AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY  
2 October 2008

CITIZENS, NEIGHBORS, STRANGERS, FRIENDS:  
WHAT IS CITIZENSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

DANIELLE ALLEN

Series Inaugural Lecture  
EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP: EXPLORING VIRTUES AND VICES  
Presented with the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society

Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, director of the Aurora Forum, and tonight we present the first in our 2008-09 series of public conversations that explore democratic ideals and, we trust, inspire social hope. Thank you for joining us.

This evening we are here for a lecture by Danielle Allen entitled “Citizens, Neighbors, Strangers, Friends: What is Citizenship in the 21st Century?” This is the inaugural lecture for a five-part series we are presenting this year with the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society entitled “Education for Citizenship: Exploring Virtues and Vices.” The series aims to generate critical inquiry into virtues and vices as moral habits that shape one’s life and its meaning at the level of the individual, and as forces that, at the collective level, influence culture in relation to education, civic engagement, democracy, and globalization. This series runs through this academic year and includes a winter quarter course on “Social Virtues and Social Vices” through Stanford Continuing Studies by Professor Debra Satz.

Before introducing our speaker, I would like to say a few words about the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society.

First, I want to thank my colleague, Dr. Noa Ronkin, associate director of the Center for Ethics, who was in on the conversation where the idea for this series first arose. From that day until now, she has been an energetic and genuine collaborator (a person who works, who labors, with another) on matters both intellectual and logistical. It has been a real pleasure to work with Noa to prepare the programs we are launching here tonight.

The Center for Ethics has recently reorganized and expanded under the directorship of Debra Satz, a professor in the Department of Philosophy. One of the guiding principles of the Ethics Center is that ethics is not only a set of ideas, it is also a set of practices. In the year 2000, Professor Satz and Professor Rob Reich, her colleague in the Department of Political Science, taught a course in “Philosophy and Social Justice” at Hope House, a
residential drug and alcohol treatment facility in Redwood City for women who were recently incarcerated. This and the courses that have been taught each quarter at Hope House ever since are part of the process of rehabilitation and recovery for these women. Last year, Stanford’s Office of Public Affairs recognized this ongoing, very successful project with their annual Community Partnership Award.

Each of these university units I’ve mentioned—the Office of Public Affairs, Stanford Continuing Studies (which also has a role in the Hope House project), the Center for Ethics, and the Aurora Forum (which is cosponsored by the Office of Public Affairs and Continuing Studies) is finding creative ways to work with others to build bridges between Stanford and the broader community, which brings me to the work of our lecturer tonight, Professor Danielle Allen.

I first became aware of Professor Allen’s work when a student in a course I was teaching on Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King reported she had heard an interview with Danielle on the Tavis Smiley show where she discussed her book, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education.*

This book is largely about building democracy by crossing boundaries and literally talking to strangers—people whose stories are different from our own—so that we can better understand and appreciate the strength that is inherent in diversity. If talking to strangers were to become a cultural habit, she suggests, it would transform our society through the discovery of what she calls, drawing on Aristotle, “political friendships.”

This book, which I highly recommend, ends by urging the crossing of other boundaries, particularly those that often grow up between universities and adjacent communities that are in so many ways affected by their presence. In bringing attention to questions concerning neighborliness (individual and institutional), she ends her study by asking whether and how universities are fostering the growth of democratic citizens, a task once regarded as the major purpose of a liberal arts education that, I think many will agree, is urgently needed now in the United States.

So while we are making progress in our bridge building, we still have a long way to go, and Danielle Allen has dedicated her life as a scholar to exploring democratic ideals. She was educated at Princeton, where Josh Ober, now of our Departments of Classics and Political Science (who will open the conversation following tonight’s lecture), was her advisor. She went on to complete doctorates at Kings College at the University of Cambridge in classics in 1996 and then at Harvard in political theory in 2001. She then joined the faculty at the University of Chicago where she was dean of the division of humanities from 2004-07. She was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2002, and, since July 2007, she is the UPS Foundation Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

Danielle, we are so pleased and honored that you have taken the time to prepare a lecture and fly across the continent to be here to inaugurate our series of public conversations, “Education for Citizenship: Exploring Virtues and Vices.”
What follows is the typescript of Danielle Allen's inaugural lecture.


Part I: Why We Repeat Ourselves
What is citizenship in the 21st century? Before addressing the particularities of 21st century experience, I must begin by explaining why we still need to ask and answer the basic question, “What is citizenship?” As I ask that question I hear a familiar, skeptical voice responding: “What? That old question again? Didn’t humanists and philosophers ask about the substance of citizenship in the last century and in the one before that and in the one before that too? Why can’t philosophers make like scientists and produce results?” To prepare ourselves to understand citizenship and its virtues, the theme of the Aurora Forum Series this year, we need to clarify the nature of the inquiry. This is not a scientific but a humanistic theme. What does such a distinction entail?

Nowadays science reigns as king among available styles of intellectual inquiry. Its methods and fruits define value and legitimacy in intellectual work. Scientists generate hypotheses and then run experiments or build models to test them. These tests yield results that ideally spur development of new technologies: new drugs, new communications devices, new power sources, new economic policies, and so on. “Now that’s what I mean,” that skeptical voice insists, “by results.” And science is expensive; labs cost a fortune; if “you get what you pay for,” science’s price-tag alone validates it. No humanist would dare to seek, let alone ever win, a multi-million dollar grant to ask and try to answer the question: what is citizenship. The very simplicity and the repetitiveness of the question exasperate.

Why, then, do humanists repeat themselves? Why does scientific knowledge appear, at least at first glance, to contrast with humanistic learning in being cumulative? The answer lies in the difference between technology and culture. Science leads directly to tools. A biologist discovers something about our genes, and new gene therapies move to market. A material scientist discovers something about a given material, temperature, and conductivity, and new transistors or computer chips are powering ever faster, cleverer gadgets. These tools are essentially prosthetic devices. Prosthetic, from Greek, means simply “added on to.” We add these tools on to ourselves to increase our capacities: with spectacles we see more clearly; with computers we calculate faster; with cars and airplanes we travel faster and farther. Most of us, I think, have an intuitive grasp of the relationship between intellectual work and the appearance in our lives of new technologies. Science makes sense to us because we see the movement from research to practical applications.

In the domain of the humanities, we are not so clear about how intellectual inquiry and practical results relate. But we should be. The fundamental human question is, “How shall I live?” Science produces technologies for daily use, but the arts and humanities produce cultures: comprehensive, ever evolving collective answers to the question of how-to-live. Culture is a far more complicated product than science has yet produced.
When science generates penicillin or a wireless phone, that object functions in roughly similarly ways for the vast majority of its users. But culture, understood as an answer to the question of how-to-live, is rarely univocal, even less so now than in generations past, as communities around the globe adapt to greater demographic mobility and diversity than humankind has ever known. The fact that each of us is born into a particular, even if multi-vocal culture, does not determine the answers to “how to live?” that each will adopt. Each of us fights day-to-day to determine that answer for herself. Our independent intellectual efforts generate the idiosyncratic habits that mark us out individually. We are born into cultures but we come to grips with their contents, vulnerabilities, and potential for change only slowly, painfully, with friction. The work may be slow but culture is fundamentally less constraining than technology.

So, yes, humanistic inquiry produces results: habits, particularly, moral habits, at the level of the individual, and culture at the collective level. And the results of humanistic inquiry do accumulate over time, like sediment, producing cultures with distinctive landscapes.

Yet the results of humanistic inquiry are not cumulative in the same way as with science. At least four specific differences between technology and moral habits can direct us toward an explanation. First, we easily substitute one technological tool for another, a horseless carriage for instance for a carriage with horses; a wireless for a wired phone. We cannot so easily substitute one set of moral habits for another. If we have been selfish, it is very hard to become self-less. If we have been cowardly, it is difficult to become courageous. Second, I can begin using technological tools at any point along the continuum of their development. I don’t need to learn to ride a horse before I learn to drive a car. With moral habits, in contrast, we must pass through phases, for instance of selfishness or timidity in childhood, before we mature into generous and brave adults. Third there are limits to the uses to which I can put any given technological tool; its power as a device that can expand my cognitive or physical capacities has been closely defined by the engineers who designed it. I can therefore come to exploit its full potential quite quickly. With moral habits, in contrast, I need a life-time to grasp the full content and experiential possibilities of any given cultural formation, and I may never master all of a culture’s resources. Finally, my successful use of any given technology—a computer, a telephone, an airplane, for that matter a chair—does not require me to have asked and answered any of the scientific questions that led to the development of these technologies. In stark contrast, I acquire my own moral habits--I test and come to know the limits and possibilities of my culture—only by autonomously asking and answering the question “how shall I live?” My parents, or other adults, may give me my first answers, but I must eventually displace them, making my own inquiry.

