

EXAMINING ETHICS
TRANSCRIPT – ROBERT TALISSE: CIVIC SOLITUDE
(03.04.25)

I'm Alex Richardson, and this is Examining Ethics, a show designed to bring insights from the cutting edge of moral philosophy and ethics education to the rest of us. In our current political moment, it's not uncommon to understand the stakes of the disagreements we have as being about the high stakes in nature of democracy itself. A drive for greater civic engagement is pretty common on every side, as many like to think of democracy as being a participatory thing rather than a spectator sport. But might we be overdoing the politics a little? My guest today argues in his new book, *Civic Solitude*, that our ideas about the role of engagement and participation in the business of democracy tend to cause us to overlook, if not actively obscure, an important role for reflection, belief formation and the hard and ironically enough, lonely work of democratic skill building. He recommends a reinvigoration of reflective public spaces as a kind of civic commons for this sort of solitude. Bob Talice, welcome to the show.

Well, thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be talking to you.

Of course. It's great to see you.

Could you start by giving us a brief overview of your work and your interests at a general level?

Sure. I am the W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy, and I am Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. So my academic work sort of travels along two paths that are sometimes connected, but not always. So let me describe them as distinct. I have a sort of fundamental interest in sort of mainstream issues in contemporary political philosophy, particularly with democracy and the typical philosophical questions that we ask ourselves about democracy. So I'm interested in sort of questions about the legitimation and the legitimacy of democracy. I'm interested in questions that are similarly philosophical, I think, about the proper structure of democratic institutions and more, I think, centrally, fundamentally interested in questions about democracy as an ideal. I tend to think of democracy as the ideal of a self governing community of equals. It's not uncommon for philosophers to speak in that kind of register about democracy.

But, you know, I see democracy as a as a as an ideal in the sense of an aspiration. A society is democratic in virtue of its aspiring to be a self governing community of political equals and questions about what that aspiration amounts to and particularly questions about what that aspiration amounts to with respect to our civic responsibilities. The other sort of what some days I think of is sort of like a side hustle, philosophically speaking. So I'm also interested in certain historical trends in Western philosophy, particularly on the one hand, historical trends in the history of political thinking that includes the trajectory of John Stuart Mill and John Rawls, the sort of the theorists of the liberal democratic society, and add to that John Dewey, the American pragmatist philosopher.

So your new book is called Civic Solitude. I'd like to ask you about the definition of that phrase, and more specifically, its civic importance and the distinction from how we might normally think about solitude. So what's civic solitude, and why is it particularly important for citizens of a democracy?

The book Civic Solitude, begins with the following observation, and this will help. You know, a lot of our political thinking, both as academics and as citizens, sort of follows an interesting trend that if you Google the phrase, this is what democracy looks like, you'll get a couple hundred thousand images of depicting roughly the same kind of thing. Now let's hold off on a question about whether that, you know, democracy looks like one thing is maybe that's weird in itself. Let's hold off on that for a second. It's an image that, you know, even without doing the Google search, many listeners will be able to predict. Large mass of people in a legibly, visibly public space, carrying political messages of a similar kind, expressing a similar political sentiment. The sort of public demonstration is what democracy looks like, at least according to Google. And maybe Google here isn't all that isn't all that, you know, isn't off. I mean, maybe this is, what people think about. And there's good reason for that. Democracies are places where, you know, the authority, the legitimacy of the government is tied in some way to its accountability, to the people it governs, and accountability is not merely something that happens a couple of Novembers. Accountability is, a thing that happens outside of the election, and mass public demonstration to hold government and officials accountable is clearly, like, a central part of what the democratic aspiration is all about. So I'm not denying that. What I do wanna suggest, though, is that democratic citizens, in addition to being active participants in the project of making their government responsive to them and

