

Hermeneutical Conversations in Public Schools: Responding to Religious Objections¹

Robert Kunzman
Stanford University

“We may be natural consumers and born narcissists,” Benjamin Barber observes, “but citizens have to be made.”² The making of citizens should include an ethical-ecumenical dialogue in public schools that nurtures the skills and dispositions necessary for mutual understanding and reasonable disagreement. This essay makes a case for such dialogue and responds to two likely objections from some private moral languages, particularly religious ones, concerning the dangers of perspective-taking and self-reflection.

In “On the Construction of Public Speech: Pluralism and Public Reason,” Kenneth Strike argues that public schools—by developing the “communicative virtues” in their students—should assist in the construction of a thin, civic speech.³ This civic language emerges from a consensus among private, comprehensive versions of the good, but is not simply an overlap of previously held conviction. Rather, it is the product of ongoing dialectical exchange and thus open to revision. “Schools,” Strike claims, “are and ought to be sites where these dialectical struggles occur” (*CPS*, 22).

Some clarifications and comments on Strike’s terminology are necessary. Central to his argument are distinctions between public, private, and political. “Public space” includes but is not limited to political power (decisions backed by the power of the state). Private moral languages stem from comprehensive versions of the good and have a rightful place in the public space except in the justification of public power. Strike explains,

My view requires that people discuss their disagreements. Thus I would see my view as concerning the grounds that may be used to successfully justify public power. It is, thus, not a view about what can be asserted in public space. Its main requirement is that public power be justified by public reasons (*CPS*, 14).

Strike draws a crucial distinction here between public power and public space, using the former in the way John Rawls and most other political theorists would use the more general term “public,” as subject to the will of the political community. This distinction may seem largely semantic—after all, the central issue is still the use of state power—but by portraying the broader notion of “public” as including private languages, Strike emphasizes his point that between the private and the political exists an important hermeneutical space. Society and its schools should foster skills and dispositions necessary for ongoing engagement in this realm intended for mutual understanding and edification.

Three points regarding Strike’s conception of civic language also deserve emphasis. First, Strike describes this public speech as “weakly rational,” since it does not claim rational superiority over private languages—it is a “special purpose language, a kind of moral pidgin” that allows people to communicate across

differing private languages (*CPS*, 14). Second, this communication need not replace all private moral assertions in the public space; in fact, citizens are expected to discuss their disagreements and express their central (and usually private) convictions. To re-emphasize, however, these private moral convictions, while neither suppressed in public space nor assumed rationally inferior, may not serve as the sole justification for civic discussions enforced by state power. The interplay between civic and private languages is crucial in light of this restriction; to serve as an effective tool in the political arena, our malleable civic speech “will need to attempt to persuade local moral traditions to interpret themselves so as to find reason within to accept the civic language” (*CPS*, 17).

Strike concludes his essay by suggesting three forms of educational dialogue to encourage this dialectical interplay: group discussions, civic discussions, and hermeneutical/critical conversations. Group discussions are insular conversations within private groups that help to nurture their particular moral language. Civic discussions, by contrast, employ the shared public language necessary to reach political decisions backed by the power of the state. Hermeneutical/critical conversations are cross-group discussions, often involving the use of private moral languages, aimed at “mutual understanding” and “critical appraisal of the merits of one another’s views” but absent any political decisionmaking (*CPS*, 25).

I support Strike’s contention that each of these forms of dialogue is necessary for a liberal, pluralistic society, and specifically as a component of its educative process. The first two types of dialogue are perhaps less controversial, but deserve brief comment. Group discussions are an indispensable feature of our society. While it would seem that families as well as religious and civic institutions would be the most likely settings for such conversations, Strike suggests such groups also deserve to hold exclusive meetings in public institutions, including schools. As an example, he cites case law allowing a Christian club equal access to school facilities as other student groups receive.⁴ Allowing private moral languages a physical presence in public institutions plays an important role, I believe, in keeping civic speech thin. When students feel their private group conversations are welcome in their schools, they may well be more inclined to practice dialogical conversation with the assurance that their private moral differences will not be marginalized in the name of public uniformity.

