

This objection has significant costs. I take it that civic virtue makes one a good community member. If one insists that, by definition, civic virtue requires political engagement, my response is that that one can be a good community member by engaging in public-spirited non-political activity. A public-spirited person who promotes the common good through non-political means might lack civic virtue, but instead have "schlivic" virtue. Let us say that schlivic virtue is the disposition and ability to promote the common good by non-political activity. If one insists that it is not an open question whether civic virtue involves political engagement, this just implies that it is an open question whether, in order to be a good community member, one should have civic virtue, schlivic virtue, or some combination of the two. Table-pounding over definitions gets the objector nowhere.

The Vacuity Objection

One might object that if for-profit business activity, or indeed any common good-promoting activity, could count as a way to exercise civic virtue (provided, at least, that agents have the right motives), then civic virtue could mean anything and everything. One might object that the extrapolitical conception of civic virtue is effectively vacuous.

I will respond by noting that that I am advocating an expansive conception of civic virtue in much the same way that most people now advocate an expansive conception of courage. Homeric Greeks generally considered courage a martial virtue, a virtue exercised almost exclusively in battle, and only by elite members of society (Redner 2001, pp. 77–79). Today we understand that courage can be exercised anywhere, in nearly any activity. Courage, like all virtues, is about appropriate responsiveness to reasons. Courageous people face danger in an appropriate way. And so courage is not just for Achilles—a woman can exemplify courage in childbirth. This expansive conception of courage does not render the concept vacuous. While nearly any kind of action could be a way of exercising courage, not all, and indeed, not even most actual actions are courageous. In expanding the range of activities that can be ways of exercising courage, we understand something that the Homeric Greeks missed.

I am arguing for a similar view of civic virtue. Civic virtue—like all the virtues—is a kind of appropriate responsiveness to a particular class of reasons. In advocating that we expand our conception of civic virtue beyond the political realm, I am arguing that the early Roman republicans and their modern admirers had an incomplete idea of civic virtue, much as Homeric Greeks had an incomplete idea of courage.

The Self-Effacingness Objection

One might worry that were this view of civic virtue commonly accepted, it would produce bad consequences for the common good.[17] Business often pays better than volunteering at a soup kitchen. If both activities can be equally good ways to exercise civic virtue, then perhaps people will neglect the latter.

[15] A fortiori, the worst evils businesses have done pale in comparison to the worst evils political agents have done. (Suppose the Great Depression and every financial crisis since 1900 have completely been the fault of business, and no blame should fall on governments. These evils pale in comparison to, e.g., Mao's Great Leap Forward.)

[16] Indeed, each time I presented this articler and other papers on civic virtue, an audience member has made this objection.

[17] A version of this objection was suggested by an anonymous referee.

I have not here provided an algorithm for determining which particular activities a citizen should engage in if she wants to promote the common good. (Nor, to my knowledge, have republicans provided such an algorithm.) By definition, a person of civic virtue will be motivated to promote the common good and will be appropriately responsive to her circumstances. Thus, citizens with civic virtue will, if they can, do what must be done to promote the common good. For many citizens, this will include engaging in a mix of private and political activities.

Note that even on my conception of civic virtue, a citizen has to have sufficiently strong public spirit (as strong as on the republican conception) to qualify as having civic virtue. Thus, if a citizen neglects some vital political activity—an activity that genuinely needs her input—in favor of business, simply because business pays better, then she lacks civic virtue, even on my conception. My conception of civic virtue implies that citizens of civic virtue will neglect politics only to the extent that neglecting politics is good or at least not bad.

Perhaps the worry is instead that citizens will rationalize bad behavior using my theory. They will act selfishly but tell themselves they act out of civic virtue. If my thesis were widely promulgated, perhaps people would become less virtuous rather than more, even as measured by my standards. Thus, my thesis is self-effacing.

This objection is problematic. First, some of this objection applies just as well to the republican view of civic virtue as to mine. Politicians, activists, voters, and so on, can and do act from self-interest while deluding themselves that they act for the common good. This does not disprove the republican view; it just shows that some people act hypocritically or in a self-deluded way. So this objection does not give us reason to favor the commonsense republican view over mine.

Even if my view were more self-effacing than the republican view, that would not show it to be false. In general, we cannot conclude a moral theory is false just because it is self-effacing. So, for instance, many critics of utilitarianism have suggested that if people accepted utilitarianism, this would make the world worse (by utilitarian standards) because most people are bad at applying standards. But, as utilitarians have responded (and it seems most philosophers now accept), this does not show utilitarianism is false. At worst, it shows we should not advertise it widely. Similarly, if it turned out that teaching business students stakeholder theory makes them perform worse (as measured by the standards of stakeholder theory) as business leaders, this would not show stakeholder theory is false. It would undermine the practical goal (making people better) of teaching business ethics, but would not undermine the theoretical goal (discovering the truth about ethics).

Conclusion

The commonsense, republican conception of civic virtue holds that to exercise civic virtue requires that one participate in political and quasi-political activities. In this paper, I have argued that this conception is too narrow. In contrast, I argued for a more expansive conception of civic virtue. I argue that private, non-political activities, including normal business activities, can be just as good means to exercise civic virtue as political activities. The businessperson can exercise civic virtue equally well at work as at the polls. While this thesis seems paradoxical, it appears to follow straightforwardly from four relatively uncontroversial premises.

In this article, I have not attempted to say everything there is to say about civic virtue. Instead, I took a stand on issues and tried to answer questions only when doing so was necessary for my argument. So, for instance, I have no tried to answer questions about how strong a citizen's motivation to promote the common good must be, because answering this question does not help us decided between the republican conception and mine. (Whatever the answer is, the republican and I can both adopt it.) I have not attempted to provide a handbook for a citizen to know what is the best way for her to exercise civic virtue.

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