accountable and responsible to them, democratic citizens also need to be reflective. They need to be able to think. They need to be able to think from the perspective of the society that is aspiring to realize the ideal of being a self governing society of political equals. And so part of what democratic citizenship involves is sort of a kind of reflection that is aimed at something beyond the mere clarification of my own interests or my own opinion or my own desire or my own preferences with respect to politics. Our responsibilities as democratic citizens calls for us to be able to reflect in ways that can sort of acknowledge that we have to be thinking in terms of what can I responsibly impose upon people who disagree with me about what's best for everybody? Turns out that the capacities that we need in order to reflect in those democratic ways can be eroded in the course of collective public political activity. That the guys in this the people in those Google images carrying the signs, not saying they're doing something bad even. Right? It's like, well, that kind of activity can undermine the kind of cognitive and emotional resources that are required of us when we're thinking about what signs to carry and what demonstration to show up for. Civic solitude is a kinda is the name of an activity. It's not just isolation. It's not just, you know, doing your own research in your basement somewhere. Right? Civic solitude is an is a kind of activity that is secluded. It's momentary. We're not saying you don't go out into the streets and you don't go to the voting booth. It's secluded, and it's an engagement of a mode of civic reflection that stands at a distance from the political present.

Great. So I wanna talk a little bit more about the actual activity here. You say that solitude is needed for reflection and a kind of capacity building to burnish the credentials, if you will, of our democratic skills. So what happens in the moments of solitude that makes us better democratic participants?

Great. The perfectly good question. So let me let me give the example that actually got me thinking along these lines that I discussed at some length in the book. You know, I'm a professor. Right? And I don't know. And so, every year, I teach introduction to political philosophy. And part of that course involves, you know, reading a little chunk of Aristotle's book called The Politics or called Politics Politea. Right? It's an interesting book as some of your listeners no doubt will know. It is the book that, you're supposed to read after you read play after you read Aristotle's book on ethics. Right? The last sentence of the Nicomachean Ethics is now we can begin. Like,

what do you mean? I just finished a book. Well, you're supposed to go to the politics to get the the the the bigger picture that completes the account of virtue that's given in the Nicomachean Ethics. Now in all kinds of ways, Aristotle's political view is very strange. It's a view about civic virtue. Right? It's a completion of his moral philosophy, which is all about moral virtue. And Aristotle says things like, you know, this the state's job is to make you a gentleman, you know, make you a beautiful person. Right? On the inside, he means, right, it's to make you a morally beautiful, human being. Almost every year, some student will ask either during lecture or in my office hours, was Aristotle a conservative? Now there are all kinds of ways that we like, this is a perfectly understandable question because so much of it is about the common good and the the purpose of the human being and what, you know, what makes for a good man or a good woman. And although in Aristotle, it's mostly the good man he's interested in. And so, you know, it's an occasion to say, well, why would you why do you suspect that he might be conservative? What does that mean? What is it what are you talking about? We're talking about conservatism, all kinds of different things that could be meant by that. So it's often the beginning of an interesting sort of, line of questioning, and it's the basis of a good in class discussion. However, one of the ways that that kind of discussion succeeds is when the students come to realize that the question is badly formed in a particular way. Because the right answer to the question was Aristotle a conservative is no. But that's not because he's a liberal or a progressive. It's because he's presented us with a systematic account of politics, a systematic theory of social and political orders because he's not only talking about right. It's a catalog of all kinds of different ways in which you can organize a group of few a population of human beings into a political unit. Right? He does all this in a way that just does not map onto our conceptual idiom for thinking about politics. He's giving us a systematic view of, social and political organization that's neither liberal nor conservative as we, 2025 US, you know, citizens tend to think. And so here here's why this is important. You know, so much of our political thinking is a red comes to us. We inherit it, formulated in a vocabulary that is the product of, you know, some particular in some cases, identifiable, not always identifiable, but, you know, just a particular sort of trajectory of social and political events. This is how we got to think about, you know, the two parties and what the agendas for the two parties are and what the commitments are and where the focus of the parties is. And, you know, part of that is explained by the fact that we have a constitution that says the stuff that it does rather than some

other constitution. You know, three branches of government, not five. You know? Elections get conducted this way, not some other way. No parliament, you know, congress. Right? So you can imagine all of the ways in which that vernacular, that set of concepts for thinking about politics is a kind of contingent product. It's an artifact of certain features of our the history of our society, of our main institutions, periods of social upheaval, periods of demographic changes. And yet the overriding tendency in our democracy is to treat the categories as if they were part of the fabric of the world. And so part of what I I suggest in civic solitude is that it's part of the responsible democratic citizen's job to occasionally engage in a process of reflection that reminds him or herself that the most familiar political categories and vocabulary are just inheritances. That's not to say they're bad tools, but seeing them as tools, I think, is an important feature of coming to be more adept at reflecting about politics.

