



# Collaboration as communication: writing with Geoffrey Brennan

Loren Lomasky<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 21 October 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2022

## 1 Introduction

Coauthorship comes in at least two importantly distinct species,<sup>1</sup> both incorporating gains from trade. The first I call *Ricardian collaboration*. Each author contributes that component for which she possesses a comparative advantage. For example, the authors may possess expertise in different historical periods; one gracefully manipulates mathematical formulae while the other shares access to a cache of proprietary datasets. Note that beyond the agreement to pool their individual efforts, Ricardian collaborators may act largely independently of the other(s). Coauthorship in the natural sciences typically is Ricardian with a vengeance, each of a dozen or more contributors fulfilling a specialized function, such as principal investigator, that may, but need not, involve putting any words on pages.

The other species can be dubbed *communicative collaboration*. Here exchanges between the authors are ongoing, from the initial decision to produce a joint product to a final review of the completed project to ascertain that it truly embodies the conception of each. In between, the authors will have batted ideas back and forth, typically coming to hold views that they had not brought to the project. Communicative collaboration is primarily epistemological, an exercise in joint learning. The intensity of communication admits of degree from complete meeting of minds on the one end to pure Ricardian collaboration at the other.

As a model of coauthorship this is both sketchy and vague. I may someday try to improve on it, especially if I can do so with a gifted collaborator, but the preceding may suffice to provide a framework for conveying a feel of what intellectual life was like at the Public Choice Center during its final year in Blacksburg, Virginia. More precisely, it is that slice of the intellectual life constituted by my introduction to thinking like an economist, courtesy of the mentorship of Geoffrey Brennan.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although I believe these to be the most important species of authorial collaboration, it is acknowledged that they are not exhaustive. A third, for example, may be for the authors to maximize the number of entries in their respective CVs.

---

✉ Loren Lomasky  
lel3f@virginia.edu

<sup>1</sup> University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA

## 2 Destination Blacksburg

That as an almost-junior academic I should come to spend my 1982–1983 sabbatical year at the Center was altogether unlikely. I had never taken a course in economics, and nothing that I had previously written strayed beyond philosophical disciplinary lines. Nor can I claim to have developed as an autodidact even a cursory appreciation of economics. So why would I choose to spend a year at Virginia Tech? Simple: there was no other invitation.

Less explicable is why the Public Choice Center would want me. The short answer is serendipity. The slightly expanded one is that I met Geoff Brennan at an interdisciplinary conference sponsored by Liberty Fund of Indianapolis, Indiana. It is there that we began our collaboration, not as dutiful scholars but at an after-hours bridge table where, with a parlay of brashness, bonhomie and beer we routed our opponents. (Admittedly, they were bridge novices and did not match in our tolerance for alcohol.) Although during the following year Geoff and I cut a respectably wide swath at the Virginia Tech duplicate bridge club, I do not want readers to believe that it was this prospect that induced him to nominate me for the residency—well, at least that it was not the dominant reason. During the day before cards came out, we found ourselves repeatedly anticipating the points the other one was advancing, and when not anticipating then bouncing off them. Even at the card table we found time between defending contracts to defend ideas. I don't know how many other scholars might have turned down an invitation from the Center before my name came around, but neither then, nor now am I apt to be choosy.

I left at home the insulated parka that shielded me from Duluth, Minnesota's winters but brought along a thoroughly philosophical project in the foundational theory of human rights that I intended to pursue over the sabbatical. I also looked forward to meeting and interacting with the university's philosophers. In the event, it transpired that they were significantly occupied with a fission of the Department of Philosophy & Religion into its two component parts. Although cordial enough, they had more urgent business than seeking out the company of a visitor in another unit. So just as it's good manners to dance with the one that brung you, I found myself doing most of my intellectual dancing with the economists. That too proved to be serendipitous.

## 3 Expressive voting

I have offered elsewhere reflections on what it was like to adapt to the ecology of the Public Choice Center (Lomasky, 2004). We were housed in a splendid older building that formerly had been the residence of the university president. Individual offices radiated from common areas. Facilitating interchange even more than the architecture was the culture. One never got the impression that you were wasting someone's time when you engaged him in conversation. Those exchanges constituted my initial economics education.

In nearly every research university featuring a department of political science, it is commonplace to observe that political theorists borrow extensively from the presumptions and methods of economics. It was not always so. The tradition of economics, even in its prehistory prior to Adam Smith, focused almost exclusively on how individuals pursue their material self-interests in something like a market setting. Situated in the neighborhood of avarice, it bore a less than savory reputation. Politics, though, occupied the other pole. Because political activity when pursued correctly is in service to the *common good*,

it opposes selfishness. Money-grubbing is base, service to the state is noble. (Among the several ways in which Socrates scandalized his compatriots, not least was rejecting political life in favor of philosophizing.) The great classics of political theorizing were not all utopian, but even those thinkers as pragmatic as Aristotle, Cicero or Aquinas aimed to construct models for nurturing and maintaining virtue even under conditions of moderate adversity. Those teachings were addressed primarily to rulers whose benevolence toward their subjects was assumed.

