

Character Education: The Priority of Philosophy to Procedure

Jon Fennell
Hillsdale College

Citizenship is a state of mind, so if the mind is changed enough, the public may still be citizens, but of a different nation. National character is a real thing, molded in part by law and politics, and it is not made of marble.¹

[T]he problem is invisible to them because the decencies are taken for granted.²

I begin by citing George Will, the conservative pundit and columnist, who, in a book whose title — *Statecraft as Soulcraft* — will raise many eyebrows, calls for “a politics that takes its bearings from what ought to be.” He states, “A purpose of politics is to facilitate, as much as is prudent, the existence of worthy passions and the achievement of worthy aims. It is to help persons want what they ought to want.” Will’s conception of politics is inspired as much by a concern for democratic government as it is by a concern for the individual: “Countries do not have residents: they have citizens. Democratic government must be a tutor as well as a servant to its citizens, because citizenship is a state of mind.” In the service of both morality and politics, then, it is the duty of government, and hence the public schools, to engage in the “cultivation of character.”³

These are familiar themes for readers acquainted with the work of Michael Sandel. Like Will, Sandel would have the schools shape character and cultivate good citizenship. Public education, says Sandel, should prepare the young to take an active role in sustaining a particular way of life, one that is necessarily infused by a vision of the good.⁴ Where, for Will, character education involves “the shaping of passions and desires in the direction of virtue” — with such virtue consisting of “good citizenship, whose principal components are moderation, social sympathy and willingness to sacrifice private desires for public ends”⁵ — the process for Sandel entails the use of “agencies of civic education” (including schools) to “inculcate the habit of attending to public things” (*DD*, 321). Sandel calls for the “cultivating of virtue, equipping citizens for self-rule, and generating loyalties to larger political wholes” (*DD*, 348). Unlike Will, who finds the adversary to his project in a conception of human nature and political life running from Thomas Hobbes’s state of nature through the self-centered calculations outlined by James Madison in *The Federalist Papers*, Sandel identifies his primary foe as a body of contemporary thought represented most prominently by John Rawls but more deeply by Richard Rorty. To his credit, Sandel addresses the objections launched from this quarter. The purpose of what follows is to show, first, that Sandel’s response to what we will refer to as “Rorty’s position” is largely ineffective. It is ineffective because Sandel does not fully appreciate what Rorty in the final analysis is saying. However, and this is the second point of this essay, there is another response to Rorty’s position that *is* effective. Sandel’s call for character education, citizenship training, and the use of the public schools to support a particular way of life is legitimate and, indeed, as urgent as he says it is. But in defending himself against Rorty, Sandel must move to different ground.

RORTY'S CHALLENGE

Sandel understands that the recommendation that public schools engage in character education in support of a particular way of life runs afoul of a version of liberal political theory, closely associated with Rawls, whose “central idea is that government should be neutral toward the moral and religious views its citizens espouse” and “asserts the priority of fair procedures over particular ends.” This understanding gives rise to “the procedural republic” (*DD*, 4). Because the public schools are an arm of government, and because government is obligated to be neutral in regard to conceptions of the good, the public schools ought not to practice character education, since doing so necessarily presupposes and seeks to promote a conception of the good (specifically, the “values and ends” that support American self-government).

Sandel offers a multifaceted response to this political theory and the procedural republic that it informs. To begin with, “The procedural republic cannot secure the liberty it promises, because it cannot sustain the kind of political community and civic engagement that liberty requires” (*DD*, 24). This is an important empirical claim that, while deeply provocative, is not our primary focus here. Second, in response to the suggestion that the republican citizenship whose establishment is the aim of his pedagogical proposals would be (a) exclusive and (b) coercive, Sandel declares that *anyone* is capable of developing the requisite character and that “successful republican soulcraft involves a gentler type of tutelage”: citizenship training can and ought to proceed “not by coercion but by a complex mix of persuasion and habituation” (*DD*, 318–20). Nearer to the central issue raised by Rorty is Sandel’s third response to the political theory underlying the procedural republic. It takes the form of a question: Does not any conception of rights (including that which would render illegitimate the use of the schools to promote character education and citizenship training in support of the American republic) presuppose a particular conception of the good (*DD*, 322)?⁶ According to Sandel, endemic to the thinking underlying the procedural republic is a tendency, when addressing difficult issues (“grave moral questions”), to vehemently claim neutrality while subterraneously proceeding from a decision on the matter in question. For example, in the case of abortion, such theory would bracket (that is, remain neutral toward) “the moral-theological question of when human life begins” and then initiate deliberations. Sandel observes that the reasonableness of the decision to bracket this question depends on having already decided that the fetus is, in an important and relevant regard, different from a baby. The moral and religious convictions of large portions of the body politic must have been ruled irrelevant or insignificant in order for the bracketing to have occurred to begin with. Sandel further illustrates his view by referring to the slavery controversy in which such bracketing was ultimately acknowledged to involve an underlying judgment and then determined to be wrong. Stephen Douglas argued that the question of the morality of slavery ought to be put aside; the matter instead should be decided by local majorities in state and territorial legislatures. Abraham Lincoln in response emphasized that such bracketing was defensible only on the basis of having already decided the issue in question. If slavery was evil, it surely should not be bracketed. And, of course, we now