Culture resembles one tool alone, namely the crutch. It is only ever at best a support for each of us as life itself forces us into autonomous reflection. Even if we learn about, say, Socrates’ approach to the question of “How to live,” we can’t exactly begin from it. We can wrestle with his ideas but only in the course of our own reflections, which began anew from the beginning when we were born. Even the most unreflective among us cannot rely on cultural inheritance to answer in full the question of how to live. Passion
or pain; surprise or loss, will eventually shock even the least thoughtful into reflection. Each new birth engages the inquiry of how to live once again from the beginning; the basic human question will therefore be repeated infinitely. Humanists of all kinds—teachers or ministers, artists and writers—do their level best to guide this intellectual work rigorously. But all we can do is serve as guides, not provide conclusive answers.

This fact that our moral habits are the products of each individual’s intellectual inquiries is what, ultimately, separates humanistic from scientific knowledge. It explains why we must eternally repeat questions like, “What is citizenship?”

So let’s move forward now, unembarrassedly, to ask, again, that question. What is citizenship?

**Part II: What is Citizenship?**

“What is citizenship?” is little more than a variant on the question, “How shall I live?” This variant means: “How shall we live together? How shall I live with others?”

When I was a kid, my family used to drive back and forth from Los Angeles to Santa Fe every summer. My brother and I drew a line down the middle of the back seat and occupied ourselves in private ways. I had a little pocket size Bible with appendices, among them the complete text of the national anthem. I spent my time memorizing all four stanzas and merging those words with a deepening passion for the Southwestern landscape that, as we drove through it, was just as forcefully impressing itself into my memory for life. It seems that at that time I thought citizenship was patriotism, a matter of love and committed devotion.

I distinctly remember during my high school years debates and fights with friends, on buses on the way to sports events, about topics like affirmative action and abortion. We couldn’t vote yet and knew it but we wanted to and our 18th birthdays beckoned. In those years also, first jobs led to the discovery that math class hadn’t prepared us to understand our paychecks: the number on the bottom line did not equal the promised wage times hours worked. The shock of the discovery that taxes had been taken out motivated reflection, and more arguments: now, about the point of government. By the time we graduated several of our friends had joined the military. By this time we thought citizenship consisted of voting, paying taxes, and service, whether in the military, on juries, or through public office. At this age, in my circle at least, we thought of citizenship, in other words, as a matter of our relation to the state, which had provided us with defined institutional duties to be assumed at age 18.

And then in college my field of vision broadened. I discovered that every generation’s thinkers had offered deep answers to the question of what citizenship is. Typically, their answers neither started nor ended with patriotism or institutional duties. The former was treated glancingly as an expression of the value of citizenship; the latter, described merely to identify the tools of citizenship. But neither concept captured citizenship’s core...
content as defined by a long, diverse list of thinkers.

In Athens of the 4th century BCE Plato, for instance, advocated that citizens focus their citizenly efforts on moderation. They should restrain their desires and, with the exception of the philosopher king, stave off any expectation of knowing enough to govern themselves. The moderation of their characters should therefore also manifest itself as deference to expert rulers and each citizen should know his place, devoting all energy to the single professional domain or field of labor for which nature had suited him. Also writing in Athens in the 4th century BCE, Aristotle argued, in contrast, that citizens should prepare to be multi-taskers. They should develop competence in their own specialized areas while also expecting to participate in politics first as soldiers and then later in life as political leaders. By learning how to take turns with each other and by expecting citizenship to require multiple skill sets or virtues—first of military courage and then of prudence and good judgment—they might through turn-taking and collective action cultivate the intellectual, moral, and physical resources needed for prosperity.

Or take Nicolo Machiavelli, who wrote in 15th and 16th century Florence. His arguments apply to political leaders, not ordinary citizens, but present a picture of citizenly virtues nonetheless. Exemplary citizens, he argued, will be those who can “master fortune.” Such citizens would understand changing realities and respond intelligently to rapidly unfolding events but would also capitalize aggressively on the opportunities presented by life’s sudden reversals. Machiavelli’s exemplary citizens intend to win. John Locke, who wrote in 17th century England, also emphasized that citizens need intellectual resources to understand the meanings of and possibilities inherent in chaos, but he saw these cognitive capacities as being properly directed to a different set of ends than Machiavelli had identified. In Locke’s evocative image, citizens find themselves all together in a ship tacking now this way, then that, veering now to one port to replenish supplies; then to another to take on or release passengers. Despite all the divagations, citizens must always seek to discern the ship’s true course. And when the boat’s true destination is, say, the slave market in Algiers, the time for revolution has come.

I could proceed, noting yet other thinkers, who argued for yet other citizenly virtues— for instance John Stuart Mill writing in 19th century Great Britain, who argued for freedom of speech and the contest of ideas in the public sphere in order that “the world [be adorned] with open, fearless characters and logical consistent intellects,” or I might cite Hannah Arendt, a German Jewish émigré who wrote in 20th America that the merciless exposure of the public sphere means that “the virtue of courage is one of the most elemental political attitudes.” And proceeding in this fashion, we could catalog the moral habits that over centuries and across cultures have been considered the core virtues of citizenship: moderation, good judgment, prudence, clear-sightedness, frankness, honesty, and courage.

But my goal here is not to digest the answers of earlier times and places. We have to answer for our own time the question of how to live with others. We live now in nation-states with populations so large as to have been unimaginable to earlier thinkers. The concept of “stranger-danger” is much more familiar than that of “fellow citizen.” Equally
unimaginable to earlier eras are the resources of communication now available to us thanks to the internet. Nearly all of our fellow citizens are complete strangers to us, and yet we can talk to any and even “friend” almost all of them digitally. It is for this world that we need an answer to the question, “What is citizenship?” But the older accounts can serve as crutches. In order to understand citizenship, one needs to see and understand the realm where citizens act, that is, the public sphere. As a starting point for our inquiry into the meaning of citizenship in the 21st century specifically, I’d like therefore to endorse and lean on a core insight about the public sphere that emerges from the tradition of political thought: namely that the public sphere is built not only out of institutions but also out of the habits of citizens, more specifically, those habits that guide citizens in how to interact with each other.

Part III: Refining the Idea of the Public Sphere
The political thinkers I’ve just described endorsed very different kinds of regime, from monarchies to princely republics to democracy, yet all focused on the question of citizenly virtues. Why? All of these thinkers recognized that the habits of citizens determine the shape of the public sphere and the quality of political life that can emerge in it. The interactions of citizens with one another generate the web of social relations that constitute the public sphere, and within which a polity’s institutions operate. How should we adapt this insight to our circumstances?

First, let me make this insight more concrete. I’d like to share with you a passage from a speech given in an Athenian courtroom during the 4th century BCE by a politician named Apollodorus that provides a good example of what I mean. Apollodorus was prosecuting a woman named Neaera. He accused her of having pretended to be a citizen, despite in fact being a prostitute, and then of having used her fake status to marry an Athenian citizen in order to insinuate her progeny into the citizenry. In Athens court cases were argued before juries of anywhere from 200 to 6000 jurors. We have to imagine Apollodorus speaking to such a large group when toward the end of his speech, he says this:

**Athens**

[110] [Jurors,] when each one of you goes home, what will he find to say to his own wife or his daughter or his mother, if he has acquitted this woman?--when the question is asked you, “Where were you?” and you answer, “We sat as jury.” “Trying whom?” it will at once be asked, “Neaera,” you will say, of course, will you not? “because she, an alien woman, is living as wife with an Athenian contrary to law, and because she gave her daughter, who had lived as a harlot, in marriage to Theogenes, the king, and this daughter performed on the city's behalf the rites that none may name, and was given as wife to Dionysus.” And you will narrate all the other details of the charge, showing how well and accurately and in a manner not easily forgotten the accusation covered each point. [111] And the women, when they have heard, will say, “Well, what did you do?” And you will say, “We acquitted her.” At this point the most virtuous of the women will be angry at you for having deemed it right that this woman should share in like manner with themselves in the public ceremonials and religious rites; and to those who are not women of discretion you point out clearly
that they may do as they please, for they have nothing to fear from you or the laws. For if you treat the matter with indifference or toleration, you will yourselves seem to approve of this woman's conduct. [Dem. 59 109-111]

In this passage, we see how political institutions and duties of citizenship take their meaning and draw their vitality from a broader conversational surround, one defined by citizens’ most basic habits for interacting with one another.

