Moral Education for Contemporary Democracy

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In his neoconservative critique of the contemporary condition of America, Christopher Lasch has condemned the universities for their creation of what Robert Reich has called "symbolic analysts." This category of individuals comprises those "who live in a world of abstract concepts and symbols ranging from stock market quotations to the visual images produced by Hollywood and Madison Avenue and who specialize in the interpretation and deployment of "symbolic information."[1] These "talking classes" have formed an aristocracy of talent and thus become more and more insulated and so isolated from the ordinary masses. As a result of this revolt by these elites, democracy, as Lasch understands their view, does not depend on the character of citizens to work, but rather survives at the behest of "a legal system that makes it possible for people to live with their differences."[2] Lasch is moved to muse about whether democracy can survive this liberal rejection of common standards of morality so that "tolerance becomes indifference, and cultural pluralism degenerates into an aesthetic spectacle in which the curious folkways of our neighbors are savored with the relish of the connoisseur."[3] Lacking the kind of populist values which Lasch champions — competence, the essential sameness of human beings, and a self-reliance based upon small proprietorship — this culturally cosmopolitan elite has misunderstood the role of tolerance in democracy and reduced the respect pluralism demands to what Lasch calls "a tourist's approach to morality."[4] What has gone wrong with American democracy is the lack of moral responsibility on the part of those who constitute its elite. Thus we arrive at the view that democracy is disintegrating.

In rehearsing Lasch's arguments, we have gotten a little ahead of ourselves. For to be able to assess them we need to know just what is embedded in contemporary views of democracy before we can decide whether disintegration is the order of the day. We shall discover, I believe, that there is much contemporary thought about democracy that is worthy of our attention, so much so, indeed, that its demands dictate a kind of moral education which is already being accomplished in some places and ought to be so in more places, if the kinds of neoconservative and populist thinking just outlined are to find an antidote in today's America. What this body of literature about democracy demonstrates, I believe, is that, so far from being in a state of disintegration is democracy that rarely can democracy have been so much discussed by so many — precisely what, on one prevalent view of democracy's nature at any rate, would proclaim democracy's health. For in the view of Benjamin Barber, to whose view of strong democracy we must now turn, "democracy *is* the debate about what democracy is."[5]

Following Dewey's lead about the necessity for participation in the natural and social scene as the basis for knowledge, so that "the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action," Barber believes that political knowledge about democracy's trajectory is achieved by strong participation.[6] Democratic

political judgment for Barber is then only exercised when citizens interact with each other in the context of mutual deliberation, arriving at common-willed decisions, resolving as much as possible the uncertainty which generated the particular exercise in democracy in the first place. Thus, democracy for Barber is a process, a self-correcting process because a process that invites reflexive scrutiny by autonomously debating citizens considering their own well-being. To be sure, democracy can be self-transforming and thus educative, but essentially it is a debate about the quality of life citizens wish to afford one another. Rather than being an externally imposed process then, democracy is taken up democratically. As a result, democracy is always in a state of becoming.

In her treatment of democracy, Amy Gutmann emphasizes the deliberative quality that her view of democracy demands. In such a democracy, all citizens share either directly or indirectly through their representatives in the "shaping of their collective life in a way that is consistent with respecting the basic liberties and opportunities of all individuals."[7] Such deliberation, undertaken in a public forum, aims at decisions that respect these basic liberties and opportunities, decisions that are reasonable by some public standard of reasonableness, decisions which settle, as much as possible, disputes over societal justice, the core of American democracy. Clearly, such a conception of justice is not populist, as Lasch understands this term. Rather, deliberative democracy is always provisional in nature because what counts as reasonable may change not simply over time but as a result of the deliberative process itself. Thus, this kind of democracy can lead to — most likely *will* lead to — changes in what counts as societal practice, but provided they are arrived at by an "inclusive citizenry," they are democratically legitimate.[8] Of course, this inclusive citizenry could choose to institute a kind of perfectionistic state or other conceptions of the policy to live under. But, once tried, these conceptions are easily jettisoned on this conception of democracy, if they fail to meet the current standard of reasonableness. And, in her most recent thinking about what is to count as reasonable, Gutmann and her co-author, Dennis Thompson, have defended a conception that in briefest outline, comprises three principles, "reciprocity, publicity and accountability — that regulate the process of democratic politics, and three others — basic liberty and basic opportunity (which we have already seen) and fair opportunity — that govern the content of policies this politics dictates."[9] Despite this specificity, however, democracy remains for Gutmann always provisional, so that, once more, democracy is always in a state of becoming.