understand Lincoln to have been correct — not only on the nature of slavery, but also on the question of whether its morality could legitimately be bracketed.

The preliminary thesis of this essay is that in making this last argument against the political theory of the procedural republic, Sandel begs the question. That this is the case becomes clear as we look more closely at Rorty's understanding of debates pertaining to morality and the good. For Rorty, politics is prior to philosophy. Articulating a principle at the heart of the procedural republic, he says, "politics can be separated from beliefs about matters of ultimate importance...[S]hared beliefs among citizens about such matters are not essential to a democratic society."⁷ Accompanying this demotion of philosophy from its traditional role as supreme arbiter is a corresponding reformulation of the meaning of justification. In place of an appeal to foundations, Rorty endorses a transactional, in-situation model of justification that, he admits, is much like Rawls's "reflective equilibrium."⁸ Under reflective equilibrium, in moral deliberation we begin (and have no choice but to begin) with our existing "considered judgments." These judgments are revised in light of theory ("principles" for Rawls), just as the theory will be revised in light of judgments that are retained after the test of theory. The process is one of ongoing mutual accommodation, marked by periods of equilibrium. Note that under this model all principles are experimental. Nothing, *ex hypothesi*, can be absolute, true for all time, in the nature of things, or the like. The most that we can have is considered judgments that belong to actual human beings living in specific historically grounded communities. Thus, rather than appeal to principles that at one time were thought to be fixed and universal (but on Rorty's view necessarily evolve over time), Rorty would place at the heart of political life adherence to "procedure." Viable and peaceful politics does not require shared beliefs about higher things; it only needs consensus on how we will contend with the challenges that will inevitably arise. Procedure is both necessary and sufficient. Continued insistence on appealing to something above and beyond procedure is a form of immaturity that threatens the fragile peace that is the gift of thoroughgoing adherence to procedure.

Why is there no better policy to adhere to than procedure? The answer is implicit in Rorty's position as well as in the concept of the procedural republic: Questions pertaining to morality and the good are inherently controversial. More to the point, they are not susceptible to a satisfactory measure of agreement and hence escape authoritative resolution. Admittedly, "satisfactory" is a vague concept. It must be so in order to accommodate the theory of procedural politics. Still, not every point of view deserves respect (though nothing can, a priori, be ruled out). How widely an opposing view must be held in order for the corresponding issue to achieve the status of mandatory "bracketing" will vary. But the matters of concern to Sandel — cultivating virtue, shaping moral character, developing a particular civic identity, and nurturing commitment to the American order and its conception of the good life — easily qualify, under Rorty's standard, as controversial and unsusceptible to a satisfactory measure of agreement.⁹ Sandel is aware of this, but in his response to the procedural republic he overlooks Rorty's point. Take, for example, Sandel's reference to the abortion question. Sandel, as we saw previously, asserts that the

procedural republic's bracketing of the abortion issue rests upon a prior philosophic decision regarding the status of the fetus. But Rorty could never agree with this assessment. Whether the fetus has the moral stature assigned to it by opponents of abortion (and denied to it by those asserting a woman's right to terminate its life) is the sort of matter that for Rorty cannot be satisfactorily resolved. Sandel therefore misses the point when he claims that the procedural republic, through bracketing "grave moral questions," in fact presupposes a position on the matter in question. Everyone recognizes that abortion is controversial. Whether it is a "grave moral question," however, is what is at issue. Sandel does no better when he states that political liberalism, in denying "that any of the moral or religious conceptions it brackets could be true," is making "precisely the sort of philosophical claim it seeks to avoid."¹⁰ For Rorty such stakes are not in play. When faced with interlocutors who insistently employ a vocabulary that he himself would eschew — and when faced thereby with the danger of entanglement in questions that are for him unproductive — he prefers to walk away. He does "not know how to discuss such issues, and [does] not want to."¹¹ This is the fundamental challenge faced by Sandel: He is speaking to an empty house.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