I had not heard of public choice economics before coming to Virginia; I had barely heard of economics. I had, however not only heard of but actually read a fair bit of David Hume, just not the pronouncement that the denizens of the Center took as their credo: “[I]n contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controuls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest” (Hume, 1742/1985). So as not to be odd man out at the party, I hastily immersed myself in some of the classics of Hume’s twentieth century successors, including Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) and, of course, Buchanan & Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (1962). What I learned, was that the person who enters the voting booth is the selfsame individual as the one who transacts in the market. Transformations of character simply do not occur in passage between political and economic realms. *Homo politicus* is none other than *Homo economicus*.

I found that central assumption of public choice thoroughly persuasive, both on Occamite grounds and by applying some casual empiricism. However, from Downs I learned that a couple of kinks were on the periphery of the theory. One slight embarrassment was the difficulty of explaining why rational agents would bother to vote at all in large-number electorates for which the chance of one’s own ballot making any difference in the outcome is altogether negligible. Another awkwardness concerns why those citizens whose votes stand to be without effect would bother to invest time and effort in acquiring political information to improve that vote’s accuracy.

Most of the public choice theorists I encountered were not very much disturbed by those wrinkles. As for the problem of *rational ignorance*, well, ordinary citizens (as opposed to academics who earn their living thinking about matters political) display no shortage of political ignorance. They wallow in it! As for why those not-very-well-schooled individuals vote at all, a number of possible explanations suggest themselves. Perhaps they are extremely risk-averse; they tend to conform to the behavior they observe in others; they do not wish to suffer the rebukes of their peers for failing in their civic duty; that the mere act of voting every two or four years entails so slight a commitment that it can hardly be viewed as the intrusion of moral motivation into self-interest; or some further factor.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps people just have a taste for voting. It would be nice to solve once and for all the problem of *rational abstention*, but even if that is left as a black box the undeniable fact that citizens do in their many millions visit the polls on election day allows all the other machinery of public choice to be hauled out to explain what those citizens will do once they find themselves there.

I had no stake in those issues and would have been content to let the two problems go but for the fact that over morning coffee I was drawn into discussion with my public

<sup>2</sup> I recently refereed a paper arguing that the probability of one’s vote being decisive actually is much larger than what is commonly maintained in the literature. I confessed to the journal editor that although sophisticated probability theory is far beyond my area of expertise, I remained unpersuaded that this is the most satisfactory response to the problem of rational abstention.

choice hosts about how far from benign the state of the art truly was. Just as converts to a creed often become its most enthusiastic expounders, I found myself increasingly drawn away from the chapters on rights I was supposed to be writing to batting ideas back and forth with Brennan about why people choose to vote. If they are so risk-averse regarding political matters, why do they buy lottery tickets, ski down slopes and eat cholesterol-rich foods? Why might knaves fear rebuke for not doing their civic duty from fellow knaves? It cannot be acceptable simply to punt on the question of why so many people choose to vote *because whatever it is that draws them to the voting booth may affect which levers they pull once they get there*. Rather, the same understanding of self-interest must be applied to both settings.

Although it is entirely vacuous to say that people vote because they like voting, were it feasible to offer an account of what it is that makes voting attractive, that analysis might yield the basis for a theory with some explanatory bite. And so, Geoff and I talked. And talked – mostly with each other but also with those Center regulars and guests we were able to dragoon. One could plead the passage of some 40 years to excuse an inability to specify who came up with which ideas and in what order, but I suspect that even if a transcript of our conversations were available, it would remain difficult to apportion credit for particular contributions. In other words, even before there was thought of actually writing up something, the collaboration was already intensely collaborative.

If not simultaneously then mostly overlapping, we came to agree that acts of voting could not usefully be thought of as investment in electorally determined outcomes. Rather, voting is of the nature of a consumption good, valued not (primarily) for what it might bring about. We didn't take much joy in that conclusion; it seemed to be a variation on the unrevealing proposition that people vote because they like to vote. The interesting question is why people by the millions might share that taste. That is, might some quasi-universal feature of human nature come to the fore in casting a ballot? The answer to which we pushed each other is that we are an *expressive* species; we value projecting attitudes and beliefs onto the world. Once we worked our way to that basic insight, confirming examples came along comparatively quickly. Congregants practice ritual observances not to bring about some particular outcome but to express their fealty to a higher power; fans gather in stadiums to cheer on their beloved team against the despised opponents, not because they believe that cheering is a rationally indicated investment in the favored outcome but to express their allegiance. (In most cases it is impossible to say which of us first introduced a particular motif, but because one of us regularly attended Sunday church services and the other cursed and cheered at the TV while watching football games, in this instance it is possible to advance an educated guess.)

