TOPIC:
DEMOCRACY AND THE IDEA OF CITIZENSHIP
Sensibility and Democratic Space

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Abstract
People have shared funds of sense that operate in every aspect of their lives. These complex sensibilities constitute a range of often contradictory dispositions and attentions that we can describe as sensible disorders. Further, sensibilities are available for multiple differential determinations from which the ability for self-reflection and intervention derives. ‘Democratic space’ is an appropriate name for the region of sensibilities. Rather than naming a grounding identity, ‘democratic space’ names a region without imperative, voice, or intention. Nothing that happens defines the region of determination.

The paper describes a sense of democratic space that is distinguishable from other senses and points to dispositional and political aspects of that sense.

Keywords
democratic, sensibility, sense, predisposition, attunement

‘[Truth is] in character and nuance and mood’, [he said].
‘That’s what governs us in our lives, that’s not the truth’, [she said].
‘For the living it is the truth’, he quietly said. . . .

“You see, in the heart of any faith is a history that teaches us not to trust—.”
Michael Ondaatje, Anil’s Ghost

Sensibility

When we speak of sense we can mean several different things. At the moment I am speaking of the sense of sense, its meaning and significance. I could intend by the word a faculty of perceiving—the sense of sight or a sixth sense. I might refer to reflective consciousness, something I come to after losing my temper or after going into a trance. I could refer to a particular sensation, such as a sense of harmony, balance, or chaos. A sense can be vague—a sense of unease—or discerning—an excellent sense for detail. I might have a kind
of intelligence in mind when I use the word—common sense, for example, or a sense of frugality. So: sense can refer to meaning, shrewdness, judgment, intelligence, perceptiveness. It can name a conveyor, such as a faculty of sense, or the conveyed, either the sensation (the process of sensing) or the sensed (the thing meant). The word usually suggests feeling and sensation as well as awareness, affection, and a measure of availability for continuing import and signification.

Sensibility, in addition to naming an ability to receive given sensations, carries a diversity of meaning like sense does. It can refer to a special ability to recognize things in certain ways: given her sensibility she is particularly alert to pain in animals. Sensibility can refer also to responsiveness in given contexts: with his present sensibility he becomes silent whenever there is conflict. Or the word can name a manner of awareness, a poetic sensibility, for example. And we can speak of a society’s sensibility, of a particularly responsive alertness that characterizes a group of people in their commonality. A society, for example, might compose a special alertness to family lineages, physical cleanliness, and light skin color. A person in such a society who is from, say, a particular family, who is very clean and has a light complexion, is immediately known in that environment as important and deserving special treatment. A social or cultural sensibility functions as a shared ability to recognize what is important and what is not. It is like a guide to evaluation and judgment, and it functions not only as a shared ability but also as a lively part in the evaluations themselves. A social or cultural sensibility gives or takes away value in specific circumstances by means of hierarchies that operate in recognitions; it tempers what and how we think, establishes felt limits on people’s formulations and articulations. It can tell us when argument is appropriate and how to carry out disagreements. Cultural sensibility promotes certain kinds of acknowledgment: it fosters some kinds of perceptive awareness and response and not others—we might be inclined to value boats more than cars, or we might in our society immediately value practical knowledge and hold intellectual pursuits in low regard. A sensibility functions personally as well as in common, like a fund of perceptive and evaluative abilities. It is like a shared fund of values, experiences, aversions, and inclinations.

We can say that sensibilities constitute complex predispositions that do not necessarily figure a unified identity. They give tendencies, arrangements of qualities and feelings, and provide something like a complicated character for groups of people. We could speak of the character of a region of people and its sensibility, i.e. the dispositions and intuitively operative values that set apart certain peoples’ judgments and ways of life from those of other groups of peo-
ple. When we connect “sensibility” and “predisposition” to “ways of life,” we see that “sensibility” can refer to an ethos, a way people live together with shared meanings and recognitions. In this context sensibility refers to the many characteristic manners of feeling and conceptualization that define communal individuals.

