

RESPONSE TO ED ERICSON

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I suspect there is not one among us who has not experienced the frustration of feeling completely insignificant in the face of the assorted mechanisms of the state: having one's tax return spit out virtually at random by a computer and subjected to an audit; being a defendant in a civil or criminal proceeding; trying to convince a state trooper of one's absolutely unfailing observance of the posted speed limit; seeking explanation for an unreasonably high assessment value of one's property; getting your dog back from the local pound. The experience is frequently annoying, perhaps frustrating, though confrontations on higher levels may provoke even greater realizations that the state may exist as an "other" - a fully-functioning organism quite apart from our own daily living, yet possessing the power and ability to manage, control, intrude, and determine.

Viewed conversely, however, is not this apparently self-initiating, self-regulating state our own product? Isn't it we who have breathed life into it, authorized its operation supposedly for the common good?

Ed Ericson's discussion of the tenuous relationship between pure and representative democracy is certainly at the heart of the crucial Twentieth Century American problem: is the citizen an agent? - capable and able of voluntary action, of being a cause, of being actor? Or is the citizen merely acted upon - subject to processes not of her own making, caught up only as an effect?

Pure democracy, it is argued, would both allow for and prompt free expression by all persons, and in so doing would foster a truly free society governed by the popular will. Representative democracy, however, is practically necessitated to overcome the obvious bias and unwieldy functioning of full and popular participation. Yet, the separation of the two forms, if even possible, must be done with surgical precision.

In favoring the representative system over the pure, I suspect that there are assumptions (or presumptions, if you wish) made about the nature of the political process which deludes us into believing that the individual has not been overlooked, but has, in fact, been incorporated into a more workable system. By your experience or your observations, you may find such assumptions to be unwarranted.

I sense that it is commonly assumed the processes of self-governance will be practiced if they are provided. This is a bit like assuming that your Porsche will get fixed if only a crescent wrench is given to you. It's just not so simple.

It's presumed that free citizens, under normal circumstances, will have full access to the political process. Despite more than a century of local and federal legislation directed at full empowerment, we are still far from being able to boast of full accessibility to the political arena by all persons. In the recent Democratic primaries, the Reverend Jesse Jackson sustained a

national campaign by arguing just such a shortfall.

It is presumed that the citizenry will have the incentive to participate fully in the political process. With voter registration and turnout, even in particularized local elections, pressing downward toward the fifty percent mark, I sense that there is more operating than simple apathy and political lassitude.

And I believe it is commonly presumed that the general citizenry will have the informational basis by which to participate fully and responsibly. That is, does the average voter know where the point of entry is to the political process? Does he comprehend the significant differences between registration, primary voting, and general election? Does she know and appreciate the effect her participation may have on the process itself and on the objectives of that process? Does the average voter make adequate distinctions between relevant and irrelevant criteria for responsible decision-making?

It is simply not enough to assume that the attractive characteristics of pure democracy have been retained in our current federal form of government. The tools and pathways exist, certainly, but they are falling into dangerous disuse. I would hesitate to say that the unwarranted presumptions above are indicia of "incompetence" on the part of the electorate, in part because of connotations having to do with the source of fault, and in part because I suspect there are other factors at work.

I would suggest that the inability or unwillingness to engage in the political process - not necessarily as a candidate for office, not even as a participant in the most local and voluntary forms of self-governance, but simple as an informed voter - has much to do with what Erving Goffman calls "the public presentation of self in everyday life." The individual in our society may feel, viscerally, some measure of danger in even this minimal exposure of self. And what are the sources of this perceived danger? In speaking out, in knowing truly what goes on, in exposing one's beliefs and opinions to public scrutiny, the citizen may suspect that she will be held publicly accountable in some way, and become answerable to friends, employers, customers, or associates. She may suspect possible legal entanglements, either civil or criminal, stemming from her open opposition to or endorsement of persons or institutions. She may hesitate at the threshold of some moral accountability where there is a perceived risk of loss; she might lose the love and affection of a personal relationship, her good standing in a religious institution, her own integrity. If you think that such risks are academic or fabrications for the sake of argument, I'd remind you of the Latter Day Saints woman, who spoke out in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment and found herself disowned by her community. The risks of self-expression are real, personal, and substantial.

Ed has suggested that the quickest route to a runaway state is to allow it the means to separate its existence and will from the body of the society that creates and sustains it. I would argue that the surest route is the failure to make morally obligatory the task of the electorate to participate in the

Humanism Today

process of self-governance. In that task is not only the key to combining successfully the two forms of democracy, but also a means of significant self-discovery. I would argue that involvement in self-governance assumes ethical proportions when the individual, by his involvement, finds himself answering the crucial questions: Who am I in relation to my self? and Who am I in relation to the members of my community?

Many of us, perhaps most of us, are seldom called upon to answer these questions all of a moment. The questions are answered piecemeal as we stumble through family and social relationships, as we are confronted by concerns which demand our immediate, though often incomplete, attention. I would suggest that in order to engage in self-governance, one must be able to answer with satisfaction to oneself, and to articulate adequately to others such questions as: What is it that I want or need and why? What makes me similar to or different from others? In what ways am I willing to contribute to the community in which I make my physical or emotional home? What things do I expect of my neighbors which will sustain this sense of community? Given free rein, what would I do if I were chosen to lead or represent the views of my community?

Such questions will obviously be answered differently by differing people in differing communities. But the deliberate process of assessing one's self and one's relative position in the community is as old as the human community itself. It is, quite simply, at the heart of what is meant by a "member of the society" - a citizen - with both rights and responsibilities conferred by such status.

Confronting the state with accusations of its current runaway tendencies is a bit like trying to talk sense to a Great Dane who's just seen the neighbor's cat. The safest move at that moment is to let go of the leash and alert the neighbors that a crisis is brewing! The problem of a runaway state will be obviated when the electorate, by fully participating in the process of self-governance, discovers that it, too, has the power and ability to exert its will for the common good. The state, once empowered and authorized, will not, and in many cases should not relinquish power which the general public neither has nor wants.

In recent years, it has become commonplace for both the citizenry and the courts to defer to the legislative branch of government when the subject under discussion has neither a clear majority of popular opinion nor clear legal precedent in the common law. Examples are to be found primarily in the fields of applied technology and in the ethics of health care, both of which present critical issues of law and governance never before considered: the questions of who has rights to an embryo frozen before the simultaneous deaths of both natural parents; whether an artificially created life form can be patented; whether a massively handicapped but not terminally ill person has the right to demand the active help of a care-giving institution in that person's suicide; the question of when life begins and when it ends. In such cases, the state is given the same kind of qualified privilege as is commonly given to the professions of law, medicine, and the ministry. That is, we - the general public - realizing our inadequacy to deal effectively

with the subject matter, grant to the state the privilege of regulating itself, so long as the consequences are for the public good. As with any such conditional grant of power, it is the grantor, not the grantee, who retains the authority to rescind the privilege if it is abused.

The danger, of course, is the assumption of power by the state not by popular authorization, but *sui generis*, on its own initiative. This is the true runaway state, either totalitarian or anarchistic in nature. At such point, the citizenry must assume the burden of action and choice, or critical decisions concerning the general welfare will be made by that worst of all possible arbiters, default.