There is another response that Sandel might make to Rorty's position, one that Rorty cannot properly ignore. The opening move in this response comes, involuntarily, from Foster McMurray, a prominent figure during a vital period for the Philosophy of Education Society. In a comprehensive theory entitled "philosophy of public education," McMurray defines philosophy of education as "the rational justification of educational programs."¹² Philosophy of education addresses the questions of what and how to teach. It organizes and directs the activity of teaching.

On what basis does philosophy of education recommend that we do one thing rather than another? In his response, McMurray sounds very much like Rorty. Historically, the sources of justification within education have been conceptions of the good as embodied in such notions as religious salvation, political order, economic efficiency, and social justice. Every vision of the ideal specifies for education a supportive role. McMurray, however, explicitly rules out a subsidiary role for education. It will *not* be a logical extension of a foundation external to it. He notes that there has always been disagreement about these foundational matters, and there is (as with Rawls and Rorty) no prospect that such disagreement will ever cease. Therefore, not only would waiting for agreement mean that we would never start, but also to allow any particular external commitment to direct the course of education is to favor one point of view, or one faction, over others. In a democratic setting, however, justification regarding public education must be directed toward *all* of the people. This element of McMurray's philosophy of education was spelled out in an article from 1955. The words might readily have come from either Rawls or Rorty:

[A] democratic school program is that kind of thing which people of many value systems, holding different philosophies of life, must be able to agree upon, and agree upon without feeling that their own highest values are either jeopardized or given an undemocratic ascendancy over the equally legitimate highest values or philosophies of other people in their society.¹³

An inescapable practical problem lies behind this statement. Schooling requires “a progressive pattern” to inform, plan, and evaluate pedagogical activity. But a progressive pattern depends on an underlying rationale. That rationale, due to democratic considerations, cannot emanate from any particular conception of the good life. What, then, are we to do? McMurray’s response to this question proceeds from the concept of “legitimate controversy.” This term refers to the condition in which people of “good will and expert knowledge and intelligence cannot agree,” (that is, “where evidence is not sufficient to justify a conclusion and we are forced to rely on temperament, assumptions, etc.” in order to take a stand on the matter).¹⁴ In relation to issues subject to legitimate controversy, McMurray insists that schools are obliged to remain nonpartisan. This means that the school must teach the controversy as a controversy. “Nonpartisan,” however, does not mean “neutral.” Schools ought to favor a particular commitment — that of education itself. The public school, says McMurray, should stand for cultivation of mind and against ignorance, dependence, and thwarting of human aspiration. Education for McMurray contains its own grounds for understanding and resolving issues within the schools.

The schools, then, promote some ends and intend to defeat others. Of all the imaginable possibilities, they have adopted only some. For McMurray, cultural transmission is the fundamental purpose of the schools, and it operates in the service of liberating and enhancing the ability of persons — *all* persons — to cope with and find meaning in an ever-changing world. In short, McMurray grounds his theory in the concepts of democracy and equality of opportunity. These concepts are intrinsically linked to education and give rise to a distinctive understanding of the purpose of the public schools. To those who might object that this approach to establishing the aims of public education is suspect, he replies, “The question of whether there are values other than those of democratic schooling and equality of opportunity which might be judged to have greater weight or a prior claim need arise only for anyone who fears that liberated intelligence is hostile to his cause.”¹⁵

There is, however, a third possibility not acknowledged by McMurray. One can call into question the assertion that reliance on the concepts of democracy and equality of opportunity avoids dependence on philosophic systems — or, indeed, one can properly ask whether the democratic conviction might itself *be* a philosophic system — without in fact fearing that “liberated intelligence is hostile to his cause.” McMurray errs in asserting that basing public education on the concepts of democracy and equality of opportunity avoids the possibility of disagreement. The public school described by McMurray *does* depend on a philosophic premise. The premise at the root of McMurray’s educational theory is the principle stated in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Defensible public schools proceed from this premise. Those that do not are wrong.