Sensibilities and predispositions very likely affect all aspects of people's awareness—affect their attractions and pleasures, their styles of mind, their choices and judgments on right and wrong. Predispositions that are not simply mine are involved as I am drawn to some kinds of identity and not to others, when I find some conceptual formations elegant and compelling and others awkward and unpersuasive, when I recognize that some questions are apt and others trivial. Or, when I find you intelligent and perceptive. Or, when I sense that something is strange and potentially dangerous. Systems of concepts, shared dreams, fervent hopes, despair, commitments, phobias, and clear certainties as well as deep hatreds, anxieties, structures of prejudice and justice: they all appear with aggregates of dispositions that constitute pervasive tendencies, customary moods, and more or less established ways to know and regulate things. What might inspire and even electrify one society might well repel and disgust another or leave it unaffected. One group’s clear and shining certainty might be a fleapit of imprudence for another group. In this context we can think of the sensibility that pervades an authoritarian state as distinct from that of a democratic republic, or the sensibility in a conservative religious community as distinct from the sensibility in a scholarly community dedicated to academic freedom and experimentation.

The force of sensibilities and predispositions in our common lives suggests that our values have a significant share of their power thanks to senses and inclinations that carry much more than individual, subjective intentions. They carry lineages of behavioral structures and affective arrangements that fund our feelings and judgments, and fund them without any particular authority outside of their own operations: They bring with them the bases for their own persuasiveness. We may speak of both the powers in such funding and the fund-like quality of the powers in sensibilities and predispositions.

To carry out reflectively our felt senses of imperative and responsibility, we would need to give accounts of the histories and meanings that invest our basic senses of things. That would constitute a reflective turn with a sensibility, both an expression of it and judgment regarding it. To ignore the shared fund of sense that operates in our accounts of ourselves and our world surely would constitute a kind of blindness that would allow these histories and meanings to operate directly and without the benefit of critical and descriptive reflection,
even in our most elaborate and beautiful expressions of our core feelings and convictions.

Up to this point I have placed emphasis on the functions of sensibility in our lives, its dynamic quality in the formation and operation of communal and individual predispositions, its aspect of forceful, often tacit awareness, and its unfounded fund-like quality. In order to approach a reflexive turn in a sensibility, I want to note first that sensibilities constitute a range of attunements, and then I will turn to the variety and lack of coherence in sensible attunements. As we consider the absence of harmony and overarching identity in such attunements, we will approach both the sensible bases for critical judgments on our communal sensibility and the appearance of democratic space.

**Attunement**

Attunements constitute a variety of direct ways of perceiving and recognizing. Presentiment, inkling, evocation, intimation, suggestion, surmise: These words name aspects of attunement. If I am keyed in to other people by loving affirmation, for example, I will be especially attuned to their strengths and virtues and especially perceptive of their fine qualities. But if I am angry at a person or hurt by him, or if I fear him I probably will be exceptionally attuned to his faults or meanness or lack of dependability, and in these perceptions my anticipation of him might well be one of warning, mistrust, and caution. In our attunements, slight gestures and hints are filled with significance, whether or not the indications are positive, negative, or fitting for the circumstances. Hatred constitutes a powerful attunement and affective alertness, and so does deep trust. In both cases we notice without effort the indicators of what we hate or rely on. People are often attuned in and by situations. When, for example, they feel that their society or government or way of life are threatened, or when a mood of excitement pervades a space they are in, or when they are in the midst of mourning, they can find themselves taken into the situation of affection and attuned by it to given circumstances. They will likely pick up suggestions and hints in similar ways and experience a deeply felt commonality in the shared attunement.

In such situations more than imaginative projection happens. People’s awareness is determined in a shared disposition in which immediate recognitions occur: Those people appear in the attuned setting as allies or as enemies, as cogent or confused. In some particular affective situations, some things are positively moving; in others, those same things might appear as immediately
angering—the leader’s dogmatic confidence, for example, might appear as positively inspired when the group succeeds and thoroughly aggravating when things go badly. Attunement: an affective, dynamic social body of shared disposition, a lively awareness that gives some things to stand out and others virtually to disappear. Some values are evoked. Others are marginalized or extracted in the force of the broadly shared attunement.