The second form of dialogue, civic discussion, serves a largely preparatory role in schools. Most students are minors and thus unable to participate fully in the political process; nevertheless, developing facility with shared public language is necessary if students ultimately are to participate as full citizens in decisionmaking backed by the power of the state. In addition, to the degree that some schools function as a microcosm of democratic society (largely dependent on school administrative philosophies), students can participate in decisionmaking processes in which the entire community is affected by school policy. Such participation can be especially instructive; students must learn to construct consensus not with faceless or abstract others, but with their peers they live and learn with on a near-daily basis. So while full-fledged civic discussion requires voting citizens and deliberation over the use of state power, its approximation deserves a prominent place in public schools.

This brings us to the notion of hermeneutical conversations. As Strike makes clear, the use of political power is not at stake here. Rather, the goals are to gain a deeper understanding of others' moral languages and to clarify one's own private views, reflecting on them in light of differing perspectives. Using Strike's brief description as a starting point, we can consider how this would take shape in the classroom. Students might engage in a discussion of school holidays, with some religious/cultural minorities expressing their dissatisfaction with public schools' observance of Christmas (for some schools, this would include various ceremonies or pageants, but for all of them, at least a week of vacation). This would serve as an opportunity for such minorities to share about their own primary holidays, and for students in the (loosely-defined) Christian majority to engage imaginatively with such questions as, "How might I feel about the school calendar if I celebrated these other holidays instead?" Students would be encouraged to reflect on the significance of Christmas as both a religious and secular event, considering it from their own perspective of (non-)observance as well as striving to understand how others might agree or disagree with them. Depending on the developmental level of the students, the discussion might extend into broader social questions of majority/minority cultures and their recognition and representation in the public square. As Strike notes, the primary goal here is one of understanding rather than resolution, although hermeneutical conversations do provide an essential lead-in to respectful deliberation.

This depth of understanding not only increases the likelihood of fruitful civic deliberation about areas of disagreement but offers opportunities for students' personal growth as well. To ask the question, "How does this other person find meaning?" with a genuine desire to understand is to hold open the possibility that some value might also emerge for the questioner herself. Again, the goal here is not to change students' beliefs, but to widen their appreciation for ways of life different from their own. Hermeneutical conversation is, to borrow Deborah Kerdeman's phrase, "a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness."⁵

While all three forms of dialogue are important elements of the educative process, I believe hermeneutical conversations are absolutely essential for public schooling. Why is the construction of a dialectic between civic speech and private moral languages such a vital educational issue? It is tremendously difficult for groups and ideologies to communicate across their differing private languages, and we see far too often the tragic consequences borne from misunderstanding and distrust. The construction and evolution of a public speech is clearly not a natural outgrowth of modern society; we must learn how to engage in ecumenical, ethical deliberation across private moral languages. The fostering of hermeneutical dialogue aimed at understanding is a crucial step, and nurtures a capacity to engage in civic discussions marked by respect for the various and essential private moral languages we all bring to the public square.

Hermeneutical engagement is perhaps unavoidably threatening, both in schools and the broader society. It requires a willingness to engage with the unfamiliar and to consider how one's own beliefs might be viewed by others. Not surprisingly, the

argument for hermeneutical dialogue in public schools is open to several objections, two of which I will address here. The first is the charge that efforts toward perspective-taking will lead to moral relativism or even subjectivism. The second is the concern that an environment in which students are asked to reflect on and evaluate their own private moral languages will encourage a sense of fallibilism that is unacceptable, especially to many religious believers.

PERSPECTIVE-TAKING LEADING TO MORAL RELATIVISM

Hermeneutical conversations encourage the questions, “What if I believed in this different way? How might I then reasonably argue in the public square?” This form of perspective-taking will likely prompt objections from some religious believers who fear that asking students to consider how a particular issue might look from a different vantage point will send a message that all perspectives are equally valid, and thus encourage an attitude of moral subjectivism, or at least relativism.

If we consider our earlier example of hermeneutical discourse focusing on religious or cultural holidays, this concern may not appear warranted. After all, most religious adherents would be comfortable acknowledging that other faiths celebrate different holidays and feel as strongly about them as they feel about their own; furthermore, it is reasonable to respect their right to observe them, and perhaps even accommodate those observances within our public calendar. Many different religious holidays can coexist peacefully.

But if we consider a situation in which religious beliefs clearly conflict, imaginative empathy becomes a more complicated endeavor. Perhaps tenth-grade biology students are discussing the ethical issues surrounding genetic research. Since human embryos are destroyed to obtain stem cells, exercising imaginative empathy on this issue would likely entail reflecting on opposing beliefs regarding the beginning of life. For instance, students would be encouraged to consider, “Is it completely unreasonable to believe that an embryo is not morally equivalent to a human life? Is such a perspective beyond reasonable belief? And if not, how might I reasonably argue my position if I were to believe as such?” (Conversely, the questions would be asked from the opposite direction as well.)