So speaking of the overarching framing devices and idioms of our current political moment, I'd like to zoom in on one in particular. It's one that we hear a lot about. It's one of the great boogymen of the age, polarization. More specifically though, you you have a lot to say about belief polarization. The way that people tend to be more extreme in their views and justifications when, like many of us, they typically engage, at least mostly, with like minded folks. So how might civic solitude interact with belief polarization?

Alex, you laid it out very nicely just to set this up just a little bit. Right? So, you know, everyone, the word polarization is on a lot of people's lips. It's a it's a word that gets thrown around. It's not often defined. And I think that, you know, in sort of everyday talk when people talk when the word polarization comes up, they're referring to a a partisan division. They're referring to something like the distance, policy wise, ideologically, morally, whatever. Right? They're pointing to some exaggerated, you know, escalated distance between the two major parties in The United States. Call that political polarization. Now political polarization might lead to frustrating democratic politics because if the two major parties are really far apart on everything, they're gonna have a hard time, you know, cooperating, and you'll get a lot of log jams and frustrations and a lot of, intransigence and obstructionism and all that. You know, one of the lessons to come out of Tocqueville is that, you know, that democracies have a hard time getting things done quickly, might be the feature of the of the system, not the bug. Right? It wasn't too long ago in the

nineteen fifties and early sixties, by the way, way, that political scientists who were studying political polarization, the the the vibe between the party between the two parties, you know, their complaint was that the parties weren't polarized enough. Right? There's like, look. The parties are so alike that people don't see what's at stake in the election, so people aren't voting. So it was a way of the lack of polarization what was what was brought in to explain low voter turnouts in the fifties and sixties. Belief polarization is a different phenomenon. It's internal. It's a cognitive and emotional affective, right, psychological, we might say in the broadest sense, phenomenon. And it's the regularity with which members of like minded groups through the course of iterated interactions with their peers become more extreme. Now they become more extreme both in that they come to hold more extreme versions of the like minded belief that makes them a like minded group. They become more extreme in the second sense as well. They become more confident in the more extreme version of the of, of the like minded view. And thirdly, they become more confident in their own ability to judge well that issue, right, that that makes them a member of that like minded group. This is a remarkably robust and reliable, non-varying kind of phenomenon. It's been found all over the doesn't vary with any of the demographic factors that you might think it should, education, religiosity, ethnicity, education. Yeah. It doesn't economic positioning doesn't vary with, you know, with any of that stuff. Now now just to give just one or two really quick sort of kinda comic examples. You got a bunch of people together in a room who all agree that the city of Denver, Colorado is notable for being high above sea level. The longer they talk about the elevation of Denver, the higher they think it is, and the more confident they are that it's that higher, right, that it's higher. And if you ask them, like, well, what do you know about the elevation of Denver? They'll tell you a story about why they have extra this special knowledge about the elevation of Colorado cities or something. So in some cases, we know they even confabulate stories. And it's not driven by extra evidence or new information. It's purely group dynamical. It's just that when you see yourself as a member of a group, you like to be we are groupish creatures. We like being members of groups. And when we find, again, we find our people. We like to fit in with them. And one way to fit in with the people who are our people is to express exaggerated versions of the things that make them our people, the ideas, the commitments, and most importantly, the affects, the the emotions. As we believe polarized, as we become more extreme versions of ourselves, we also become more puzzled by, less trusting of, more put off by anybody who doesn't share