Gutmann's concern for inclusivity as the hallmark of democracy is central to the third contemporary conception of democracy to which we must attend, namely Chantal Mouffe's agonistic conception of democracy. Taking seriously the fragility of democracy, Mouffe declares "there is no threshold of democracy that once reached will guarantee its continued existence."[10] For Mouffe, a healthy democracy calls for a clash of positions and a conflict of interests. This is why she is so mistrustful of communitarian conceptions of democracy which depend upon what she calls "an excess of consensus," a consensus that might marginalize entire groups in the democracy so much that they feel excluded from the political community.[11] Pluralism, then, is the engine of this conception of democracy, rather than any idea

of a common good, and so antagonism is ineluctable. Race, class, gender, sexuality, on this view, join issues such as the environment as matters of democratic struggle so that Mouffe's radically democratic citizens are associated under *societas* (as opposed to *universitas*), which for Mouffe, drawing from Michael Oakeshott's understanding of the distinction, "is not a mode of relation.…in terms of common action (*universitas*) but a relation in which participants are related to one another in the acknowledgment of the authority of certain conditions in acting."[12] Thus citizenship becomes a common political identity of individuals who might pursue very different ends for themselves, "but who accept submission to the rules prescribed by the *res publica* in seeking their satisfactions and in performing their actions."[13] Thus, democratic citizenship becomes an articulating principle of conduct permitting a plurality of allegiances and respect for the individual's freedom to pursue these. Democracy, then, is not a terminus but a starting point for those who would embrace it.

The fourth and final construction of democracy we need to consider is that of Seyla Benhabib. For on this construction, the deliberative model of democracy once more, we find articulated the details of the ethics that is embedded in, or alluded to, by much of the thinking of the earlier models. To be sure, Benhabib is at pains to argue that for democracy to be legitimate "what is considered in the common interest of all results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals."[14] But her main interest lies in tying her conception of democracy to a discursive model of ethics for its validity. Under this rubric of ethics, she writes, "only those norms can be said to be valid (that is, morally binding) which would be agreed to by all those affected by their consequences, if such agreement were reached as a consequence of a process of deliberation."[15] This process is participatory in character, in such a way that all who are affected by the norm under discussion are included in the discussion, and each has the same opportunity to participate in the discussion, questioning whatever they will about the proposed resolution of the norm under discussion and the rules of discussion for arriving at that resolution with respect to both the rules' formulation and execution. Thus, democracy becomes a deliberative form of governance that is procedurally defined. It assumes, however, a plurality of values and the possibility of conflict among these values and the social interests generated by allegiance to these values. Benhabib's model of democracy certainly has Mouffe's agonistic dimension, a dimension which is to be supported by a kind of Barberesque strong participation and Gutmannesque deliberation as the *sine qua non* of the model. Again, democracy is always in a state of arrival rather than a guaranteed destination.

Now, each conception of democracy presented here confesses to democracy's uncertainty of perpetuation. On these models, democracy is always the quest for democracy, so that there never can be an absolute democratic truth about anything. At best, democracy is only an interim, best deliberated truth about the issue — resolution of conflict, usually — at hand. As Barber says, "democratic politics begins where certainty ends."[16] But that deliberation, if it is to be democratic, must be as inclusive as it can be of all those affected by the deliberators' decision. Maybe here is a kind of absolutism about democracy. Democracy, then, is pluralistic in

nature, calling for the tolerance and respect for persons to which Lasch alluded. But, if the tolerance is to be principled as opposed to voyeuristic, then a certain kind of moral education is called for. Put bluntly, that kind of moral education will need to teach a tolerance that will permit the kind of inclusivity and respect for persons pluralism demands and alert its students to the provisional nature of its truths. As we attempt to delineate the kind of moral education that might satisfy these *desiderata*, an appropriate place to begin thinking about that moral education is the nature of the students for whom it is designed and the settings in which it is conducted.