What shape of the Athenian public sphere is captured here? Yes, the city-state was structured by institutions, here juries, but in this passage the fact of the institutions matters less than that the jurors were acting together, specifically judging. Their judgments had a life in a public conversation that could leap institutional barriers and travel to other parts of the city, including to the proverbial kitchen table; there further evaluations and assessments would also be conducted. The jurors are not merely judges; they also are judged and must face their own accountability for the choices they make about the meaning of Athenian citizenship. They are responsible not only in an institutional but also in a personal sense, conversationally, before their families in particular. The web of relations among men and women here generates a conversation that envelops political action. The public sphere in Athens, in which core values are memorialized, thus consisted of overlapping networks of conversation that related all Athenian citizens, male and female, to one another in the creation of the city’s shared life and the memorialization of its values.

Just as political philosophers have produced a catalog of citizenly virtues, so too they have offered multiple accounts of how to constitute the public sphere. Nonetheless, beneath the differences in detail, one idea emerges consistently. It is useful to us too in the 21st century, where we face not a small community of fellow citizens as in the Athenian city-state, but millions of citizen-strangers. That consistent idea is this: The structure and quality of a polity’s conversations determine both the quality of its collective political decisions and their relative legitimacy as political actions.

Let me break this core idea down. As I do I will begin to explain how this idea can guide our understanding of citizenship in the 21st century.

By “structure” I mean the patterns by which opinions form and ideas move both through and across informal and formal citizenly networks. Informal networks are neighborhoods, communities and other social groupings without durable form. Formal networks are institutions and organized media. One discerns the “structure” of the public sphere by mapping conversational relationships, by analyzing where and how groups or institutions or conversational communities have formed, and by tracing conversational relations among them. Are all of a polity’s social groups somehow linked to each other through conversational structures? This is an important question. What percentage of the citizenry is so linked? Are there any effectively impermeable barriers to the movement of ideas from one group to another? These are questions to ask in order to determine the structure of the public sphere.
The second set of questions that must be asked concerns the quality of the conversation that passes through these conversational networks. Do these conversations allow for the development of critical reason? Do they allow for learning and the development of genuine knowledge? Do they provide opportunities for opposing viewpoints to be expressed in contests guided by norms of fair play? As democratic citizens, we also need to judge whether the quality of our polity’s conversations legitimate collective decisions as democratic actions specifically. To do this, we must ask another set of questions about conversational quality. Are our public conversations inclusive, egalitarian, autonomy-respecting, transparent with respect to interest, and maximally actualizing of individuals?

Of course, making judgments about the democratic caliber of public conversation is not easy. Philosophers have agreed for nearly two centuries now that a properly democratic public sphere should embody those qualities of inclusiveness, egalitarianism, respect for individual autonomy, transparency with respect to interest, and human actualization, but they have by no means agreed on exactly what counts as success in regard to these criteria. The debate has produced a spectrum of views. Let me provide just two examples of its poles.

The 19th century German philosopher, Georg Friedrich Hegel, for instance, argued that cultures develop through dialectical processes where first one view, then another is ascendant, leading eventually to a synthesis that produces a set of values for the community to which everyone can wholeheartedly assent; all members of the community will have their own particular viewpoint assimilated within the merged final view, with the consequence that the resultant communal values belong equally to all. Thinkers who follow this Hegelian line generally argue for communitarian forms of citizenship that emphasize the preservation of shared cultural heritage.

My own argument, in contrast, is that such a dialectical merging of all citizens’ viewpoints, particularly in a world as vast as our own where we are all, essentially, strangers to one another, is impossible; pictures of the public sphere that suggest we can achieve consensus or unanimity are generally misguided. Instead, citizens need to structure public conversations to draw all points of view into circulation, but they must then also recognize that there is no way to avoid the need for majority votes to decide questions. Since majority votes make winners and losers, loss in the public sphere is inevitably part of the experience of citizenship. Practices of citizenship must, therefore, include habits for seeing the sacrifices that some citizens make for others, of acknowledging and honoring those sacrifices, and also of reciprocating them so that no one citizen or group of citizens solely or continually bears the public’s necessary burdens.

The fact of loss in political life will continually work to stir up distrust among citizens; in order to maintain a healthy public sphere, citizens must work constantly to overcome that distrust. This they can do, I have argued elsewhere, by enacting a citizenly virtue that I refer to as political friendship, an idea that I have stolen from Aristotle. In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle presents an account of a whole host of virtues—from courage to generosity to prudence. Each of these virtues hits a mid-way point between two extremes. Courage, for instance, hits a midway point between cowardice and
Aristotle’s virtues is one that he says does not have a name. It is the virtue of acting well toward fellow citizens and strangers. He says that this virtue is like friendship but does not have its emotional factor. I have taken to calling this unnamed virtue “political friendship.” It lies, says Aristotle, between the vice of being domineering “and acting toward others without caring whatsoever how much pain one causes” and the vice of being obsequious “or acquiescing in everything and going entirely out of one’s way to avoid causing any pain to anyone whatsoever.”

This Aristotelian virtue of public life, concerning proper interaction with strangers, looks like friendship even if it doesn’t feel like it, since an emotional charge is missing. Political friendship is not mainly (or not only) a sentiment of fellow-feeling for other citizens. It is more importantly a way of acting in respect to them: friendship, known to all, defines the normative aspirations. One doesn’t even have to like one’s fellow citizens in order to act toward them as a political friend. There is a very easy way of transforming one’s relations to strangers. We might simply ask about all our encounters with others in our polity, “Would I treat a friend this way?” When we can answer “yes,” we are on the way to developing a citizenship that is neither domination nor acquiescence. When the answer is no, we have not escaped our old bad habits. In an excessively partisan age, with a culture riven by distrust, we are more than ever need to cultivate this sort of virtue. My own view is that the quality of public discourse in a democracy should properly be judged against the measuring stick established by this idea of political friendship.

This account, then, of the public sphere yields two tools for diagnosing our current situation as citizens. First, we need to determine the structure of our public sphere; that is, we need to identify the structure of our conversational networks; and second, we need to assess the quality of the conversation that flows through those networks with a view to whether it meets the standards of “political friendship.” For the remainder of the time that I have with you this evening, I will begin to sketch answers to these questions about the structure and quality of our contemporary public sphere. A full account of the structure of our public sphere, as it presently exists, however, and a full assessment of the quality of conversation flowing through it, would take a second lecture as long as this one. I will therefore for the time being offer only impressionistic, partial, and initial observations. I hope, though, that my preceding description of the questions to ask about public life gives you a basis for proceeding on your own to ask and answer the question of what citizenship is in the 21st century. I aim now only to offer a jumping off point.

**Part V: Citizenship in the 21st Century**

Two features of the public sphere as it exists on October 2, 2008, in the U.S., worry me. One relates to the structure of the public sphere; the other to the quality of conversation that flows through it. The first, structural issue is the intensifying sense that a stark cultural divide now marks our collective life; we commonly acknowledge this divide by joking about red and blues states. The second qualitative feature of our public conversations that makes me nervous is the rise in anonymous political discourse on the internet. Anonymous writing is a constant, of course, of politics but its volume does wax and wane. We are in a period of its waxing for specific historical reasons of real existential import.
First, then, for the structural issue. We already have a short-hand for understanding the difference between, let’s say, red and blue citizens. Reds, we say, bring guns and Bibles into the public sphere; blues, we say, bring lattes and Chablis. These symbols convey socio-economic differences between the two categories of citizen: the “reds” are imagined as working to middle class; blues as middle to upper class. The symbols also convey cultural differences: reds are social conservatives; blues advocate social toleration; reds are grounded in old, recognizable, homespun traditions; blues are oriented toward novelty and the easy assimilation of foreign influence. But I think this shorthand misses the structural feature of our public conversations that may be generating the feeling of increased separation between reds and blues. If one spends time on the web, trying to trace the conversational networks through which different sorts of social and cultural norms travel and tries to identify when, where, and how ideas leap from one social group to another, or instead of leaping, circulate within closed groups reinforcing group identity, one notices that present and prior military affiliation are of critical importance. Putting it crudely and too generally, reds often are in or have been in the military; blues typically are not. In the distinction between red and blue cultures, are we beginning to see the cultural and political consequences of having converted from a citizen’s army to a professional military?