In addition to the obvious attunements of certain kinds of crowds and pervasive social moods and alignments, there are those that are not so apparent: Thoroughly permeating, long-term, and non-pathological anxieties, for example, as in a time of war or scarcity. There are the attunements that accompany employment of academic disciplinary methods—attunement to causation, for example, or certain kinds of evidence and deployment of equipment. There are attunements that characterize religious communities of religious belief, and others that are found in languages, as when a grammar gives emphasis to substantial and nonverbal nouns. There are the attunements of racist societies and in social structures of control or nurturance. Every way of life—every ethos—will probably have its own body of attunements that affects styles of thought, evaluations, convincing evidence, and forms of virtue. What appears as abusive in one society might well appear as responsible nurturance and training in another. If the definitive social attunements change significantly in a person’s lifetime, for example, then what did not seem abusive earlier might well appear as abusive now. Attunements give or produce appearances whether privately or communally and broadly culturally. Individuals bring their own personal attunements with them, but languages, practices, and institutions also constitute regions of attunement into which people come and go more or less agreeably, more or less impacted. Attunements are mutational and highly fluid as well as nonvoluntary and determinative of many situations and identities in our lives. In them individuals share environments, knowledge, and values immediately and are already in common with others before they could notice. We can say that attunement names a major, affective aspect of sensibility.

**Sensible Disorder**

Although attunement can suggest harmony, comity, and fit, the attunements of the multiple sensibilities that characterize a complex society and group of operative lineages in a culture are hardly harmonious. There are so many operative lineages: Those of major religions and their many subgroups, those
of scientific work and liberation from religious teachings, those of human rights and resistance to tyranny, those of institutions’ authority, control, and possession, those imbedded in languages and systems of civility—many, many more. Lineages carry sensibilities and thus dispositions, and attunements, and they often constitute conflictual forces in the formation of definitive meanings and values. Most of us, I expect, are affected by many of these lineages in their disharmony, and more than likely many of us are conflicted in the draw of more than one forceful tradition. Many of us, for example, move in and out of significantly different lineages as we move from circles of friends to our families of origin to our home institutions to our professional societies.

As we move in and out of the different circles, profound differences can emerge. We can experience the often huge affective difference between the defining center of one of our groups and the people and voices at that group’s margins, people and voices that are definitive in another group to which we belong—like that between the cohesion of a community in which we were raised, let’s say, and the pluralism in an urban culture where we now live, or that between an intellectual environment and a populist, worker-oriented union. Many of us try to reconcile the differences that play in our lives, to “understand” them and “hear” them, to find agreement among the regions of often conflicting and guiding senses. We want to establish networks that bring differences together, to define the normative values that transcend this or that lineage, to ignore the limited and exclusionary lineages, and to prioritize attunements that give us to emphasize the primary importance of reconciliation and a higher or underlying harmony. And sometimes in such well intentioned efforts, we find the drive toward harmony expressive of one lineage and over against others who value their own identities more than harmony and find oppressive our intentions of reconciliation. Granddad, for example, will not reconcile himself in the name of peace in the family to your new political and religious views, and people in this minority group are not interested in a conciliation for the sake of a greater good that results in a loss of the group’s identity, no matter how reasonable and right it seems to “us” who are in the majority.

I would like to hold in mind that sensibility, disposition, and attunement in this discussion each invoke the others. I hope that you agree that regions of sensibility are not governed by harmonious identities, that they are made up of a variety of, as it were, homesites and hence characterized by conflicted attunements and dispositions. I am moving toward three observations: A social sensibility is available for multiple, differential determinations; a sensibility has sufficient differential complexity to allow for self-reflection and the
chance for invention; and the term *democratic space* is an appropriate name for the region of sensibilities. Finally, I will indicate that democratic space is without imperative, voice, or intention and comes nonetheless with its own sensibility.