In her thinking about late- and post-adolescent individuals, Mary Burgan has pointed to the importance of fads in their identity formation.[17] Thus, these adolescents are conflicted in their needs, as they appear to require some kind of secure cultural identity while simultaneously seeking the opportunity to experiment with their lives as they sculpt a unique sense of themselves. Moral instruction must accommodate this highly subjective stance of the students for whom it is designed with all its embedded relativism, and yet somehow encourage some resolution of moral issues, ensure ethical commitment, and, in the process, ensure some degree of moral mastery. In other words, I believe, students must have instruction and attention which is comprehensible to them. There is no place for chaos in the moral education classroom.

But that classroom need not be authoritarian in tone, dull in content, and pedestrian in its instructional method. Rather, the moral education classroom must honor both the intellectual and moral dimensions of teaching, so that there is a balance between the inequality in the teacher-student relationship generated by the students' needing to learn the intellectual standards their teachers are already presumed to possess and the equality in the teacher-student relationship that the moral dimension of that relationship supposes for the responsible teacher. Moral education's first demand, then, is for a kind of equality of respect for all, a respect that, Donald Arnstine argues, requires that all individuals in the class have their own choices acknowledged by teachers regardless of whether they are the choices the teachers would have made for them. And, Arnstine insists, these choices are not simply to be restricted to the trivial — where the students sit in class, or whether they wear shoes to class on warm summer days — but are to come as the result of teachers working out with students what sorts of choices they should have and why.[18] In effect then, realizing respect for all by acknowledging the choices the students make is the way to realizing democracy in the classroom. Indeed, equality of respect is, for Arnstine, the touchstone by which to assess school practice. From the moral educator's point of view, such a stance requires two considerations, both of which seem to be features of the principle of justice.

First there is the practice of reciprocity. Teachers are not to engage in conduct toward their students that they would find offensive to their own sense of moral worth. Students ought not to be interrupted when they are attempting to spell out, however haltingly, their own ideas. Nor are they to be left in the dark about why moral educators think what they think about these ideas. Moral educators must be accountable to their charges for what they do to them, for, in this way, moral

educators give their charges a sense of their own moral worth. Thus, these educators are to abolish as much as possible the asymmetry that still suffuses so much of the typical educational relationship. Realizing democracy in the classroom by appropriate moral education means moral educators denuding themselves of the hierarchical relationship that their intellectual superiority to their charges may encourage and, instead of viewing themselves as so many classroom bosses to be learned from, construe themselves as classroom facilitators to be learned with. Democracy will flourish as the result of taking the plurality of students where they are, working through their concerns for their own identity and a kind of life that might better serve them. To effect this kind of moral education, however, is going to demand the second feature of the principle of justice, namely, fairness.

In the practice of moral education, educators must strive for equity in the treatment of their students: they must not play favorites in the moral education classroom. Of course, it is not easy to celebrate the diversity that pluralistic classrooms typically afford. But fairness demands the fullest engagement the teacher can offer for all students . Self-disclosure — or at least a willingness to engage in self-disclosure when the engagement with the students genuinely demands it — seems essential here. "Are you gay?" again asked, not as an attempt to "psych out" the teacher, but as a genuine quest to understand why the moral educator takes the stance he does with respect to the morality of same-sex marriage, may also require a degree of self-disclosure in order to address the demands of fairness. And, of course, to distinguish the real from the phoney question will require that moral educators engage in genuine listening as they engage their charges fully. Listening requires both patience and self-control on moral educators' parts, if fairness is to be realized in the treatment of their students. Moral educators must resist the witty remark that demeans the student's less-than-thoughtful effort at articulating a moral response to such issues as the morality of homosexual relationships, the death penalty, or the mismanagement of business. As David Smith says of professors in general, but, perhaps, most appropriately of moral educators in particular, "Sometimes it is better to keep our awesome brilliance to ourselves."[19]