Richard Nixon ended the draft in 1973. Since then we have had an all-volunteer armed force. Militaries are by definition organizations that build solidarity and construct organizations to ensure that current and former members share ongoing conversation. These conversations reinforce bonds. One of the most striking features of the “red” conversations that thrive on the web is the degree to which their vocabularies and rhetorical styles show the marks of military culture; conversely one of the most striking features of “blue” conversations is the near total absence of such vocabulary and rhetorical styles. Let me just check something. How many of you are closely related to someone who has gone to Iraq? By this I mean a parent, sibling, spouse, or child? How many of you have at least a distant relative who has gone to Iraq?

My hunch is that the single most important structural feature of our contemporary public sphere in the U.S. is the relative segregation of military and non-military communities from one another; the conversational network gathering together active duty and veteran members of the military seems to overlap with only, let’s call it, half of this country’s familial and social networks. If the red state-blue state distinction does capture a breakdown in conversational connectedness between citizens who have and have not served in the military, then our cultural divide is not accidental, not momentary, and not trivial. If we are seeing a real separation of military and non-military cultures, I would say the time has come to reconsider a variety of institutional possibilities—from required national service to a draft—with a view to restoring a set of informal and formal conversational networks that can ensure that conversations that emanate from military experience are fully integrated with the rest of the polity’s conversations and vice versa.

Now let me turn to the qualitative issue: the rise in anonymous public speech. In fact, I believe the resurgence of anonymity arises from the privatization of political communication occasioned by the internet. What do I mean by the phrase “privatization
of political communication”?

You might at first think that I mean the stunning fact that any private individual anywhere can now generate “news” and disseminate it globally. Professionals such as journalists are no longer in charge. And ordinary citizens, who have rushed eagerly to topple an edifice of elite news control, have generally not yet adopted the ethical standards, developed by associations like the American Society of Newspaper Editors and journalism schools that for nearly a century had defended truth, accuracy, and “fair play” as the bedrock of our public sphere. But this phenomenon, the upsetting of elite control over the media, is best called not a privatization but a democratization of political communication.

By “privatization of political communication,” I mean instead the fact that citizens can now speak publicly from the privacy of their own homes. I can sit in bed in my bathrobe and write a blog that will ricochet around the web. The fundamental political concepts of public and private are in jeopardy here. Since philosophers first began to argue about the meaning of citizenship and its virtues, they have stabilized their concepts with just that distinction between private and public. Some philosophers have argued that private and public virtues are identical, but others have argued for differentiation. In Athens for instance, expressing oneself angrily toward other citizens in the public sphere was valorized but similar behavior at home was considered poisonous. Other eras have also made much of this distinction. In the 18th and 19th century, Romantic thinkers developed notions of intimacy and self-development that made home the place where individuals come to know their true selves. From this idea a commitment to privacy emerged to protect the intimate lives of our selves, conducted in our homes, from the glare of public scrutiny.

One common thread runs through all prior accounts of the relation between public and private. Citizens know the difference between the two in spatial terms; we talk about public and private spaces, spheres, domains, and realms. We talk about being in public or in private. “A man’s house is his kingdom,” we say. Or, “What happens behind the closed doors of my home is my own affair.” The streets, the malls, the marketplace, the debating halls belong to public life; we know its components by coming to understand geography. Importantly, this spatial understanding of the line between private and public life does not merely help us know which is which; it serves as a mnemonic structure to help us remember when to adopt one or another persona. At work all day or out shopping,

---

1The arrival of the internet has, I believed, introduced a radical challenge to our basic habits for understanding citizenship. Other scholars have worried about the effects of the internet on public life. Cass Sunstein, for instance, in a book entitled Republic.com and a sequel entitled Republic.com 2.0 has taken up the topic of “echo chambers.” His argument is that the internet allows each of us to tailor our media consumption to our pre-existing tastes, and allows advertisers and producers of media content to tailor their offerings to us to our pre-existing tastes as made manifest in our usage habits, that we run the risk of all moving solely in cultural contexts where we have our own predispositions and prejudices confirmed by likeminded-people with similar tastes. He worries that the encounter with the unfamiliar, the surprising, the opposing viewpoint will become sufficiently infrequent that we must worry about cultural balkanization and the atrophying of our capacity to deal with difference. This is a concern but not the one that pre-occupies me. In my view, the radical challenge posed by the internet is what I think of as the privatization of political communication.
or at a political rally, I conduct myself on the premise that I will be held accountable in
the public sphere for my treatment of others and for the views I express therein. But when
I get home, and close my door behind me, I, as they say, “let my hair down.” Now I am
accountable to myself, my truest feelings, and my own reflections. I may experiment with
ideas or behaviors that I am not yet willing to acknowledge in public. I will certainly
share with my housemates—whether family or friends—a fuller range of my emotional
life than I share out and about. The spatial difference between private and public life
helps me remember which kinds of behaviors to undertake when.

Thanks to the internet, our system of spatial mnemonics for knowing the difference
between private and public has collapsed. When I sit in my bedroom in my bathrobe
typing a blog, is that a private or a public act? I am in the privacy of my home. Doesn’t
that make it private? But I am speaking in a domain to which many others, including
many strangers, have access. Doesn’t that make it public? Which is it? The proliferation
of anonymous forms of communication on the internet may well reflect exactly this
confusion. The use of anonymity in the public sphere functions as a way of pretending
that, despite the public posting, the communication really is private, hidden, from behind
closed doors or in the dark, because it has been written in private. In the era of the
internet, as long as we try to understand the distinction between private and public in
spatial terms, we will suffer cognitive dissonance. My hunch is that the common use of
anonymity reflects that cognitive dissonance.

If we are to preserve a distinction between private and public, and I think we need such a
distinction, we will have to ground it in not spatial but temporal terms. We might, for
instance, distinguish between the time we spend with ourselves and the time we spend
with the world or, as I think of it, between time of the self and time of the world. Time of
the self we would treat as private and time of the world as public, expecting to be
accountable to others for how we conduct ourselves when we are engaged in the time of
the world. But what do I mean by time of the self and time of the world? I build here on
insights of the philosopher Hannah Arendt, a German Jewish émigré, who taught at the
New School in New York and the University of Chicago, among other institutions.
Arendt recognized that important intellectual virtues had over millennia been built into
the ideas of private and public space; in particular, the contrast between private and
public had protected the contrast between reflection, which is best done privately, and
political deliberation, which we do publicly.

In her 1957 book The Human Condition she distinguishes private from public life in
terms of the type intellectual inquiry appropriate to each; and makes clear that private and
public really denote not different spaces but different ways of spending time. In the
private realm, taken in the most extreme case of solitude, we spend time with ourselves
thinking. As she puts it: “thinking therefore is never altogether without a partner and
without company” (p. 76). These occasions with ourselves provide the basis for coming
to understand, crudely, what life is to us, what is valuable in life, what our hopes are
beyond the bare necessities of feeding and clothing ourselves. The private realm is for
hiding whatever should not be exposed to the glare of publicity. We find the well-springs
of our own capacity for truth-telling in the dark. We can think of this sort of reflective
contemplation, a searching out of meanings, as what we do in a private place or we can think of life spent in this fashion as private time or as time spent with the self.

The public realm is marked instead by historical time. This is the time made by events and deeds. For examples of events, we might take September 11th, say, or election days when the will of “the people,” metaphorically understood, as it exists on a specific day, is recorded, changing our common direction. As for deeds, here the focus is on individual agency. We might take Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation as an example. Arendt means something very specific when she uses the word deeds; my own usage extends her meaning. Let me try to convey the precise sense.