We have, then, the response to Rorty whose elaboration constitutes the second purpose of this essay. Rorty claims that democracy is prior to philosophy, and that procedure is therefore fundamental and takes precedence over doctrine. But

democracy *is* philosophy. Therefore, if our highest commitment is to democracy, philosophy is prior to procedure.

In response to this argument, Rorty is likely to assert that because foundations are an illusion, “philosophy” is itself procedural...all the way down. To the degree that our reference to philosophy rests on Platonic or Kantian vocabulary, Rorty would be apt once again to walk away. On his own grounds, however, he should remain engaged. Rorty admits to a preference (it may be a passion) for “the habit of attaining our ends by persuasion rather than force,” that is, for a form of rationality linked to “curiosity, persuasion and tolerance.” Tolerant persons are “superior.” Even if it is a “lucky accident” that such a way of life exists and that we are part of it, his preferences are real.¹⁶ We see Rorty pursuing them and can imagine him struggling to defend and preserve that for which he cares. But perpetuation of the world that is dear to Rorty depends on continued cultivation of a type of human being — a sort of character — among whose primary features is the sort of rationality Rorty associates with “the thick morality of the European industrialized democracies.”¹⁷ We should expect, then, that Rorty would support the measures that make his world possible, *even if he does not agree that they are grounded in something foundational*. He has as much reason to do this as he does for doing anything.

One would like more from Rorty. It is for this reason that he is widely criticized for drafting John Dewey into his service.¹⁸ Sandel, for example, observes that at the very heart of Dewey’s educational program is a concerted (and distinctly nonironic) commitment to the shaping of a democratic personality that is characterized by a clearly delineated set of skills and dispositions. Sandel in this connection cites *Liberalism and Social Action* (which calls for “producing the habits of mind and character, the intellectual and moral patterns,” required for genuine democratic life). Similar statements permeate Dewey’s work. Sandel observes, “Dewey rejected the notion that government should be neutral among conceptions of the good life. He lamented rather than celebrated the moral and spiritual disenchantment of public life.”¹⁹ Yet Sandel, not unlike McMurray, stops short of forthrightly expressing the logic that alone anchors his educational program and the non-neutral objectives (most notably, character education, with its conception of the good) to which it gives rise. That “all men are created equal” may well be self-evident. But that perception is not a gift of birth; one must learn to see that the principle is true. The social and political implications of equality, including the corresponding understanding of rights and responsibilities, must also be learned. Civic education (including character education, linked to a sense of identity and infused by a sense of the good) is in this sense necessary. But Sandel’s response should go further: As we learn daily, the concept of human equality and the democratic arrangements that follow from it are philosophically controversial. Even the suggestion that persons entertain such ideas is philosophically controversial. We ignore or belittle such controversy at our peril. One wishes that democratic principles and institutions, including their implicit conception of the good, were not held in doubt or contempt; but to refrain from democratic character education until such doubt and contempt has disappeared is to

wait forever, since such character education is among the necessary conditions for dissipation of the doubt and contempt.

Sandel, in response to what has so far been argued, could with justice claim that he has from the beginning stated that the procedural republic, while maintaining the illegitimacy of establishing politics on the basis of a conception of the good life, inconsistently possesses its own conception of the good life (though it is apt not to admit it).²⁰ In this vein, Sandel states, “Arguments about justice and rights have an unavoidably judgmental aspect.”²¹ This is true. But Sandel must go further in order to effectively meet the challenge posed by Rorty. Rorty maintains that questions concerning the good life are insusceptible to satisfactory resolution. Conceptions of the good life therefore cannot legitimately inform our politics, including a program of character education. Sandel argues that the procedural republic (and, by extension, Rorty’s own preferred arrangements) unavoidably but without acknowledgment proceed from a conception of the good life. To complete his response to Rorty, Sandel must add two things. First, he needs to declare whether or not Rorty is correct in alleging that there is no satisfactory resolution of disputes regarding the good life. Second, he must explicitly identify the consequences of that declaration. To agree with Rorty that there is no satisfactory resolution of the question of the good life and still call for a character education infused by a conception of the good is to endorse a politics of the will: On this view, rationality is exhausted, but we must forge ahead nevertheless. One should act with determination since it may, after all, be determination itself that makes the difference.