One could imagine great concern arising at this point over such a process. “Understanding the details of stem cell research advocacy is a valid educational objective,” some might protest, “but expecting students to concede that the pro-research position is reasonable may be highly offensive to those who disagree.” But here is the point: one can acknowledge that another position is not unreasonable and *still* maintain a firm conviction that such a position is wrong. Much ideological conflict and, ultimately, oppressive conditions emerge from moral languages that are slow to listen and quick to condemn. Hermeneutical discourse provides a process by which students can learn to identify and appreciate the reasonableness of other positions, even if they differ from their own. This is what Michael Perry describes as a pluralist sensibility, which “serves as a brake on the regrettable tendency to condemn and outlaw choices, behavior, and ways of life different from one’s own.”⁶

But hermeneutical discourse extends beyond a detached acknowledgement that others have rights to believe what they want; it seeks to provide a depth of

understanding that will encourage genuine dialogue and deliberation about areas of disagreement—leading either to eventual agreement or reasonable disagreement. Such reasonable disagreement goes beyond tolerance, which would acknowledge opponents' right to disagree but make no effort to understand and respect their position. Mere tolerance is not sufficient in a diverse democracy that seeks to base policy decisions on more than political power.

Acknowledging the reasonableness of other viewpoints does not mean students are urged to adopt a “to each his own” or “all roads lead to the mountaintop” philosophy of relativism or subjectivism. An equal appreciation for all beliefs and perspectives is not demanded or even coherent. Hermeneutical discourse is not intended to produce a paralysis or fickleness of belief in students. Students are encouraged to recognize and appreciate their own anchored perspectives, while at the same time acknowledging the good in other moral languages where they find it. Lee Yearley has described this as “the recognition that various, legitimate ideals of...flourishing exist and that although some of them move you deeply you cannot manifest them, indeed may not even want to manifest them.”⁷⁷ Such an appreciation might even be part of an exclusivist perspective that finds these other languages insufficient; nevertheless, according to Yearley, this appreciation “remains even if that good must also remain unavailable, unavailable just because of the integrity of the self that meets the alien good.”⁷⁸ The very act of recognizing a good therein can add an appreciative dimension to deliberation that, while not ensuring agreement, at least makes reasonable disagreement more likely. The strong link between Strike's notions of hermeneutical discourse and civic discussion becomes clear here: seeking a greater understanding and (at least sometimes) appreciation of differing moral languages while evaluating their coherence serves as a direct entrée into the construction of a public speech through which political decisions are made.

Here a tension begins to emerge in Strike's description of hermeneutical conversations that reflects his locating of public space between the private and the political. “Their chief purpose,” according to Strike, “is to allow people to reflect on their own lives, and not to debate the employment of public resources or power.” At the same time, he contends, they involve “critical appraisal of the merits of one another's views” (*CPS*, 25). Evaluating another's moral language, however, often involves consideration of how those beliefs affect nonbelievers, and thus we edge closer to political concerns. Another implication here is that hermeneutical dialogue does not suffice as an educational endpoint. Strike's notion of civic discussion—in which enhanced mutual understanding aids the construction of a public speech necessary for political action—is an equally vital activity for students who will soon be engaged in such deliberations in the public square.

SELF-REFLECTION LEADING TO FALLIBILISM

Hermeneutical conversations also contain a self-reflective component, asking students to explore and appraise not only other moral vocabularies but also their own. Giving students the opportunity to communicate their own comprehensive perspectives can help deepen understanding for all participants, the communicators included. Then, to foster thoughtful self-appraisal through interpersonal dialogue, students should gain facility in asking and answering, “How might this other person

critique *my* perspective?” Here, religious believers who hold a strongly exclusivist, fundamentalist perspective toward matters of belief and interpretation would likely object. Asking students to raise such questions, they would claim, encourages a fallibility about their beliefs that is unacceptable: it threatens the stability of one’s faith and—for monotheists who believe their perspective is *the* truth—it questions the very authority of their god.