A sensibility is available for multiple, differential determinations. It is not fully present in any of its specific occurrences. I take it to be a commonsense observation that, for example, a sensibility that accompanies empirical scientific research does not appear as a whole but is considerably richer in its possibilities and range than any of its instances shows. Earlier I used the metaphor of “fund”: A sensibility functions like a historically developed fund of perceptive and evaluative abilities and affections. I doubt that we will be able appropriately to fix a sensibility by any single, unified identity. We can speak of apparent predispositions and attunements that are complementary; we can identify certain limits and differences among sensibilities; and we can identify many characteristics of the sensibilities of societies, subgroups, and individuals that allow a wide range for solidarity, consensus, and group identity. But possibility, mutational processes, and what appears like an amorphous reserve prevent us from finding a clear, unified identity for a sensibility. It is a fund that disturbs the identities that arise in it. Conflicting tendencies, variability, deviant and porous margins, and a wide range of modal evocations, attractions, and insubstantial disjunctions trump the ordered coherence of definitive, well-focused identity in a sensibility.

A sensibility has sufficient differential complexity to allow for self-reflection and the chance for invention. When I am able, for example, to experience some of the affections, interests, and needs at *the margins* of the mainstreams in which I live and when I am able to empathize with them, I experience the difference of my dominant ethos that is at the center of my way of living from life at the margins of my ethos: By non-defensive empathy I experience a measure of the margin’s ethos, and that sets apart my own familiar way of living. I experience something like perspective; I am aware of the differences of the dominant sensibility, the differences that define for me a mainstream as distinct from the tributaries. Even if I do not think about these differences in a careful way, I find my primary ways of living reflected by, as it were, a marginal mirror. Feelings that are different from both those at the center and those at the margin can arise in this kind of reflective experience. A different disposition can emerge, one that is formed by the encounter of the differences. It is a transitional disposition, one that threatens to displace feelings of insulation or security or singularity. A wide range of responses can occur to this different, reflective disposition. I expect that the reflection and its implications will not
be exactly clear. But a differential and marginal component of a dominant sensibility has appeared interruptively, and a site for further reflection has now taken place. The marginal component is a dimension of the familiar sensibility. There is enough kinship for reflective connection, but the margin’s impact can displace the center’s apparent integrity and give the defining sensibility’s reserve of possibility, chance, and instability to appear differentially and transformatively.

The larger claim that I am developing is that differences in a sensibility—differences of disposition, attunement, value, and meaning—provide the displacements necessary for reflective occurrences. Were there no transformative conflicts, departures, disappearances, clashes, hostile encounters, or incompatibilities—were there a fundamental and uninterrupted harmony—I think there would be no reflection. Our thought does not usually arise from simple harmony and concord. Our sensible experiences, with the full range of meanings that we have noted for “sense” and “sensibility,” provide the fund for reflection. It is the clash and interruption of dispositions and attunements in a sensibility, not their harmonies, that provide the opportunities for reflection.

As far as I can tell, an inclination to reflect in a disciplined way on the definitive intentions and feelings in a sensibility also comes from dispositions that are not the same as those of the definitive intentions and feelings. We might call such inclination an added reflective value in its connection with tacit familiarity. Disciplined reflection—thought—has its own lineages, its own range of sensibility. I am not suggesting that there is a definitive origin for thought. I am noting that thought is refined reflection, that it reflects in disciplined ways among conflicted differences. I suggested a moment ago that a differential experience at the margins of a dominant sensibility provides one kind of reflective event. I am now broadening that suggestion by locating the ethos of reflection in sensible conflicts and change. When we think, those conflicts, changes, and differences come to expression. Thought arises from sensibilities, in the struggles that describe them and the differences found in them.

The chance for invention and innovation comes with the incompleteness, vagueness, and partiality that characterize the constitutive elements of a sensibility. I point this out in order to put a particular value on the variable, differential quality of sensible disposition. Sensibilities may be better described by the image of a cloud chamber—or of the formation and deformation of clouds in the sky—than by the clear outlines of a map or an argument or the physical laws that govern the movement of moisture. All manner of unexpected deviations from operating standards can occur in sensibilities. Perhaps
this chancy, amorphous quality of living, this lack of imperative or intention, has a dispositional aspect in people’s attunement to it. We will have to see.