On the other hand, Sandel might conclude that Rorty is wrong. Satisfactory resolution is possible. We can therefore possess an authoritative conception of the good life. For Sandel this would include grasping the self-evidence of human equality and recognizing the legitimacy of the democratic virtues and institutions to which that understanding gives rise and upon which their perpetuation depends. But what are we to make of persons who do not share this conception of the good life? The answer is that they are in error. Such error cannot be allowed to interfere with the steps required to secure and preserve the good life. As Will notes, “Is the drawing of lines potentially dangerous? Yes, indeed. But it is less dangerous than not drawing them.”²² We act out of knowledge of the good and in the faith not only that we are undeceived but also that the others will eventually join us.

The procedural republic in no small measure owes its existence to reaction to the protracted and horrifying religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²³ Fear of religious conviction remains widespread, especially among educated elites.²⁴ For this reason, we can anticipate forceful objection to the suggestion that Sandel jettison procedure in favor of philosophy — that he recommend character education predicated on a conception of the good life that is not, and perhaps never will be, agreed to by all who are affected by it. This objection will warn us of the danger of violent conflict. In response to that warning Sandel should note that the critic’s peace is itself but a candidate for the good and then remind us of two facts: First, the conflict has already begun. Few of us will be spared, despite professions of tolerance, not the least because it is precisely such tolerance that is in

large part the occasion for the conflict. There is a world of difference between a way of life, respectful of reason, in search of mutual understanding, and one inspired by a vision of God delighting in professions of faith delivered under threat of violent death. Second, character education as outlined by Sandel and Dewey is required to establish and nurture the regime of tolerance that the critic would make supreme. As Aristotle observes, “he who lives as passion directs will not hear argument that dissuades him, nor understand it if he does.” For reason to reign, “character... must somehow be there already.” Therefore, “it is best that there should be a public and proper care for such matters.”²⁵

-
1. George F. Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (New York: Touchstone, 1983), 153.
 2. Leszek Kolakowski, “Dilemmas of the Contemporary World,” in *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty, and Kolakowski*, eds. Josef Niznik and John T. Sanders (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 80.
 3. Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, 24, 27, 24, and 40.
 4. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1996), 320–1, 326, 332–3, and 348. This work will be cited as *DD* in the text for all subsequent references.
 5. Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, 134. Will also speaks of developing “a sense of community rooted in a substantial range of shared values and aims” (150), “self-consciousness about what being an American involves” (153), and taking “measures to encourage citizens to be linked by ideas that give public content to the public mind” (149). Will’s focus is “citizens’ inner lives” (144).
 6. See, also, Michael J. Sandel, *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 213.
 7. Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 175.
 8. *Ibid.*, 183.
 9. There is some question whether Rorty meets his own standard. See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
 10. Sandel, *Public Philosophy*, 224.
 11. Rorty, “Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” 182, n. 15.
 12. McMurray never published this work. He did, however, teach it every year in a graduate seminar, and the manuscript embodying his views is accessible via ERIC (document number ED 442 681). For a comprehensive bibliography of McMurray’s work, see Michael Oliner, “Memorial Essay for the Late Professor Foster McMurray,” *Proceedings of the Midwest Philosophy of Education Society, 1999–2000* (Chicago: Midwest Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 531–6.
 13. Foster McMurray, “Preface to an Autonomous Discipline of Education,” *Educational Theory* 5, no. 3 (1955), 130.
 14. These phrases are taken from class notes for the fall 1973 offering of McMurray’s course.
 15. McMurray, document number ED 42 681, 26.
 16. These phrases are from Rorty, quoted in Niznik and Sanders, eds., *Debating the State of Philosophy*, 28, 85 and 47.
 17. *Ibid.*, 47.
 18. Sandel, *Public Philosophy*, 183–95, esp. 189 and 192. See too Robert Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), esp. 139–74. According to Westbrook, in his abandonment of any noncontingent understanding of truth or objectivity, Rorty leaves liberalism even more vulnerable than does Rawls. This is in stark contrast to Dewey who believed that “some justificatory practices are better than others, not just better for us but better as such” (162).

Westbrook's spirited endorsement of democratic civic education is coupled with a sharp disdain for those who claim that there is little or no need for the education of citizens (228).

19. Sandel, *Public Philosophy*, 192.

20. See, for example, Sandel, *Public Philosophy*, 253–4.

21. *Ibid.*, 254.

22. Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, 92.

23. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xxii–vi.

24. For Rawls, the “fact of religious division remains” (xxiv). “Political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict” (xxvi). Division and conflict, the inevitable consequence of the use of reason, is a fact to which theories of justice and politics must adapt.

25. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179–80.