Before responding directly to those concerns, let us consider how hermeneutical self-reflection might play out in a classroom. Returning to our original example of discussing school holidays, students who celebrate Christmas and support continued school observance would be invited to share their perspectives but then asked to reflect on how someone else might critique their beliefs. They would be encouraged to consider the intended religious neutrality of schools that nevertheless surround this holiday with a week or more of school vacation, while generally providing no break for many other groups’ holidays, religious or otherwise. Conversely, non-Christians would be asked to consider how their arguments might fare if proponents of “Christmas break” conceive of the holiday as primarily secular, akin to the government’s observance of Thanksgiving and Memorial Day.

Encouraging students to ask these questions serves at least two functions. First, in culturally homogeneous environments, critiques of the dominant majority will be less apparent, and citizens need to consider differing viewpoints even when those voices are not present themselves. It is important to stress, however, that teachers (and societies) need to make every effort to provide a forum for first-person minority expressions; in strongly homogeneous schools, this might include guest speakers, literature, and multimedia. Nevertheless, there may be times when this is not possible, such as consideration of those who literally cannot speak for themselves, such as the very young or the physically/mentally incapacitated. Second, encouraging students to consider how others might view their own beliefs is a crucial step in fostering genuine dialogue. If I cannot even conceive of objections to my moral vocabulary, the possibility of learning from those who disagree seems remote if not impossible.

In responding to likely religious objections, it is important to emphasize the *possibility* of learning from other languages, not the *requirement*. As with the practice of perspective-taking, the self-reflective component of hermeneutical conversation does not demand that students conclude that their own moral language is incomplete, but rather that other perspectives deserve to be heard and evaluated in an environment of respect and understanding.

It is important to draw another (admittedly rough but nonetheless crucial) distinction here regarding the notion of fallibility. A significant difference exists between requiring a fallibilism about a student’s core metaphysical beliefs and encouraging that student to consider that others might have understandable reasons for believing differently and thus critique that student’s perspective. Teachers should encourage a stance among students that allows for a certain degree of fallibilism, but at the same time does not demand that they throw their deepest metaphysical beliefs into question. Hermeneutical progress can often be made while core beliefs remain unchanged, as Randall Curren suggests:

There is no harm in people being forever bound in their sentiments, conduct, and perception of the good by the correct fundamental morality they are brought up in.... A training in critical thinking and moral case analysis would presumably develop their capacity for advancing moral progress through sensitive and creative application of the fundamental principles they have learned.⁹

There is no inherent contradiction between adherence to a particular moral language and open dialogue about the implications of that language for the political realm. As religious believer Robert Adams asserts, "There ought to be room in our conception of faith for honest investigation of all questions, and for feeling the force of objections to our faith, even while we are sustained in that faith."¹⁰

An attitude that strikes this balance between investigation and sustenance might be thus: "This is how I view this particular issue. It stems from these core beliefs I have, which I must ultimately take on faith and am not willing to call into question. But I am willing to consider that others might reasonably disagree about this issue, and if that is the case, it would encourage me to think more deeply about the ways in which I have applied my core beliefs to this particular issue." It should not be the role of the public schools to encourage students to question their most basic beliefs; at the same time, citizens need to learn how to analyze the implications of their beliefs and how they appear to and affect other members of the polity.

CAUTIONS AND REASSURANCES

Hermeneutical conversations involving perspective-taking and self-reflection are vital elements of education in a diverse democracy. Nevertheless, the closer we get to students' core beliefs, the more caution teachers need to exercise. As Strike notes elsewhere, students' fundamental convictions deserve special attention:

Especially when we are dealing with young minds, we need to proceed with a higher level of sensitivity than may be required by treating the issues as solely issues of intellectual liberty. We are discussing matters that are of more moment to people than, say, different interpretations of theories of gravitation.¹¹

This caution has as much to do with an appreciation for the nature of belief as it does a concern for the fragility of youth.

Strike's vision of dialogical education—with its triad of group discussions, civic discussions, and hermeneutical/critical conversations—leaves room for a broad conception of rationality that does not insist on a foundationalist epistemology. As Mike Degenhardt asserts,

It becomes inappropriate... to encourage in the young a skepticism that demands evidence for every acquired belief. Rather the young should be helped to develop sound judgment as to which beliefs ought to be questioned and when. And they should be helped to see that failure to achieve ultimate epistemic foundations neither requires nor licenses a lapse into total skepticism.¹²

Too many educators—and by extension, their impressionable students—assume that rationality demands a self-evident, fully justified bedrock of principles, and that since such a basis is not to be found, subjectivism and complete fallibilism become the only recourse. Hermeneutical conversations need not embrace these conclusions. Perspective-taking, self-reflection, and sincere religious conviction can exist together in hermeneutical space.

