

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE IDEA for this book began in a two-year long seminar of the Program in Ethics and Public Affairs at Princeton University. The program brings together faculty and students to address important moral issues of public life. The value of associational life in liberal democracies is among those issues. Eminent social scientists report a decreasing proportion of Americans have been joining traditional civic and religious associations. Many people are lamenting this decline. Others are skeptical of the lament or of the reported decline. Before joining the lament or criticizing it, we would do well to inquire into the values of associational life—and of various kinds of associations—for individual citizens and for the civic life of liberal democracy. The seminar embarked on this inquiry in a collaborative way, with the aim of writing a book that examines the value of freedom of association and its limits in American democracy.

The seminar met biweekly to discuss working drafts of the essays in this volume. Over the two-year period, there were also numerous lunches, dinners, and late-night drinks, where authors, commentators, and kibitzers argued (and occasionally agreed) with one another. The value of our association extended beyond the book that was our primary collaborative purpose. We also created an example of what one contributor to this volume calls an “insignificant community,” an informal association of friends and acquaintances that may not by itself have a great societal impact but is nonetheless significant in its members’ lives.

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