Democratic Space

I am using “democratic space” to refer to the unfounded aspect of sensibilities. The mutability and variability of sensibilities, their availability for thorough transformation, their “housing,” as it were, of elements that undercut dominant values and meanings: These aspects of sensibilities make apparent no principles, rules, or presence that ultimately govern sensibilities’ occurrences. We can certainly interpret sensibilities in terms of sensible guidelines and imperatives. We can learn to recognize things in a variety of discourses and sensible orientations. It is probably the case that in cultures there are basic values and principles that operate among a wide variety of sensibilities. But those basic and comparable values and principles appear in overlapping sensibilities and the interlinking lineages of sensibilities. Lineages and their aspects linger, while contrary factors grow to modify and transform them. It is the indifferent “space” of sensible formations and their transformations that I refer to.

“Space,” of course, is a metaphor, and I do not want to privilege it overmuch. “Democratic” is an even less satisfactory metaphor, since I am not talking about a government by the people. The aspect of democracy that I want to emphasize is its characteristic of valuing the rights and privileges of a wide range of participants without giving any of those participants authority to define the whole. Democratic governance radically interrupted the ancient lineage of the father-king. It jeopardized the image and idea of one controlling set of normative values and of an aristocracy or plutocracy. Taken out of a strictly political context, “democratic space” means a region of occurrence in which none of the happenings defines or normalizes the space of their occurrence. I could say that democratic space lets all voices and values happen; or, that it allows differences without requirement of sameness; or, that it appears in repetitions with what seems like a requirement of loss and newness. We might say that democratic space does not hold things together by meanings but yields sites of possible determination. Such statements as these that are meant to describe democratic space seem to expect themselves to melt away before they reach their expected object. They expect that the meanings they give cannot govern their reference. At best they speak of democratic space in an expectation that the very limits and indirectness of metaphors let the indefiniteness of the intended non-object come through, appear, as it were, in
recession, as wakeful in its allowance of whatever happens along with and in excess of organized determination.

I noted that sensibilities and attunements carry a wide range of values and meanings as well as fund the emergence of new values and meanings. I pointed to the disordered, conflicted, chancy, and mutational aspects of sensibilities. Now we are considering a sensible dimension in the absence of an intentional foundation for sensibility, something like a sense of democratic space. We could speak of a sense of ambiguity in which we undergo the difference between an anonymous fund of sense and the orders of good sense. That would be a sense of radical ambiguity in which an alertness undergoes the impact of loss of meaning in meaningful occurrences—a sense of opening out beyond the reach of meaning and order, as though there were a meaningless opening where significance and recognition stop and begin. Something like this sense characterized, for example, Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to speak of ambiguity and visibility, Nancy’s reflections on thought, freedom, and the exhaustion of meaning, Derrida’s writing on writing and on the other, Heidegger’s accounts of the question of being, and many others’ sense of interruptions of meaning and good sense in the very happening of meaning and good sense.

A frequent approach in the Continental tradition to the exhaustion of meaning in meaningful situations is to find in texts the exhaustion or ambiguity or hidden disruption of foundational concepts and values. In such instances the deconstructive move includes discovery of an opposite or an other or a countervalence in the governing, often self-positing agency or reflective force that brings order to a textually articulated system of thought. The discipline of such deconstructive thought is found in its scholarly care, its relentless engagement with texts and systems of thought, its conservation of the tradition in which it finds the deconstructive and often revolutionizing factors, such as the force of ungrounding eventuation, of nonconscious and nonreflective power or vacuity or mere differencing.

In such instances, in addition to significant critique and modification of canonical thinking, a philosopher often does not go outside of texts to what appears utterly without thought or essence or consciousness or textual determination. That sort of difference goes unnoticed or is considered unapproachable. Another danger is that a philosopher in this orientation will likely believe that we approach nontextual things best as philosophers primarily by means of reflection that is oriented by texts. It is a highly significant discipline but one that I believe is inadequate for addressing nontextual problems, values, and expectations.