our judgment of the matter in question. And so as we become more extreme, we also become more wary of, distrustful of, disliking of the out group. Once we start thinking that, the in group, out group border becomes really important to police, and so belief polarized groups become more homogeneous internally. So our more extreme selves are not also more alike other group members. We're more into being alike. And so believe polar more our more extreme selves are more conformist. If you, listeners want any sort of, like, rough, you know, rough and ready evidence of this, it's a pretty clear indication of, the partisan affiliation of anybody who you might hear speaking about the country whose name is pronounced whose name is spelled I R A Q. If you hear them say Iraq or Iraq, that's a really good indicator of what their partisan affiliation is. And note, I don't even have to tell you whose party pronounces it which way. Belief polarization is really important for one sort of right off the bat very, I I I think, evident way. Well, if it's a cognitive dynamic that irrespective of evidence but strictly driven by groupish kinds of tendencies leads us to become distrustful, disliking, disgusted by anybody who's not just like us. Well, that's already a problem for democracy because, remember, going back to the very beginning, right, democracy means, like, I gotta see you as my equal even when I think you're wrong about politics. Right? And so part of the challenge, the moral challenge, I would say, of democratic citizenship is cultivating within ourselves the very peculiar habits and dispositions that would enable me to say, peculiar habits and dispositions that would enable me to say, Alex, I despise your politics, but I recognize that you're not somebody who merely gets an equal say. You are entitled to an equal say. When you and your friends get your way, that is what the government must do despite the fact that I think you're wrong about what justice requires. It's a very, very tortured posture that democracy requires of us. Takes a lot of skill. Belief polarization encourages us to adopt the following thought. Ready? Democracy is possible only when everyone's just like me. I believe polarization is bad in that regard, but it's bad in this other regard too because after all, some of your listeners might say, well, wait a minute. But the people on the other side really are depraved. You're telling me that democracy means I can't think anybody's really wrong? No. No. No. No. You're gonna think there are people who are really wrong. Belief polarization encourages you to think that people are really wrong even when they're not, even when they don't believe the things that you attribute to them. The American electorate is no more divided today over fundamental questions about the purposes of government and what policies the government should implement. No

more divided today than they were in 1992. We feel a lot more divided. Cross partisan animosity has escalated in a way that is not in the least bit commensurate with the actual things that people disagree about. It's a very, very interesting sort of lack of fit between what people tend to model in their own minds with respect to their political opposition's beliefs and dispositions and what people actually say their beliefs and dispositions are. So belief polarization leads us to embrace conceptions of what our fellow citizens think and what they want and who they are that are not tied to any of their of those people's own expressions. So that's the takeaway. The problem of polarization when we're thinking about belief polarization is not, in my view, I argue for this in the book, is not divisiveness. Maybe divisiveness is bad. It's certainly unpleasant. Maybe it's not dysfunctional except in certain kinds of extreme circumstances. Maybe those are our circumstances. But it's not divisiveness. It's not that we need more unity, unity, unity, like, you know, president Biden said in his inaugural. Maybe we need that. I don't know. But the problem of polarization is not animosity and hostility. It's exaggerated animosity and hostility. It's animosity and hostility that is elevated artificially. The civic solitude proposal wants to suggest that well, look. A lot of people hear polarization, and they think, oh, well, you think that people just have to, like, you know, invite each other over for coffee and hug it out and be friends. No. Right? I'm not I think that politics is about animosity. I think I'm an agonist in political philosophy. I understood what president Biden was saying in his inaugural, but there's a very real sense in which democracy is not about unity and democracy is not about mending fences, and democracy is not about reaching across the aisle and finding common ground for its own sake. What depolarization is about is about correcting our misperceptions of what the people around us think. And belief polarization not only leads us to distort our conception of what our political foes think, but remember, belief polarized groups become more conformist. Belief polarization also leads us to distorted attitudes and dispositions towards our political allies. It leads us to be worse at understanding their priorities, their ideas, more dismissive of their ideas if they seem to us to detract or deviate from what we think the group commitment is. So believe you know, conformity is a real is the other face of the polarization problem. It's not just the hostility towards the outside. It's the conformity within. This is why, by the way, when you hear people talk about depolarization in terms of sort turning down the temperature, finding common ground, shaking hands, hugging it out, you know, guys like me, that that makes me queasy too because I think