Were the requirements of reciprocity and fairness, these dictates of justice, to be met, some might say the bases of democracy are met in the moral education classroom. For having modeled these dimensions of justice for the students, moral educators have modeled enough of the dimensions of our four characterizations of democracy for democracy to take root. After all, reciprocity will foster inclusivity and a respect for persons, while fairness will encourage the pluralism which demands tolerance and respect. But is learning the justice perspective truly enough for the kind of moral education contemporary democracy demands? Like Onora O'Neill, I must confess to having doubts.

In the course of articulating her sense that justice is not enough for an ethic appropriate to our day, O'Neill characterizes justice as requiring "the rejection of injury," and she goes on to explain that justice will always set standards for maintaining society's institutional practices.[20] Now, if they have learned reciprocity and fairness, morally educated students will certainly understand O'Neill's construction of justice as prohibiting injury, howsoever justice is practiced in their

society. But implementing justice is implementing a universal principle. And, as O'Neill points out, justice as a universal principle "cannot show *who* falls within the domain of universal principles."[21] To know who comes under justice requires knowledge of certain social virtues which, when they are implemented, O'Neill argues, reject indifference.

Now O'Neill is quick to point out that she means systematic indifference, realizing as she does that, on occasion, gratuitous indifference is unavoidable, especially when we are careless about our obligations.[22] What the *virtues* are designed to combat are the unacceptable consequences of implementing justice as a universal principle. These consequences include justice's prescription of the uniform treatment of individuals, individuals who are treated as atomistic in nature and thus denied their situatedness, especially their connectedness to others with its specificity of connection — friendships, partners, and so on — to which principles such as justice appear immune.[23] The virtue of care, of course, is designed to address the vulnerabilities such connectedness can generate. Yet, those who are persuaded that only the virtues, such as care, are enough to guide moral conduct, must be aware that the particular account of ethics that the ethics of care makes possible may only be adequate in a society where the connections it is designed to honor are homogeneous in nature and not pluralistic, so that caring may work best in societies where the ones caring are dealing with those cared-for who share their value-orientation. Caring may not work where there are interracial, constantly shifting, patterns of relationship in a myriad of different spheres of life.[24] It may take principles, like justice, to arbitrate moral resolution to conflicts generated by the pluralism that is endemic to today's society. O'Neill concludes, then, that "justice and certain social virtues are necessary because both are required" to arbitrate moral conduct these days.[25] What this realization (that students must learn both the ethics of justice and the ethics of care and their appropriate application) means for moral education must be our final concern.

In his thinking about contemporary educational practice, Arnstine avers, "teachers often put their students into groups, but they don't always realize the importance of how they choose to form these groups."[26] Nowhere is the lack more significant than in the pursuit of moral education, I believe. For Arnstine argues that learning groups are to be structured around what is of shared interest to the members of the group because in this way members' learning will be enhanced — in our case, their moral learning. Because these groups are to be built around shared interests, the groups can afford to be inclusive in nature, since diverse students can have common interests and bring to the learning group a variety of perspectives on these interests about which each student can learn from one another. Affording students a learning experience based on their heterogeneity rather than their homogeneity will certainly create the need for students to learn about justice as we have construed it — reciprocity, fairness, and, ultimately, the avoidance of injury. In addition, however, students in such a structure will learn about the need for tolerance of points of view divergent from their own and respect for the persons, who may be different from themselves, from whom these points of view come. The kind of cooperative learning Arnstine imagines these groups to encourage will certainly go some way toward

teaching pluralism in the moral education classroom. And the students in the course of learning pluralism, if they do so successfully, will come to understand the need for many of the virtues — honesty, integrity, courage, and, especially, care. For these learning groups provide a natural setting for students to learn Nel Noddings's dimensions of the ethics of care, namely, modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation.[27] In this morally educative process, students are learning democracy's demands by learning the moral virtues in the context of the principle of justice.