The sense and appearance of democratic space are not solely or even primarily textual. We could say with Deleuze that they are subtext as well as subrep-
representation. Or we could say that democratic space appears with many different kinds of events, including texts. My purpose now is to suggest that a culture’s most forceful senses of meaning and value lack an overarching identity and harmony beyond their own organizations and that the dissonance and conflict that characterize sensibility, as well as constitute the possibility for future determination, forcefully show what I am calling democratic space—the space, as it were, without determinate sense or disposition that yields sites of sense and disposition. People’s gathered tacit knowledge and common understanding are never the last word. They are with democratic space, and that means that people will undergo other and different senses, imperatives, and forms of recognition as their commonalities transform.

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A Light-hearted Excursus on Identity and Social Coherence

Let’s pause for a moment to think about becoming a society that has a basic, defining identity. I would like to recommend that the Scotch-Irish Protestant heritage define the central and controlling values and procedures, but, we Scotch/Irish being the stubborn, conflicted, and often unruly way we are, I cannot advise that possibility. So let’s think rather of all of us becoming organized as Orthodox Jews in one, large, pretty happy, if often fussy, extended family that is run by bearded men who pray, dispute, and advise a lot. Or, if that’s not likely to work, let’s go the route of an open, liberal, discussion-oriented, often conferring feminist society in which Catholic priests can be women, presidents can be lesbian, and the Speaker of the House can be a former homemaker named Tom. No? Then a society with harmony based on a conservative identity, not quite fundamentalist in its Christian values but reasonable in the knowledge that truth and salvation come only through Christ Jesus and that when push comes to shove, the New Testament trumps all other testaments in a thoroughly cleansing and largely peaceful, loving way.

Of course, it’s not going to happen. The identity-stakes for most of us are too high in all of the harmonious solutions. We know that most options that promise universal community are too close to final solutions for what we most value. The issue is in finding how we might live in proximity and non-destructively with our vast and perhaps growing differences.

* * *
I return now to the question of whether democratic space has a dispositional aspect. We can say that the dispositional quality of democratic space occurs as _attunement_ to the instability of our axiomatic stabilities, as _expectation_ of fundamental change in social and reflective orders, and as _inclusion_ to value positively the emergence and persistence of differences vis-à-vis local harmonies. This dispositional possibility is found in the way—in how—we hold and carry out our commitments. It comes to expression in readiness to find conflicts among our excellent commitments, to find the variable and differential quality of what we know to be true, a readiness to discover the dangers and limits in the values we affirm. The indeterminate quality of democratic space is manifest in attunements to unfixedness in the identity by which we recognize and feel familiar to ourselves and each other.

A group of faculty members spoke together recently at Vanderbilt University about ethical dilemmas in their professional lives. A physician in the group said that without a clear moral compass, she would feel completely lost in the welter of decisions she had to make in her practice. Her suggestion was that professional education should equip students with such a compass and that ethical critique should take place from within a clear moral direction. How could one seriously resist her claim? I would not want to.

The limits of sense, however, constitute another issue. If I am descriptively right when I say that our senses of value and truth are funded in something like democratic space and that our sensibilities are tuned, however silently and tacitly, to their indeterminate dimension, my admiration for this physician and her goals for education need caution. We are also lost with our compasses. I am reasonably sure, given the breadth of her practice, that she deals daily with people whose compasses point south when her compass points north, people whose sense of right and wrong are intense and, on occasion, quite different from hers. I think it’s differences and not common moral meanings that connect many of the occurrences of those intensities, and that it’s in such differentiation without common moral connection that we can sense the space where we live and where we are often more juxtaposed with others than we are in sensible commonality with them. “Democratic space” composes a dimension of sensibilities that appears in such juxtaposition when our moral compasses fail to tell us exactly where we are, as though we were at the North Pole—or is it the South Pole? It’s a dimension that yields an attunement that is different from our genuine and forceful sense of human commonality. It’s rather an attunement in the space of human good sense, where nothing human or true or good also happens and allows us to sense the limits of the truths that govern our lives.