there are lots of ways to achieve consensus and unanimity and agreeableness that are anti democratic because they are rooted in distortions. Depolarization means trying to figure out strategies for combating our tendencies to adopt distorted conceptions of the people around us and their political views and priorities. And part of what I think is needed is, you know, a sort of broadly speaking, a version of the devil's advocacy norm. Right? So we need to figure out ways to expose our ideas to criticism. Having true beliefs is one epistemic goal. Knowing the story about the truth of those beliefs is a different epistemic, but knowing the just having a command of the evidence and the reasons that justify your correct view is another worthy epistemic aim and having a good command of the ways in which people who reject your view, where they see it going wrong. That's another thing that you can have having a good grasp of that is also a good for you epistemically. So the thought is not that depolarization means that we all become a little bit less convinced, a little bit more ready to say, hey... Maybe the other guys have a point. No. No. You could be steadfast and still say, well, wait a minute. Figuring out ways to expose your ideas to criticism is an epistemic good even when you're quite confident that you're never gonna change your mind. Depolarization is not about reconciling. Depolarization is about rooting out your dis distortions, getting a better command of the issues, getting a better command of what's salient, and getting a better command of your own mind. That's where the solitude bit comes in. Right? Exercising the cognitive and affective capacities that enable you to be a good self critic, a good self assessor of your own cognitive and affective condition and a good dispeller or container of the worst distortions and the worst biases that you are vulnerable to.

We'll be right back with this episode of Examining Ethics after a short break.

AD BREAK: Do you ever wonder why students today are choosing TikTok over Tolstoy? Is deep immersive reading on the way out? Or are there bigger forces at play? In her latest article, No More Patience, No More Books, Katie Leonard unpacks the shift away from long form reading and what it means for education, empathy, and the future of critical thinking. Don't just doom scroll the headlines. Dive into the full conversation and get to the moral heart of the matter at the Prindle Post. You could read this piece and other recent stories now at [prindleinstitute.org backslash post](https://prindleinstitute.org/backslash/post). The Prindle Post is a digital publication of public philosophy dedicated to examining

the significant ethical issues raised by current events and popular culture. It's produced by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University, and its editor in chief is Dr. Tucker Seacrest.

We're back with Bob Talisse talking about his new book, *Civic Solitude*. Suppose we're trying to build spaces for the type of reflection that you recommend. It occurs to me that there's a lot in our way. One of these things is the civic impulse. Right? You know, democracy isn't a spectator sport. You should be informed, engaged, sometimes solemn, sometimes outraged, and so on. That's, of course, to say nothing of our information diets, which tend to be, shall we say, omnivorous, if not gluttonous. There's a constant stream of stuff out there. You and I interact some on Twitter or X as it's now called. A lot of folks think it's sort of a disgrace that so much discourse about politics in particular is mediated through platforms like this. A lot of our experiences in our social worlds seem structured to discourage solitude and distance. So I wonder how you think about overcoming some of these challenges.

Good. So you've put your finger, Alex, exactly at the point. Like, we're already in it. Right? We're not the task now is not trying to prevent something bad from happening. We are submerged in the bad thing. The bad thing here particularly is just to put my own spin on it. It's the saturation of partisan politics to every aspect of life. The right way to think about this seems to me to have been captured by, Lilliana Mason in her book, *Uncivil Agreement*. It's like, yeah, conservative, liberal, republican, democrat, these are not the names of political projects anymore. They're the names of lifestyles. Patterns of consumer behavior, patterns of various kinds of expressions of preferences. Liberals and conservatives were really talking about yoga pants versus camouflage. Where the division lies really isn't in anybody's, like, beliefs about taxation. Right? The division is a lifestyle division. In fact, in The United States today, strongly negative and disapproving attitudes towards cross partisan marriage outstrip similarly negative attitudes towards interracial and interfaith marriages. Let's think about that for a second. You'd rather see your kid were marry somebody who worships a false god than who votes for the wrong candidate. People who are similarly who are similarly positioned politically live more alike than people who are economically similar but of different parties. Right? So part of the problem here then is that, like, everything's become politics. And when everything becomes politics, we get bad at it because the kind