A deed is an action that (1) flows from a particular type of inquiry, (2) makes a particular intellectual claim, and (3) attempts a particular type of action. Those who accomplish the deeds that make history take it upon themselves, first, to understand the moment, the activated, live present, in which they find themselves. They scrutinize the chaos of events around them and seek to understand its structure and its meaning. Second, they diagnose the present moment and claim to understand the particular questions, problems, and challenges it presents and the decisions it demands. When, for instance, Barack Obama says, “We are at a defining moment in our history,” and proceeds to elaborate the choices we face, he claims to have engaged in just such an intellectual inquiry and lays claim to a definite diagnosis.

Third, those who accomplish deeds act, on the basis of their intellectual inquiry and resulting diagnoses, in an effort to shift the direction of the unfolding of human events. The example of Lincoln and the Emancipation proclamation can help clarify the point. The Emancipation proclamation in fact liberated no one because it applied only to the Confederate states over which Lincoln at the time of its issue had no control. The Proclamation served instead to re-define the war. Up until the point of the Proclamation, the war had focused centrally not on slavery but on union. Lincoln hoped, by issuing the Proclamation, to shift the emphasis from union to the end of slavery and in so doing to renew the emotional and spiritual resources the Union could bring to its endeavor, thereby tipping the balance in the war. Lincoln meant, by giving the war a new meaning, to re-direct its outcome and to re-direct the political processes of the country. This is the sort of action Arendt, and I mean, when we use the word deed. It is the kind of action that can flow only from the desire of human beings to “show who they really and inexchangeably are” by bending the entirety of their mind’s energy to a decision about the meaning of the present, a decision about the choices that flow from that meaning, and a decision about how to act in the present in order to make that adjudged meaning and its related choices the basis for generating a new direction for historical time. This participation in the time of the world is what we all do in the public sphere, however un-self-consciously, however inchoately, however imperfectly. When I blog politically, even in my bathrobe, I spend time with the world.

And when we are engaged in thought and action of this kind—diagnosing the circumstances of our lives with others; proposing responses to those circumstances; and acting in order to make the meanings we consider essential real in the world—we should
feel the full weight of our public responsibility upon us. To the time of the world the norms of the public sphere apply. As I said above, in my view, these are the norms of political friendship. They entail being willing to speak in one’s own name and to take public responsibility for one’s views. Would I send a friend an anonymous letter? Certainly not. So too, with fellow citizens, such a form of address should be the exception not the rule.

There are also important intellectual virtues, at stake here in this issue of reconstituting the distinction between private and public. The instinct for anonymity may often reflect intellectual laziness. It does frequently indicate a failure to have spent adequate time with the self in advance of spending time in public, as if one can economize and do both things at once. But one can’t. As Arendt put it: “A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real non-subjective sense” (p. 71). When we publish anonymously, we often instinctively reveal that we have not prepared ourselves adequately through private reflection to accept responsibility for our public contributions. Paradoxically enough, we need sufficient private time, when we think with our selves and complete our own thoughts, to make our best contributions to public life. Blogging in our bathrobes we are caught betwixt and between, in some shadowy middle ground between private and public; from this position we are tempted into anonymity. Perhaps when one finds oneself there—in a bathrobe at the computer—one should be asking oneself whether one needs time with the self or time with the world before one decides whether to write? A need for which sort of time has brought one to the computer?

The deep problem of citizenship in the 21st century may be to recover the distinction between private and public, between time of the self and time of the world. This problem is more challenging ultimately, I think, than the need we also face to find ways to restructure our conversational networks to avoid the development of segregated experience and communities. But we must confront both problems. I will add, though, that universities have a special role with respect to the first. For centuries now great universities have fostered humanistic reflection—the well-spring of citizenship deeply understood. Will they continue to do so? We may hope so since such reflection gives public life its depth.

Gonnerman: Thank you very much. Now we’ll move into a conversation that will begin with remarks by Professor Josiah Ober, the Constantine Mitsotakis Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences here at Stanford. He divides his time and academic

---

2 This distinction between public and private spheres as coinciding with two different kinds of thought and two different ways of spending time with oneself and others intellectually identifies the two halves of the humanistic project: to understand life itself and its meaning for each of us individually on the one hand and to understand social life and the possibilities and difficulties of our life with others on the other. In private, during time spend with ourselves, we do the former. In public, during time spent with the world, we do the latter.
appointment between the Departments of Classics and Political Science, and has a courtesy appointment in Philosophy. He writes and teaches courses on various topics conjoining Greek history, classical philosophy, and political theory and practice. In addition to his ongoing work on the politics of knowledge and innovation, he is developing a project on the relationship between democracy and inherent human capacities and the ethical implications of that relationship. His most recent book, *Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together*, was published in 2005. His new book, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens*, is forthcoming in November from Princeton University Press. At Princeton he was Danielle Allen’s academic advisor when she was an undergraduate there.

Josiah Ober: I’m tremendously pleased to be given this opportunity to continue a conversation that Danielle and I have been having for a great many years now, and it’s one of the best conversations of my life.

Habits are often thought to be bad: we speak casually about problem behaviors as addictions. And even for those of us who do not self-describe as addicts: how many times do we say to ourselves: I really must kick this nasty habit of [fill in the blank], or I’d better quit doing [whatever] before it becomes a habit.

But borrowing from Aristotle, Danielle Allen shows us that habits can be good—when they are self-conscious products of our autonomous moral choices. Actively choosing, not just passively “developing” the right kind of habits is, Danielle reminds us, a fundamental part of achieving maturity as individuals, and as members of a community.

If we are adequately self-aware, we choose our habits as a response to important questions. Humanistic study, Danielle reminds us, is an essential part of any fully realized life because it bears upon a question of the very greatest importance: “how ought I to live?” Choosing for ourselves the right habits requires that we have an answer to that question. I don’t suppose that it need be the FINAL answer, but it had better be a pretty good one. The alternative is living unreflectively, randomly, in the manner of a “wanton”, in the language used by the moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt was author of a best-selling book entitled *On Bullshit*. One implication of his work is that when we bullshit ourselves about the big questions, our lives and the lives of others in our community go that much worse. To undertake serious humanistic study, of the sort Danielle calls for, means learning to cut through the bullshit of public and private communication.

Living together with others, in a democratic rather than an autocratic community, entails learning citizenship. Danielle shows us that this is no simple thing: She pushes us away from conceiving of citizenship as mere patriotism or a bare set of institutional duties. She urges us to think of citizenship as a set of moral habits, habits chosen as a result of public conversations and private reflections. A menu of habits may be offered to us by our
culture, but the habits we choose must be adapted by us to our particular circumstances, and made our own through reiterated practice.

Citizenship, in Danielle’s terms is at once a perennial concern arising from human nature, and an intensely contemporary matter, specific to the circumstances of our own here and now. Danielle reminds us that, as we seek to choose the right habits, we can learn a lot by reading texts that bear on the ideal and practical problems of citizenship: autonomous choice ought not require reinventing the wheel. We must begin the hard work of struggling with the ideas of great writers from the past in full recognition that our choices will be made under the unique conditions of our modernity—a world that is in some ways different from anything that has gone before. In some ways, but not in every: Danielle urges us to engage with the past.

She is eloquent on why we should do so. But how ought we to use an engagement with the past to allow us to make better choices in our unique present when seeking to decide how we ought to live our lives together? What is the method of humanistic study? Hasn’t she left out the most important part? Maybe not.

In her talk this evening, Danielle did not offer an explicit lesson in humanistic method. But she did offer us a text, a passage from Apollodorus’ prosecution speech *Against Neira*. I’d like to suggest that her talk can be understood as an exegesis of that text. In other words, a good reader ought to be in a better position to grapple with the arguments Danielle has offered us this evening after paying close attention to the text on offer and placing that text in its historical context. This requires that we each learn to do what Danielle and other great humanists do extraordinarily well. The field in which Danielle received her first PhD is traditionally called “classical philology”—and philology, it has been well said, is the art of reading slowly. So let’s just try a bit of slow reading.

At first the passage seems unpromising: Apollodorus was not a moral or political philosopher in the usual sense of the term: no Plato, or Machiavelli, Locke, or Mill… or Allen! But if the passage was not chosen casually, it ought to help us understand how habits of virtue, how space and time, past and future, public and private relate to citizenship.

The passage begins:

[110] “[Jurors,] when each one of you goes home, what will he find to say to his own wife or his daughter or his mother, if he has acquitted this woman?”

