

Not So Thin: Education as an Ambiguous Moral Practice

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Rooted in the rationalistic tradition, Christopher Martin addresses the moral nature of education, and offers a consideration of what he terms “thin” universalization as an ethical framework for public deliberation on educational policies. By emphasizing just procedures for the distribution of educational goods, Martin’s proposal reflects his efforts to explore the universalistic moral dimension of education, while avoiding making any substantive claims regarding the moral content of education. In recognition of the pluralistic nature of educational goods, Martin supports an inclusive approach to the validation of educational policies, where such policies are deliberated and implemented in accordance with universally accepted procedural and distributive principles. To the point, Martin stresses the social nature of human rationality, and calls for an active commitment to reclaiming our moral obligation to protect the educational rights of all individuals.

In the face of global economic recession, Martin’s advocacy of “thin” universalization for public deliberation on educational policies reaffirms the right of vulnerable populations to equitable quality education. Although I commend Martin for his courage in reclaiming education as a moral right, I remain skeptical of how and what “thin” universalization can contribute to the delineation of education as a moral practice. Admittedly, my skepticism reveals my disinclination to pledge allegiance to the rationalistic tradition. Nevertheless, the moral indeterminacy of education inadvertently can pose and has posed unsolvable challenges for those attempting to develop an equitable and just distribution of educational goods within the rationalistic framework. More specifically, Martin’s argument is based on the presupposition that people are reasonable, and reasonable people intuitively strive to achieve a consensus on establishing a just political procedure for collective deliberation on educational policies. However, it is noted that “reasonableness” can mean different things to different people, especially in a culturally diverse society. Implicitly, Martin’s argument seems to be based on two interrelated premises. First, “reasonable people” are capable of attaining overlapping consensus on “reasonableness.” Second, reasonable people can recognize and accept the pluralistic nature of “reasonableness.” To this end, education as a moral practice can aim to cultivate a “reasonable citizenry” who appreciate “reasonable” cultural pluralism. In other words, education can bring about a mutual transformation and mutual accommodation of diverse cultural groups, and thus sustain “a just and stable society of free and equal citizens who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines.”¹

On the other hand, Marilyn Friedman points out that using “reasonableness” as a regulative ideal can be a convenient way to exclude people who are perceived to be “unreasonable” from playing a role in the determination of public affairs.² In addition, “reasonable” people are likely to delegitimize “unreasonable” or

“nonreasonable” procedures for policy deliberation. For instance, theocracy continues to assure its reasonableness in many communities where the divide between the public and the private appears to be a reasonable and progressive social and political arrangement. In the case of *Mozert v. Hawkins*, Judge Pierce Lively’s ruling authorized the School Board of Hawkins County to promote “civic tolerance” by exposing all students to a culturally inclusive reading program. This rationale assumes that a culturally inclusive program in public school settings is essential to foster prospective citizens’ appreciation of diverse reasonable cultures. However, from the standpoint of the Christian fundamentalist families who brought the litigation against the school board, their objections to course contents were reasonable efforts to determine what ought to be reasonably excluded from the formal curriculum in the public schools. To resolve value conflicts among reasonable citizens and/or institutions, reasonable people and/or institutions certainly can appeal to reasonable judicial review. John Rawls claims that “public reason is the reason of its supreme court.”³ However, the selection of judges at both state and federal levels in the United States has been an ongoing ideological battle ground. While it seems to be “reasonable” to expect citizens to comply with judges’ legal rulings, it is still questionable whether Judge Lively’s elaborate legal reasoning could convert Christian fundamentalists into zealous supporters of multicultural curricula. In fact, the popularity of home schooling and the increase of “autonomous” charter schools clearly show that more and more reasonable citizens are inclined to exercise their political autonomy in “circumscribing” the public realm further so that they can maximize their rights to duly exercise their ethical autonomy in their private domains.

Furthermore, while thin universalization recognizes differences among divergent political, religious, and moral doctrines, one cannot overlook how the imbalance of power relationships might impede the establishment of just procedures for the equal distribution of primary goods. Often, cultural differences reflect conflicts of interest, and a genuine recognition of cultural pluralism does not necessarily lead to their resolution.⁴ Moreover, all reasonable cultures do not necessarily receive equal recognition from all reasonable people. Some reasonable cultures become the “dominant” cultural forces, whereas other reasonable cultures remain perpetually on the margin. Consequently, Martin’s proposal might have overstated reasonable people’s willingness and readiness to prescribe and observe a just procedure for policy deliberation.

As discussed above, “reasonableness” appears to be an all-embracing human virtue. But, while individuals might be born with the moral capacity to be “reasonable,” it is obvious that the cultivation of reasonableness as an individual virtue is a long-term educative task. In the same vein, the cultivation of “public reason” is also an arduous undertaking. Who should be responsible for cultivating the virtue of “reasonableness”? How shall we cultivate the virtue of “reasonableness”?

Notably, distinctive cultural groups are more inclined to focus on the transmission of their own cultural values than to explore alternative cultural norms. Stephen Macedo argues that the heart of civic education in a liberal polity lies in a

fundamental query: “How can tolerance be taught without exposing children to diversity and asking them to forbear from asserting the truth of their own particular convictions, at least for political purposes?”⁵ Martin’s proposal could provide important support for the mandatory multicultural curriculum that is embedded in universal schooling. At the same time, the positive rights and duties that are embedded in thin universalization can inadvertently keep a tight rein on the ethical autonomy of presumably reasonable peoples. When the court as an embodiment of “public reason” fails to support reasonable peoples’ ethical autonomy, it seems reasonable for these peoples to exercise their political autonomy further by electing like-minded politicians who, in turn, would appoint like-minded judges. Consequently, one cannot help but question the impact of mandatory multicultural curricula on the reasonable appreciation of cultural pluralism.

All in all, thin universalization reflects a strong liberal faith in human moral capacities to be reasonable moral agents, committed to the pursuit of justice. An ideal liberal polity comprised of reasonable people can stand forth as “a social union of social unions”⁶ in spite of divergent religious, philosophical, and moral traditions. However, while thin universalization provides us with a venerable moral vision of building a just society, Martin’s moral vision remains vague and indeterminate. Nevertheless, I applaud and support Martin’s timely effort to reclaim education as a moral practice in a time of scarcity. After all, education, like ethics, will always be indeterminate and contentious. It is unrealistic to expect that a “conflict-free” policy deliberation can resolve cultural conflicts. Instead, the indeterminacy and ambiguity surrounding education as a moral practice can induce limitless dialogical educational interactions among diverse individuals, cultures, and institutions — a pathway toward the common ethical ground for just deliberation on educational policies.

1. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xxxix.

2. Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

3. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 231.

4. Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, ed. Cynthia Willett (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998).

5. Stephen Macedo, “Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of *God v. John Rawls*?” *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995), 471.

6. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 320.