And, we should not fail to note democracy's demands are learned by the students themselves without the imposition of their teacher once she or he has structured the groups. And, as the teacher restructures the groups in the course of the semester, the students will come to realize the provisional nature of their decisions as they now face the deliberative process engendered by participating in a new group. As they deliberate, these students in the course of their moral development will come to learn about the importance of granting group membership, a lesson which they will certainly understand democracy's pursuit demands. How a group is constituted, or (put another way) who is granted membership in the group, will occur as a natural question to the learning group, for the group will have to debate the matter of who shall have moral standing in the course of its debate about whose views the group attends to and why. And this is just the sort of lesson democracy demands its adherents learn. Moreover, the reasoning behind the group's decision will, as O'Neill points out, need to be practical, "that is followable by [the] relevant others."[28] The students will come to see that, depending on their decisions, their practical reasoning will require them to be very inclusive in their thinking because the consequences of their decisions will affect the lives of many. In such cases, the group will have to assume a very generalized conception of the human beings whom their decisions about the moral issues they debate may affect, hoping that they have the capacities to follow their peers' chains of reasoning. That the practical reasoning be action-guiding is the main point in the moral education of these students. For democracy is an activity, whether it be deliberative, participative, or agonistic in character, and moral education must address this central facet of its nature.

Moral educators, offering such a moral education, will themselves have to be committed to democracy if they are to take on being "the catalysts for collaboration" that this construction of moral education requires.[29] The "collaboration" they are to foster must be suffused by the dispositions of thoughtfulness, engagement, sensitivity, and responsibility on the part of the teacher's students. To accomplish the demands of the kind of moral education being argued for here will require that the teachers model these dispositions themselves. They may, therefore, have to be willing to strip themselves of their position of privilege in the classroom and move toward an education that co-creates with students a shared set of goals for the moral education enterprise.[30] In such classrooms, the notions of "the teacher-of-the-students" and "the students-of-the-teacher" have come to be replaced by "teacher-student" and "students-teachers" so that the teacher is one who is her or himself taught by the students, as she or he sets out to teach the students.[31] Such may be the ultimate demand of moral education in our contemporary democracy — and, I suspect, Lasch would not give in to it!

1. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 35.

2. Ibid., 85.

3. Ibid., 87.

4. Ibid., 89.

5. Benjamin R. Barber, "Foundationalism and Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 355 (my emphasis).

6. Ibid., 353.

7. Amy Gutmann, "Democracy, Philosophy, and Justification," in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 343.

8. Ibid.

9. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 12.

10. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 1993), 6.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 66.

13. Ibid., 6.

14. Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 69.

15. Ibid., 70.

16. Barber, "Foundationalism and Democracy," 349.

17. Mary Burgan, "Teaching the SUBJECT: Developmental Identities in Teaching," in *Ethical Dimensions of College and University Teaching*, ed. Linc Fisch (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 18.

18. Donald Arnstine, *Democracy and the Arts of Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 38.

19. David C. Smith, "The Ethics of Teaching," in Fisch, *Ethical Dimensions of College and University Teaching*, 10.

20. Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

21. Ibid., 4 (emphasis in the original).

22. Ibid., 5.

23. Ibid., 18 and 193.

24. Nel Noddings admits to the difficulty of caring for strangers and distant others in Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 110. In contrast, see Aaron Schutz, "Caring in Schools is Not Enough: Community, Narrative, and the Limits of Alterity," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 3 (1998): 373-93.

25. O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 206.

26. Arnstine, *Democracy and the Arts of Schooling*, 140.

27. Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 190-92.

28. O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 52.

29. Thomas E. Kelley, "Democratic Empowerment and Secondary Teacher Education," in *Democratic Teacher Education*, ed. John M. Novak (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 73; Also, contrast Landon E. Beyer, *Creative Democratic Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 27-86 and 127-49.

30. Janet C. Fortune, "Democracy in Education: A Fox-fire Experience," in *Democratic Teacher Education*, 21.

31. Smith, "The Ethics of Teaching," 8.