Doubt and the Demands of Democratic Citizenship

The triumph of democracy has been heralded as one of the greatest achievements of the twentieth century, yet it seems to be in a relatively fragile condition in the United States, if one is to judge by the proliferation of editorials, essays, and books that focus on public cynicism about politics and distrust of government. *Doubt and the Demands of Democratic Citizenship* explores the reasons for public discontent and proposes an account of democratic citizenship appropriate for a robust democracy. David Hiley argues that citizenship is more than simply participating in the electoral process. It requires a capacity to participate in the deliberative process with other citizens who might disagree fundamentally, a capacity that combines deep convictions with a willingness to subject those convictions to doubt through democratic decision making. Hiley develops his argument by examining the connection between doubt and democracy generally, as well as through case studies of Socrates, Montaigne, and Rousseau, interpreting them in light of contemporary issues.

David R. Hiley is professor of philosophy at the University of New Hampshire. He has held administrative academic positions at several North American universities and is the author of *Philosophy in Question: Essays on Pyrrhonian Themes* and is coeditor of *The Interpretative Turn: Philosophy, Science, and Culture* and *Richard Rorty*.

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For Angela with love

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Preface

Several years ago I met an artist from a small community outside of Richmond, Virginia. He was producing what he called his Doubt Project. As part of the project he had invited everyone in his community for afternoon tea. At the tea he served sugar cookies molded in a puffy script spelling out "doubt." I know only a little about his artistic intention. It is just as well that I don't know more because it was enough that I was captivated by the idea that doubt was a value of a community and that it should be celebrated. It resonated with my philosophical outlook and I wanted to leave it at that.

Doubt has occupied my thinking for the last three decades. In 1988, I wrote a book that argued that skepticism was best understood as a way of life rather than a set of technical arguments about the possibility of knowledge; and its challenge is more political than epistemological.[1] During the course of that book I formulated what I called the *deep challenge of skepticism*: Can I live with fundamental doubts about the basis of my beliefs and values and, at the same time, live with the conviction and resoluteness that political responsibility requires? Can a skeptical way of life be a politically responsible life? A skeptical outlook seems to undermine the very foundations on which political criticism depends, or so it is often claimed. If this is the case, must the skeptic – lacking the certainty of an outside standpoint to justify a political stance – simply

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[1] David R. Hiley, *Philosophy in Question: Essays on a Pyrrhonian Theme* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

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have to acquiesce in the status quo? This book returns to these questions, placing them this time within the context of thinking about the nature of democracy and democratic citizenship. However, it has come about as a result of a long detour.

For the past fifteen years or so I have served in administrative roles at several universities while practicing philosophy on the side. But as I hope to make clear by the final chapter of this book, this detour has been important to my philosophical reflections about the challenges of skepticism. Universities have provided me with a laboratory in which to observe and think, and also to apply some of what I have learned about democratic theory to the culture of universities. More importantly, I have come to appreciate the distinctive role of universities in a democracy. My administrative roles forced me to think about philosophy in practice, philosophy and education, and education's democratic possibilities.

In returning to questions about the political implications of doubt, my thinking has also been shaped by the condition of political and civic culture in America today. What was earlier a primarily scholarly project has increasingly become my attempt to make sense of the strains and fissures in our democracy at the beginning of the new century. It goes without saying that the most recent presidential election in the United States dramatized the degree to which we are polarized around conflicting views about the role of the United States in the world, about the place of government in our lives, and about the values that should be central to our culture. It goes without saying because it has been said so much by the pundit class that we have come to accept polarization as merely the cultural landscape. But organizing our geography in terms of red and blue states is much too simpleminded because it overstates marginal differences in some areas and understates others. It goes without saying that distrust and disaffection characterize the American citizenry, even while acknowledging that there was the largest voter turnout in the recent presidential election than in any election in recent memory. Voting, however, is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for a healthy democracy. This is one of the lessons we should be learning from the democratization experiment in Iraq. As heartening as it was to see Iraqis risking all to go to the polls for the first time in decades, democracy is as much about the values of a culture and the character of its citizens than it is about the ballot.

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Given the cynicism and distrust of politics in the United States, there is as much reason to worry about the quality of democratic culture here as there is to worry about the possibility of democratic culture in the Middle East.

I believe that the philosophical questions that motivated my earlier thinking about the political implications of skepticism are relevant for thinking about the nature of democracy, and also about how we might think differently about reinvigorating our democratic culture, thinking that does not paint our political lives as red or blue.

During my administrative sojourn, I was allowed time off from my responsibilities at important periods in my thinking about this project. I am grateful to Grace Harris, Provost Emeritus at Virginia Commonwealth University, for supporting an administrative sabbatical at the early stages of this book. I am also grateful to Joan Leitzel, President Emeritus of the University of New Hampshire, for an administrative sabbatical that made possible the final stage of this project. And I am especially grateful to her for how she modeled the best values of democratic decision making and how she articulated the responsibility universities have to the larger communities of which they are a part.

Some of my ideas have been tested in print along the way. Some ideas in Chapter 4 appeared in "The Politics of Skepticism: Reading Montaigne," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 9 (1992). Some ideas in Chapter 5 appeared in "The Individual and the General Will: Rousseau Reconsidered," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 7 (1990). And some ideas in Chapter 6 appeared in "The Democratic Purposes of General Education," *Liberal Education*, 82 (1996).

Finally, I am grateful to students and colleagues in the Philosophy Department at the University of New Hampshire who not only welcomed me back from my administrative detour but stimulated me to complete this book. I was able to test out parts of this project in an undergraduate seminar on democracy and its challenges and in two departmental colloquia in which students and colleagues were both sufficiently tolerant and aggressively challenging to force me to be clearer and more consistent. But more than that, their interest encouraged me to think that the project was worthwhile.