of politics that we're supposed to be invested in is the kind of politics that is committed to various forms of recognition of our fellow citizens' political equality that is their entitlement to an equal political say even when we despise the political judgments they make. In our line of work, in political theory, you know this is the case. You could read a lot of contemporary political commentary, political theory, political philosophy from, you know, professors at very universities to the commentator in your local newspaper and walk away with the idea that our civic duties are always intrinsically public collective duties. When we are acting in the role of citizen, we are doing things together, that is with others, out where other people can see us doing them. Civic Solitude is a book that says, no. That's an error. Right? It's a mistake. It's not because those public collective things are not important. They are. They're not the only thing that's important because those public collective activities, because of belief polarization, erode the reflective capacities that we need if we're going to do democracy well. How do we exercise those capacities? How do we sort of build them? How do we cultivate them? The answer is, that I propose in the book, is gotta find spaces where you can go and be alone to think your own way through things when especially think your own way through things that are not already thought through by your partisan allies. What I'm suggesting is that what goes on in museums and libraries and public parks is not rest is not necessarily respite from civic life, that there's a distinctive kind of civically important, crucial, reflective, contemplative activity that can go on there. Right? Part of the problem of the civic solitude book is I get to the part where trying to make the prescription. I'm like, wait a minute. The whole world is already submerged in this partisan, you know, the these partisan rifts and conflicts, where we shop, where we go to school, what professions we are already partisan coded. How are we gonna break out? I said, wait a minute. There are a few remaining, I think, pub properly public spaces and institutions. These tend to be noncommercial spaces and institutions that lend themselves... The public library, the public museum, public park are designed for all kinds of things to happen. They lend themselves, though, to a kind of detached reflection. Now one of, I think, the anti elitist payoffs of the civic solitude proposal is that once you see a kind of momentary detached distanced reflection as part of the part of the package of our civ member of the package of our civic responsibilities. We're no longer able to see public funding for these institutions as optional. If a certain kind of reflection in the presence of exposure to ideas and thoughts and images that don't sort of call into play your existing partisan

reflexes, that's part of what we are required to do as good democratic citizens already. You know what? The public library is a lot more like a voting booth than we think. Fundamental, crucial, central, nonnegotiable democratic activity is made possible by the public library and the public museum and the public park. And I think that one of the real democratic payoffs that should, I I I hope, sort of, you know, maybe gain the interest of the activists out there who are thinking, no. Democracy goes on in the street. It's like, no. It goes on in libraries too. And once you see that, it's like now you've got a democrat it's like libraries are not just for people who happen to value, you know, Horace, and the museum is not for people who happen to like art. It's like, no. The museum is a democratic space. It's a democratic space that permits, that lends itself to a certain kind of reflection that need not be any more sophisticated than somebody sitting and looking and saying, what is that about? Those are fundamentally crucial democratic thoughts. And the civic solitude book, what I hope is the payoff is that once you see that democracy needs active citizens and reflective of citizens. Modes of our democratic activity can undermine the reflection. The reflection has to happen in context that are not like the places where we are active. What kinds of context are that? These noncommercial spaces that lend themselves to a certain kind of quiet reflection, okay. They're not optional for democracy now. We need to expand them, in fact. That's the payoff of the book.

Okay. I think I'm with you so far, but are you worried about the ongoing possibility that these kinds of spaces you think are so crucial themselves become sites of politics too? I'm thinking about recent news about funding cuts, which target these very sorts of space or the organizations that support them. We're seeing gestures at political, ideological, maybe even aesthetic litmus tests for institutions like museums and libraries. This comes up a lot in the public discussion about diversity and inclusion programs, about placing restrictions on library materials in schools and in public, and on and on we go. These spaces in some ways seem vulnerable to, as you've suggested, politics overdone. I wonder how you might think about responding to this.