Right away, Apollodorus thrusts his audience—the Athenian jurors and us his later readers - into the role of having been jurors, of imaginatively inhabiting a future time in which we are living with the effects of our joint public action. He asks us to think about the question: What will happen if we choose to acquit? Apollodorus imagines the conversation we, having been (adult male citizen) jurors in this imagined alternative future, will be having with female members of our imagined household—wife, daughter,
mother—people who cannot be active citizens according to Athenian law, but whose private choices are deeply affected by the public choices of “us citizens.”

So to continue: “When the question is asked of you, “Where were you?”… You answer, “We sat as jury.”

The imagined interlocutor, your wife, mother, or daughter, asks what seems to be a spatial question about an individual, “Where were you (singular)?” But your answer is not in spatial terms, rather it is in the terms of the consequential joint actions of a body of citizens: “We sat as a jury.”—So now we, as readers, need to ask ourselves: why did we answer that way? Slow reading means we ought to stop here until we sort that out, but let’s move on…

“Trying whom?” it will at once be asked, “Neaera,” you will say… “because she, an alien woman, is living as wife with an Athenian contrary to law, and because she gave her daughter, who had lived as a harlot, in marriage to Theogenes, the king, and this daughter performed on the city's behalf the rites that none may name, and was given as wife to Dionysus.” And you will narrate all the other details of the charge…

Now we really need to slow down! Theogenes the “king” married Neaira’s harlot-daughter who performed religious ceremonies on behalf of the city, and was given as wife to a god… Whoa, we are definitely not in Kansas, Toto! What is a “king” doing in a democracy? What’s with all this intermixing of state and religion, of mortal and divine, of public and private? All this demands that we SLOW DOWN…

And the women, when they have heard, will say, “Well, what did you do?”

And there it is: what public choice did you make and with what consequences…? This is “action” the sense that Hannah Arendt meant it.

“And [in the imagined alternative future] you will say, “We acquitted her.””

Gulp. Now we come to a decision fork, between righteous anger and lawless license: “At this point the most virtuous of the women will be angry at you for having deemed it right that this woman should share in like manner with themselves in the public ceremonials and religious rites.”

So women who have chosen for themselves the “right” habits (right according to Apollodorus)—the habits of private virtue, are furious because when they appear in public they must share that public space and civic time with an individual who is not “one of them”—not in birthright nor in chosen habits. So anger pervades the household and the city—with what consequences? Again… SLOW DOWN!

“… and to those who are not women of discretion you point out clearly that they may do as they please, for they have nothing to fear from you or the laws.”
Athenian women who have not chosen the right habits, suggests Apollodorus, will be unfettered from fear of male authority and law. Again we need to think through the implied consequences. Which is worse, for your imagined family and city: the righteous anger of the virtuous or the unfettered license of those who have failed to develop the habits of virtue?

*Can you imagine* yourself as Apollodorus’ juror? What would it take to make the leap from a question about an individual in space to an answer about joint action? How much does Apollodorus’ argument depend on gender relations that we, the we of here and now, must reject out of hand? How much depends on our judgments about the importance of maintaining strict boundaries separating citizens from non-citizens? Does it matter that Apollodorus himself was a naturalized citizen of Athens, the son of a former slave?

If we are to answer those questions, among others, we will need to read *very slowly*. We will need to consult other texts, reflect quietly and engage in lively conversations with one another. That, at any rate, is the substantive and methodological point I take away from Danielle’s choice of this text, which I suppose she offers us as a sort of gift in the spirit of friendship—at once civic friendship and perhaps something more.

**Allen:** Thank you very much. I think you went right to the heart of what I was trying to say about the relationship between learning and citizenship, so the phrase “slow reading” is definitely one that I mean to convey and capture. So for me, in some sense, the argument of this paper comes out of personal discoveries. I think private time and reflection are not the ways of being in the world that have gotten the most attention from political scientists and political theory in recent years. We were talking about this a bit at lunch. We tend to talk a lot about deliberation and the kinds of practices citizens can develop for deliberating on hard questions with one another. And for a variety of accidental reasons, I’ve come to have a better appreciation of how much work people need to do even before they are in that deliberative forum in order to be ready for it. And it’s a very different kind of work, but it is no less politically consequential despite being private and reflective and, in an important way, *un*political before it has its own political relevance. We learn how to do it. We all are forced into it to some extent, but we can learn to do it with more or less discipline, essentially, and so the art of slow reading, I think, does capture the kind of discipline that can be developed for that activity of reflection.

**Ober:** This is the sort of question that political philosophers interested in classical philosophy often bat around, so let me offer it as a jumping-off point. It’s sort of a double question, so take either part of it or put them together. There are two problems in Aristotle. One is the famous: Which is the best life? Theoria, the life inherently of reflection and contemplation, is often translated as more action. Do you think there is an answer to that? Famously, Aristotle doesn’t seem to come to a clear answer. Should we try to be driving at an answer to the final question of how ought I to live my life? Ultimately, I think, that’s the big question that is hovering there, and there are at least two possible answers. Just the related question—another Aristotle puzzle—and that is, is
political citizenship to be understood in the first instance as a form of use friendship or virtue friendship?

Allen: I’m going to take another page from Sarah Palin and not answer your question. No, I’m kidding. I will answer your question, but I’m going to go back for two seconds to the previous one, and it will feed back into this because another thought occurred to me as you were beginning your second question. In some sense, actually, we could use the idea of close reading even to help us think about the debate that we just watched. I, for a while, had a hunch about political conversation that citizens respond to the relative coherence or lack of coherence in any speaker’s pronouncements. I tested this hunch out by asking a psychologist who works on this stuff and he said yes, I was right. So it’s not that citizens self-consciously can say, “Ah, that speaker produced a coherent set of thoughts and that speaker did not,” but that they have an instinctive reaction to that presence of coherence or not. In watching the debate, I think there are moments when one can see or one responds in that way to the presence or absence of coherence in one or another speaker. That kind of coherence, I think, emerges from time spent with the self, time spent in reflection. It is what allows one to figure out the connections between concepts such that then answers can hang together as earned thoughts as opposed to pastiches of stuff picked up publicly.

 Obviously, I wallow in Aristotle. I spend too much time with Aristotle. The second question is in some sense easier than the first one: the use and virtue friendship distinction as Aristotle gives us three different kinds of friendship, essentially. First is the friendship between two people who are both serious thinkers—people who have moral integrity and whose friendship, therefore, is complete intellectually and in moral ways, too. And then you have this middle domain of the kind of attractions among citizens and strangers. And then you have something called “use friendship,” which is basically business transactions—the kind of relationship you develop with the guy at the cash register every time you go in to get your groceries, or whatever else. And I think political friendship lives in a middle space because it has aspirations to the higher type of friendship, but it starts from the lower type, so it’s always a kind of oscillation back and forth between those sets of relationships.

I’d be curious to know what you think about the question of the relationship between the life of contemplation and the life of action. I think that they are fundamentally irreconcilable and I think in substance that’s what Arendt’s comment about the shallowness of public life was about, too. At the end of the day, one makes choices, and each choice comes with a cost. The life of action will ultimately limit the time one has for reflection, and therefore presumably over time erode that kind of intellectual coherence that I was talking about, or at least make it hard to maintain that same level of thoughtful caliber as new questions and new problems arise. On the other hand, the life of contemplation is an extremely selfish life, I think it must be said. What do you think?

Ober: I’ve really puzzled about it a lot, and at least one sort of dodge is to imagine Aristotle’s own life and how he would have imagined it going at various times in his life. We don’t know a lot about the history of Stagira, where he was born. He came from
Stagira before he was an adult. He was sixteen or seventeen when he came to Athens, if we’re to believe the ancient biographies. It’s very probable that, in the meantime, when he was in Athens, Stagira was eliminated as a state by the actions of Philip of Macedon. So Aristotle is now living in Athens as a metik—as a permanent, long-term resident foreigner—and yet there is no place for him to be a citizen any longer in his life. And so I’ve at least played around with the thought that here he is tugged toward this life that he can never actually live in its fullness. He has, in fact, chosen this contemplative path because he’s gone to study with Plato. But had he meant to go to study with Plato and then, when he’d gotten sort of tooted up as a really good, powerful analytic thinker, he would return to a world of action, return to the world, but in the meantime, the world has moved on for him. I think that at least it’s sort of playing biography into philosophy, which is a famously bad way to do it. But still and all, it seems to me that actually thinking about how the lived life—the actual choices you really have and the choices you don’t have—the choice that an exile, even if he is initially voluntarily self-exiled, then becomes permanently exiled because his homeland is gone, doesn’t have, is that some part of how we should be thinking about how to read Aristotle’s unwillingness to commit, in a sense, or willingness to commit that seems to be two different things in two different spaces.