By arguing that hermeneutical dialogue—and especially its vital component of reasonable disagreement—can co-exist with steadfast religious commitment, I have sought to allay the likely fears of some religious believers. One can acknowledge that differing private moral languages are reasonable while still insisting upon the exclusive correctness of one's own. And while the logical soundness of this argument may be acceptable to many religious believers, another deep concern will likely remain. "While I admit it's possible for my children to retain an unwavering commitment to their faith," a parent might object, "it's also quite possible that an exploration of other moral languages will result in a reduction in their own moral certainty, perhaps provoking a crisis or even loss of faith. Why should I risk that?"

While certainly many faith traditions acknowledge the value of a faith tested and the deepened commitment that can emerge from such a struggle, there are also many believers who seek to shelter themselves and their children from as many such influences as possible. To them, the payoff of a faith strengthened through the complexity of hermeneutical discourse is not worth the risk of apostasy. So a convincing argument for such an education must take a different tack: a diverse society in which everyone clings fervently to their private moral languages without acknowledging that other languages deserve tolerance and respect cannot sustain democracy. If I believe I am right and all others who believe differently are unreasonably wrong, my tolerance—never mind respect—will extend only as far as their political power will support them. Society becomes a pure political struggle where might equals right and discourse evaporates.

Granted, a few religious adherents will accept this scenario with the faith that their privileged spiritual status will produce political victory, and that "compromise" in the form of mutual understanding is unnecessary and even sinful. An argument for hermeneutical conversation will certainly not sway all believers. But a dialogical education that is sensitive to and inclusive of private moral languages has potential to foster a civic speech in which those languages are respected far more than at present.

CONCLUSION

A crucial aspect of citizenship in a liberal democracy is an education that fosters the skills and dispositions necessary for mutual understanding and the capacity for reasonable disagreement, and this requires deliberation between various conceptions of the good. As Strike observes, our public schools' excessive desire to avoid conflict makes hermeneutical conversations especially difficult. Encouraging students to express and evaluate private moral languages is a risky endeavor. Such engagement involves emotion, complexity, and uncertainty, but developing and using an effective and just civic speech requires that we understand and respect our fellow citizens as fully as possible. As Henry Giroux argues,

You can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful, or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages, and cultures that give them a distinct voice. We can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it.¹³

Our public schools, however, frequently deny or ignore these textures of students' lives, thereby denying students the crucial learning opportunity to connect their necessarily limited experiences to broader concepts and social concerns. If a student is not encouraged or even allowed to explore the implications of her private moral language as they relate to living in society marked by diversity of belief, we have cheated her out of an opportunity to understand the broader polity and thereby also cheated and weakened the polity. This routine educational separation of private belief from public discourse poses a grave risk to the vitality of the public square. Hermeneutical conversations and the civic dialogue they enable deserve the attention and commitment of our public schools; the health of our increasingly diverse democracy requires no less.

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1. My thanks to Eamonn Callan for his insightful comments on this essay.
 2. Benjamin R. Barber, "America Skips School," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1993, 43.
 3. Kenneth A. Strike, "On the Construction of Public Speech: Pluralism and Public Reason," *Educational Theory* 44, no. 1 (1994): 1-25. This text will be cited as *CPS* for all subsequent references.
 4. *Westside v. Mergans* 493 U.S. 182.
 5. Deborah Kerdeman, "Between Interlochen and Idaho: Hermeneutics and Education for Understanding," in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), 275.
 6. Michael J. Perry, *Love and Power: The Role of Religion and Morality in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 133.
 7. Lee Yearley, "New Religious Virtues and the Study of Religion" (Paper delivered at the Fifteenth Annual University Lecture in Religion, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, 10 February 1994), 2.
 8. *Ibid.*, 4.
 9. Randall Curren, "Critical Thinking and the Unity of Virtue," in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), 163.
 10. Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 17.
 11. Kenneth A. Strike, "Are Secular Ethical Languages Religiously Neutral?" *Journal of Law and Politics* 6 (1990): 489.
 12. Mike Degenhardt, "The Ethics of Belief and the Ethics of Teaching," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 32, no. 3 (1998): 338.
 13. Henry Giroux, "The Hope of Radical Education: A Conversation with Henry Giroux," *Journal of Education* 170, no. 2 (1988): 91-101.