That's right. And so part of what I wanna say there, like, I'm not a I'm not an optimist. Right? I'm passionate. And I do real I'd say this in the book in all three of the book. Like, I harbor real concerns that, like, the ship has sailed. Like, we are a we are a society that is kinda doomed now to drown in its own politics and sort of suffer the dysfunctions. In fact, what

I in the civic solitude book, I say, look. There's an autoimmune disorder here. There's something to be managed. It's not a problem that can be fixed. We can't be cured. We can only mitigate this. And part of my suggestion is that, look, you know, I'm really... I share the concern. It's like it's too late for somebody like me, you know, tweed jacket at a elite institution saying, oh, we need to think of libraries and museums as parks as places where people can go and expose themselves to unfamiliar ideas. And then somebody comes along and says, yeah. That's a liberal progressive thing to do. Like, you know, you're just you're just kowtowing to, you know, AOC or Bernie Sanders or whoever it is. Right? Now I wanna say, well, wait a minute. Like, maybe I can tell you a story, right, that gives some pushback to that. Maybe. Right? No. No. Wait a minute. I could tell the story about the value here that's really just about democracy. Right? And I think I can tell a version of that story that takes on board a lot of what I think of as pretty valuable philosophical insights that are indigenous to conservative, right, traditions of thinking. Right? Right? Part of remember, part of the idea, like, when you read Aristotle because Aristotle's yeah. Aristotle's exposing you to a world that's not yours. Right? The important thing about Aristotle is that he's not talking to you. Understanding Aristotle means, like, getting out of your head and getting into something different. Like, this is not I mean, this is a thought that is very comfortable from the point of view, especially of the strand of conservatism that's wrapped up with the great books tradition. The target here is that, like, the person who says, yeah, libraries are important. The past is important. You know, monumental works of of of philosophy, of thinking, of human civil civilization is important. It's like all of that is consistent with pretty conservative traditions of social thinking, not merely consistent, I should have, embraced by those traditions. And I think I can tell most of my story in that idiom and just say, look. I've got a conservative argument for this. And in fact, part of the Civic Solitude book does end on a on a, you know, a little bit of a reflection that some people have told me, like, sort of takes a step too far into the direction of conservative thinking. I happen to not think that, you know, anything that any, like, conservative person has thought is something to be resisted. I think Michael Oakeshott is a serious political philosopher. There's no way around it, or Burke or even Roger Scruton. Right? These are serious political thinkers. They are conservative. Part of the activist project, the project that sees democracy is just fully the activist stuff. You know, the way that this has impacted our conception of the value of the humanities in liberal arts education, I

think has been really pernicious in that you know, again, my own institution is certainly not unique in this, but, you know, maybe it's you know, there are certainly degrees of this, but it's not uncommon. I've talked to lots of professors around the country about this kind of thing. It's not uncommon to hear from, you know, deans and other administrators and even colleagues. Things like, you know, the importance of teaching Plato's Republic so that you can teach students how to understand Trump. I'm not saying, like, you know, the point of a liberal arts education is that, like, you never learn anything that talks to you. But I also wanna say, like, well, wait a minute. No. No. No. Part of what's important about The Republic is that it's not readily translatable into our experience.

No. It's supposed to be weird. That's why it's fun.

It's weird. You've got to exercise your political and social imagination to understand what's going on in that book. The fact that this isn't talking Shakespeare is another good example. Not talking to you, 20 year old in 2025 US politics. It's not talking to you. That's an important thing to learn about yourself is it's not always about you. That's that is that's part of self understanding. That should be part of your conception of your lived experience is that the world is constructed out of things that weren't made for you, that you've gotta navigate, that don't speak to you, whose relevance is not immediately legible to you. If the idea is, well, we could think about libraries in a way that isn't merely the kind of thing for kids, is it but is a place where people can expose themselves to the thoughts of a Burke or an Oak shot and wonder what's going on there, right, or even Scruton where a lot of the conservatism happens to be about Britain. Right? Right? What's going on there? It's like I, like, I okay. If you're not on board with that, like, I'm ready for the conversation.

This has been a conversation with Bob Talice of Vanderbilt University about his new book, Civic Solitude, the third in a trilogy of excellent books about the nature and requirements of democracy, available now from Oxford University Press. Bob, this has been a great conversation. Thanks so much for coming on the show.

Thank you for having me, Alex. It's been great to talk to you.

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guests and don't reflect the position of the Prindle Institute or of DePauw University. Our show's music is by Blue Dot Sessions. You can learn more about today's episode and check out supplementary resources at examiningethics.org. As always, you can contact us directly at examiningethics@dePauw.edu. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.

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