Allen: That’s very interesting. I think the other question it raises is what sets of questions—what modes of thought—are lost with contemplative life by virtue of lack of participation in the public sphere. And, in fact, there are various very hard, moral philosophical questions that are generally thought to emerge more in the context of action than in the context of contemplation. A good example of this is the “dirty hands problem.” There’s a very good new book by John Parrish called *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*. The dirty hands problem is the kind of problem that we’ve all been thinking about in the last few years. For example, should a political leader request or authorize the torture of a suspect in order to prevent an act of terrorism against thousands of people, or whatever? What is the right thing to do in that kind of circumstance? In general, Aristotle really doesn’t have much to say about that. He doesn’t think about that kind of question. There are other sorts of moral quandaries that people find themselves in that he doesn’t get much purchase on. So there may be some reason to think that an active life throws up problems to which a person who cares about the full range of contemplation wants access to, so that’s a way of flipping the issue around, in which case Aristotle’s “yes” in his life must have been constrained and limited in important ways.

Ober: I think that’s exactly right. The other thing to think about is that if we’re to once again accept the tradition, Aristotle causes his students to develop these case studies of 158 other states, most of them Greek city-states like Carthage—not limited to Greek city-states. We only have one of them, of course: the constitution of Athens, which appeared accidentally in the belly of a crocodile mummy (one of the stories philologists love to tell). But if this is any indication, it really is an attempt to get at the nitty-gritty of what really happened. The constitution of Athens is not a description of institutional duties in your terms. A lot of it is really a description of what really happened in the history of this city—the actual decisions that groups of citizens had to make together. So it’s interesting to think about him trying to come to grips with this through accounts that are not just
simply the kinds of deracinated puzzles that analytic philosophers sometimes use to try to slow down.

**Allen:** Different sorts of crutches, in other words, to support intellectual inquiry.

**Question from the Audience:** One of the things that you mentioned was the separation between anonymous speech on the internet and personal speech. What is your opinion about pseudo-anonymous writers—people who maintain, for example, one Web site or one pseudonym for years?

**Allen:** There are two sets of thought. In general, I’ve treated pseudonymous writing in the same terms as anonymous writing, and I recognize that there is good and valuable anonymous and pseudonymous writing. The one most obvious example is *The Federalist Papers*, published originally by Publius. An important distinction is whether what the anonymous writing does is articulate analytical or theoretical arguments or facts—factual allegations against particular individuals and things like that. The former I have no problem with at all. It’s the fact that slander often travels with anonymity; that first provoked my interest in it. I just said that I have no problem with anonymous writing if it’s about theoretical or abstract ideas. Obviously, I’ve just contradicted myself in the sense that I don’t have a problem with it if it conveys the fullness of thought that I am describing. If it’s lazy, if it’s clear that someone has not thought the thing through before—they’ve just thrown it out there—that’s a problem. But it’s a different kind of problem from the kind of problem that attaches to the use of anonymity to hide slander. But what you’re really asking is what if a person builds up a character over time so this person is essentially a known entity. They’ve taken public responsibility, but in a different way than through their legal name. I would have to think about that. I don’t have an easy answer immediately. I would be cautious in the same way because I do think taking public responsibility in a way that you can be found and held accountable—that people can talk to you—is an important thing. I would have to look at examples and think it through.

**Question from the Audience:** I had a question about how we can teach our youngest citizens, children still in school, about how to live this life of contemplation—to prepare young citizens for discussing in a public sphere and also being able to reflect privately. As someone who has just recently come out of the public school system, I have to say that I don’t think I was ever encouraged to do this until I got to college which, unfortunately, I think, is really too late to start doing that.

**Allen:** Let me throw it back at you, then, and ask you: What would you change about your elementary or high school in order to achieve that?

**Audience member (continued):** I would say that the education I got—learning about the basics of government and, as you mentioned, seeing patriotism as the foundation of citizenship—is very simplified. I would like to see more debate and discussion in the classroom at a younger age … instead of students passively taking in information from
someone standing in front of the classroom, really forcing and encouraging students to wrestle with ideas on their own.

**Allen:** Thank you. That’s helpful. Josh, what do you think?

**Ober:** Well, I certainly think that this is really desirable. I think that if one once again takes a basic Aristotelian conception of this that the kind of character formation does happen early. The thing about Aristotle’s argument is that it’s a sort of sliding scale. At a very early age, children are told what to do, they are not given full explanations for why they must do that. They eventually come to understand that. So I think that it can’t be the case that we start in the very earliest ages fully throwing open the possibility of all forms of action and license, and so on. But I think that the idea that we can push back the problem of self-consciously (in Danielle’s framing of this), reflectively chosen habits of mental habits, habits of engagement with others … push that back into the high school, and even the grade school time, and begin to think really self-consciously instead of just tooling up these kids to have the technical and mathematical, reading, and all the things (sure, they need that) but also have the kind of contemplative skills—that the kind of self-consciousness about what they really are doing in terms of forming themselves early on— I think it’s very hard to do. It requires a lot of thought about pedagogy, but that doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen.

**Allen:** I’m just trying to think about my own experience and where do I feel I got my own lead into that way of spending time with myself. For me, it does come back to reading, actually, and close reading, as you put it, but not just close reading and not just in the way that we were taught skills in school. It also very much mattered to be able to pick my own books; in other words, to be able to find the book that I needed to read at a particular point in time. So to the degree that there’s room for more independence, both in terms of choice of thing to read and then choice of reflective product that might be generated from that reading, that probably would be what I would be looking to find ways of making space for in the curriculum.

**Question from the Audience:** A bit of a follow-up on the question, but reflecting not on the position of the student but rather, Danielle, as your position as a teacher. I’m looking for advice about what you would do in this situation. You’ve just offered some about reading books, but I’d like to know whether or not there is any aspect of the ideal or even just a simply good student-teacher relationship or teacher-classroom relationship that approaches friendship for you or whether that’s a fundamentally different sort of relationship? Do you strive for friendship, or is there space for a political, pedagogical friendship in the classroom?

**Allen:** I do strive for friendship in the classroom. I learned that from a great teacher, so yes. I do think that’s critical, actually. I guess, and maybe this is also partly in answer to the previous conversation, one of the ways I do try to do that is by, on occasion and when it’s appropriate, making a connection between whatever text is under discussion, for example, and my own effort to wrestle with some kind of hard moral problem so that I am revealing myself to the students as a thinker of the same kind that they are and then
trying to find a dynamic that allows us both to contribute to that process of developing reflection for both of our sakes because I, too, am working on that. So I do try to bring that kind of working egalitarianism into the classroom.

Ober: Like you, it seems to me that the key thing is a willingness to show a certain vulnerability. If you come into the classroom as the master of verity, as it were, which is easy to do at almost any level (you can do it in graduate seminars because you do know more than other people and you say, Look, I’m the authority on this and you guys snap to when I say), you can make it very clear that the relationship is master to pupil, or you can make it very clear early on that the relationship is fellow seekers, older and younger, perhaps—more experienced, less experienced, certainly—and yet fellow seekers after really hard answers to which I, anyway, don’t have. I think it’s that sort of willingness to be a bit vulnerable (or maybe deeply vulnerable) that seems to me to be absolutely essential. Without that, there isn’t friendship; there’s some kind of domination.

Allen: I agree.

Question from the Audience: I was wondering how you thought the expansion of the public sphere and the emergence of digital media and a local awareness of national-level and international-level problems affects the newer generation that doesn’t have a real understanding of local politics, which I think is something that was the norm going back to the Revolutionary era or nineteenth- or twentieth-century America—the idea of a bowling league or something like that—a place where citizens can get together and talk about local issues. Now, along with the anonymity in the public sphere and blogging, and so on, it seems as though my generation is losing the capacity to really delve into results-oriented action on a local level and that we end up with a sort of political paralysis at a level where we really could make a huge difference and we become very involved and worried about ideas that are happening not necessarily in the abstract—they’re definitely real problems—but they are problems that we are not, or should not, primarily be concerned with globally.

Allen: It sounds like you have a pretty good diagnosis, so what do you think we should do?