Because expressive activity pervades human culture, nothing notably radical surfaces in supposing that it has a place in political activity. The special sauce that gives the dish its flavor is the indecisiveness on election day of any individual vote. That precisely is what makes voting an exceptionally low-cost vehicle for expressing support or opposition. Cost-conscious individuals—that is, all of us—thereby have reason to favor the migration of concerns from the private into the political realm. An example: many people believe that it is morally commendable for well-off people to give to the poor. They might do so more often were it not so expensive; contributing \$1000 to a suitable charity comes at the cost of \$1000. However, to vote for a policy (or candidate who supports) taxing people like you \$1000 is virtually cost-free. You are supporting “the moral thing” and still retain your \$1000. What a bargain!

That relative prices matter is, of course, a truism found in every economist's toolkit. To the extent that votes serve as an (imperfect) substitute for other, more costly modes

of behavior, citizens will direct their votes toward the line on the ballot that maximizes their expressive rewards. What separates that understanding from orthodox public choice is explicit acknowledgment that the expressively richest line may not be the one that the voter would have selected if decisive. An expressive theory of political behavior offers unified explanations both of why individuals make their way to the polls at all and what they do once they get there. Although the construction described above addresses only voter behavior, natural extensions arise to the incentives faced by candidates for office and other political actors. I say “natural” but confess that they emerged slowly. Again, who came up with what is lost in the indeterminacy of communicative collaboration.

Responsibility can, however, be allocated for the decision to start writing up and submitting our thoughts. I was entirely clueless concerning how one approaches economics journals, so Geoff led, and I contentedly followed. I also was the passive partner in the decision to apply our theory to the provision of *merit goods* (Brennan & Lomasky 1983). That is because I had never heard of merit goods. But once I was introduced to the concept and a sliver of the literature, the familiar bilateral dynamics of our collaboration resumed. He was no more the “lead author” on this paper than I was on our speculative Adam Smith construction (Brennan & Lomasky, 1985).

#### 4 Coda

On balance, the close of the sabbatical probably was a good thing for me. I returned to Minnesota and renewed plugging away at the human rights manuscript I had abandoned in order to learn some economics. I believe it also was a fortuitous time for the Public Choice Center as it picked itself up and decamped to George Mason University, and for Geoff Brennan who made his way back to the Australian National University. Before our mutual leave-takings, he and I had mused about the prospect of building on our handful of articles to produce an integrated theory of expressive democratic politics. That didn’t happen right away. We each had other things that needed doing. More to the point, we were neither willing nor able to shift to a more Ricardian mode of collaboration. Would things have progressed differently in an age of Zoom? Probably not for us; our limited technological aptitude was stretched to the limit by email. Fortunately, in 1986 I was able to wrangle a semester leave that allowed me to visit the ANU. Lots of chatting turned on the writing faucet that eventually led to production of *Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Preference* (Brennan & Lomasky, 1993).

That was the climax but not the conclusion of our investigations of democracy. Much later we came together again to argue the negative case in “Is there a Duty to Vote?” (Brennan & Lomasky, 2000). The reason that that question had not been not pursued in *Democracy and Decision* is that we then disagreed as to whether voting in elections is more morally meritorious than, say, going off instead to play tennis.

It was a pleasant surprise to be informed that the paper had been awarded a prize to be presented at the 2003 American Philosophical Association meeting in San Francisco. Celebrating afterwards over dinner at a nearby restaurant with some close friends, we vigorously debated the case for democratic participation. Unexpectedly, we were approached by a grim-faced young woman from an adjacent table who declared in a voice almost as loud as ours, “You make me ashamed to be an American!” Although he and I often recalled the incident, Geoff never revealed to me whether he was pleased or dismayed to be afforded collaboration in shared citizenship.

## References

- Brennan, G., & Lomasky, L. (1993). *Democracy and decision: The pure theory of electoral preference*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brennan, G., & Lomasky, L. (1983). Institutional aspects of “merit goods” analysis. *Finanzarchiv*, *41*, 183–206.
- Brennan, G., & Lomasky, L. (2000). Is there a duty to vote? *Social Philosophy and Policy*, *17*, 62–86.
- Brennan, G., & Lomasky, L. (1985). The impartial spectator goes to Washington: Toward a Smithian theory of electoral behavior. *Economics and Philosophy*, *1*, 189–211.
- Hume, D. (1985) Of the independency of Parliament. In E. F. Miller (Ed.) *Essays, moral, political, and literary*. Liberty Press, Indianapolis, Ind.
- Lomasky, L. (2004). When hard heads collide. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, *63*, 189–205.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.