Audience Member (continued): I’m asking you, ma’am. [Laughter]

Allen: I know, but I think you’ve thought about this one more than I have, so I’d appreciate knowing what you think. I’ll do my best.

Audience Member (continued): This red state-blue state divide that you talk about: I was in the military, I went to college, I was back in the military, and now I’m back in college. I’ve been kind of jumping back and forth from the ice bath to the Jacuzzi, so I’m very aware of the impact that this expansion of the public sphere—this sort of constant talking and not much isolated thinking—is having on general public discourse, I think particularly within my generation, because those are the people I tend to spend the most time with. So it’s more something that I’ve seen a lot and that I’ve thought about a lot
myself personally when I’m alone in the private sphere. I guess, in a sense, just because I am a member of my generation, I think about it on a national level and I think about it on an international level as other countries are absorbing these same sorts of media and these same sorts of communication styles and structures, as you’re saying. We haven’t quite found a way, and we are the most innovative and the most radical. We haven’t found a way to deal with it and my generation is trying all these different ways. Most are failing, some are succeeding, but there doesn’t seem to be any overarching way of addressing the problem or even an overarching acknowledgment of it from any sort of higher level (multi-national corporation, NGO, governments).

Allen: Maybe what I can do is just share my own experience of thinking through those sorts of things. I spent ten years living on the south side of Chicago, and this is not the same phenomenon that you’re describing, but it’s a related one. I lived and worked at The University of Chicago, and The University of Chicago was oriented to the national and international world; that is, few faculty members subscribed to the Chicago Tribune, we all subscribed to The New York Times. We talked about international issues; we didn’t really know what was going on five blocks away past the boundaries of the university campus. I began to feel, and it sounds somewhat similar to how you feel, that specific types of capacity within me were atrophying—that I didn’t know my own local world and I certainly wouldn’t have any idea how to make something happen in that local environment. So what I started doing was just trying to figure out, Who are the people who are right here? What are the conversational communities? Where do they exist? Where are there places where there might be potential overlaps? So I began to discover that although I myself was not actually experiencing that kind of local action or activity, there were groups that were doing it, and it was a matter for me of finding groups that I thought were interesting and then starting to try to put pieces together. For example, one thing I discovered was a group of citizens who worked for a park advisory council and were concerned about lots of environmental issues, but they were flailing and not getting anything done because they didn’t have access to any high-quality scientific knowledge. At the university, there was a group of scientists who cared a lot about the environment, but they were always thinking about it at the national and global level, so I just went around and knocked on my friends’ doors and said, “You’re coming to the park advisory council meeting because they need you right here.” I guess the short answer is that if it’s local, it’s got to come from a local person who notices the problem.

Audience Member (continued): What I have noticed is that at the local level, it tends to be the older generations who are particularly involved because they have a history of that as did the previous generation. It seems like it’s decreasing in importance, and I guess that is part of the problem. Who do our children look to?

Allen: They look to you. [Laughter] That’s right.

Question from the Audience: My question is similar, but it’s also about the expansion of the public sphere. You suggested that the great political challenge of the twenty-first century might be recovering the distinction between the public and the private. This is not really a new development; it’s something that seems to have had its origins in the
time of the early Industrial Revolution when the public sphere moved closer into people’s homes and there was a shrinking of the private sphere. Today, it seems that this is more pronounced—that there is increasing technological acceleration with more and more methods of being connected to the outside world permeating our lives. How do you think we should address this, given that it has been getting more pronounced and it’s been getting this way for two centuries?

**Allen:** I do think that there has been a categorical shift with the internet. I am at the very beginning myself of trying to understand this phenomenon. In the first instance, I’m trying to call people’s attention to it, and then the next thing you do is ask the kinds of questions that, for example, Bailey asked: What are the institutional structures that might be susceptible to adjustment that could make space for protecting an idea of the private—for protecting an idea of reflectiveness—so that individuals come to want to protect that for themselves? At the end of the day, we’ll protect it only if we want to protect it for ourselves. How do we remind ourselves enough of what it means and what it’s worth to desire to protect it? You have to call attention to the problem, start to ask the questions about what sorts of changes might shift our orientation to the problem, and so forth. For some of those changes in institutions, one can work to adjust them to generate possibilities, but this is also the sort of culture work that I was talking about. My own particular approach will be to try to find clear concepts that help people hold onto the value in reflection—clear concepts that help people remember what it is we’re trying to do with this other kind of time so that we don’t forget about it.

It’s back to this Athenian idea of memorializing values. There are many ways to memorialize values. We’re in a period where we need to start figuring out anew, I think, how to remember the value of the kind of stuff that gets done when we are spending private time.

**Question from the Audience:** As our world expands, do you think it’s imperative that we find a way to relate, not only on a local, national, regional, but international level to the other citizens in different countries? How does the definition of citizenship evolve? Mass media is obviously revolutionizing things. How does citizenship evolve on a very global basis?

**Allen:** It is evolving, so I think the first question is to figure out exactly what are the ways in which it is evolving. Conversationally, it’s clear that it is because as the gentleman in the back said, conversational communities are connected now around the globe in a way that is unprecedented, and we are seeing already the adoption of communicative styles in different places faster than before. There was an unusual article about the popularity of Oprah among young women in Saudi Arabia in the *New York Times* a couple of weeks ago. Go figure. At any rate, we’re connected conversationally which means, interestingly enough, that we have an opportunity to think more about how we shape our values and what the different sources of values are. That’s good for everybody. But we’re also quietly becoming more connected through a lot of different bodies of international law, not to mention things like multi-national corporations, and so forth. The International Court of Human Rights is driving legal change around the globe,
including for us. There are all kinds of ways in which we now share bits of political life even with people in different countries and we need to begin to think about that relatedness. I suspect that as we get accustomed to thinking about it, that will be about beginning to think about our own American involvement in international bodies in a different kind of way than we’ve thought about it for the last few decades. I do think there will be an institutional focus to that thought. I’m not sure quite yet how the habits follow along with that.

**Audience Member (continued):** Would you ever endorse placing more importance on a certain kind of citizenship—local as compared to national, or national as compared to international?

**Allen:** I’m a person who still endorses the structure of the nation-state. I don’t think we can do without it. I’m not saying that we could never do without it, but I don’t think we’re at a point now where we can do without it, although it’s a complicated structure that’s not completely adequate to all the relations we have with one another. What I do try to encourage people to do is think about the kinds of connections. There’s a political philosopher who passed away recently named Iris Marion Young who was, sadly when she died, working on a project on responsibility. One of her main goals was to try to help people figure out how to understand what links them to people in very different parts of the world. I do think that kind of element of moral responsibility is becoming, and needs to become, a basic part of how we think about citizenship. So I imagine the legal relationship staying connected to the nation-state formation, but I imagine the moral idea of citizenship to include a pretty cosmopolitan notion of responsibility.

**Gonnerman:** Professors Allen and Ober, thank you very much for providing us with a very rich and memorable start to our Education for Citizenship series. [Applause]
Danielle Allen, UPS Foundation Professor
in the School of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study
Prior to her appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in July 2007, Professor Allen was Dean of the Humanities Division of the University of Chicago, where she has served on the faculty since 1997. Trained both as a classicist and a political theorist, her particular interests are democratic theory, political sociology, the linguistic dimensions of politics, and the history of political thought. She is the author of The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens (2000) and Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown vs. the Board of Education (2004). In 2002 she was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

Josiah Ober, Constantine Mitsotakis Professor
in the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford
Josiah Ober divides his time and academic appointment between the Departments of Classics and Political Science, and has a courtesy appointment in Philosophy. He writes and teaches courses on various topics conjoining Greek history, classical philosophy, and political theory and practice. In addition to his ongoing work on the politics of knowledge and innovation, he is developing a project on the relationship between democracy and inherent human capacities and the ethical implications of that relationship. His most recent book, Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together, was published in 2005. His new book, Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens, is forthcoming in November from Princeton University Press.

Comments?
We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to auroraforum@stanford.edu or via the feedback form on our website: auroraforum.org.

Aurora Forum at Stanford University
425 Santa Teresa Street
Stanford CA 94305

The Aurora Forum is directed by Mark Gonnerman and sponsored by Stanford’s Office of Public Affairs and Stanford Continuing Studies

© Aurora Forum at Stanford University 2008