

Unreasonable Views of Citizenship Education

Kevin McDonough
McGill University

Dwight Boyd's essay is a vigorous and refreshingly direct repudiation of certain actually existing illiberal conceptions of character education. Some versions, like Thomas Lickona's, have been formulated as *theories* of character education. Other versions, such as the "Character Matters!" Program, appear to be theoretically innocent. Nevertheless, the characteristic linking each of these views is the conflation of the good of the democratic citizen with the good of individual persons in ways that severely and odiously — cancerously — erode individual liberty, moral diversity, and cultural difference.

LIBERAL CITIZENSHIP: THE REQUIREMENTS OF PUBLIC REASONABLENESS

In this brief response essay, I highlight one feature of the illiberal conceptions of civic education Boyd criticizes — their unreasonableness. Unreasonableness, in the sense I have in mind, is a notion that plays an important role in the Rawlsian conception of liberalism, which Boyd himself employs in his critique of character education. According to this Rawlsian conception, good liberal citizens are citizens who are responsive to the requirements of public reasonableness.¹ Public reasonableness serves as the governing moral basis for the cooperative aspirations of citizens who differ deeply on and disagree sharply about moral matters. This notion of public reasonableness involves three distinct but related concerns. First, "governing moral basis" means that citizens should view only "certain kinds of reasons as politically authoritative."² Second, the reasons that citizens put forward as the basis for political authority should be "public reasons" — meaning reasons capable of being seen as acceptable by as wide a range of citizens as possible. Third, in order to be widely acceptable, public reasons must be capable of serving as moral justifications for state authority while remaining compatible with underlying reasonable disagreement and difference about fundamental moral issues. As Stephen Macedo puts it, public reasons must be reasons that "can be widely seen to be good by persons such as they are,"³ where "such as they are" indicates among other things, that citizens disagree about many other fundamental issues of moral value. To summarize, public reasonableness refers to the capabilities of citizens to appeal to reasons that are (1) politically authoritative, (2) very widely agreeable, and (3) compatible with deep moral diversity.

An important point about these three features of public reasonableness is that they act as certain *ex ante* constraints on citizens' exercise of reason in public deliberation. The constraints of liberal public reasonableness are not merely procedural rules that govern citizens' behavior in the public arena — for example, voting procedures. They are, as Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson say, best understood as "self-constraints."⁴ Reasonable liberal citizens, therefore, are those citizens who incorporate in their self-understandings the constraints of liberal public reasonableness. In short, public reasonableness entails a specific understanding of civic virtue.

To put explicitly in terms that Boyd uses, public reasonableness is a “moral perspective that all share to ground claims that those located in these different points of view *ought* to respect each other.”

WHAT MAKES A CONCEPTION OF CITIZENSHIP UNREASONABLE?

With this admittedly quick and dirty notion of liberal public reasonableness in hand, the point I emphasize here is that proponents of both Lickona-type and “Character Matters”-type citizenship education violate the constraints of public reasonableness in especially strong and aggressive ways. The views of character education they defend are clearly unreasonable. The claims they make in advancing their views of character education as citizenship education are, to employ William Galston’s helpful distinction, offensive rather than defensive claims.⁵ They are claims of the type: “Others should do as *I* say” rather than claims of the type, “I need not do as *you* say.” They are not merely requests for exemption from the demands of legitimate liberal public authority, on grounds of freedom of conscience for example. Instead, they explicitly seek to enact a particular comprehensive conception as the basis of policy and practice for state-funded and regulated schools. As such, they are especially serious — “unreasonable” — threats to liberal democracy.

To be clear, what makes Lickona-type and “Character Matters!”-type character education unreasonable is not that they are, as Boyd suggests (pulling no punches), “shallow, conservative, Christian, capitalist, and apolitical.” Reasonable liberal citizens can be all those things (or at least being those things is not what makes them unreasonable). What makes them unreasonable and therefore illiberal is that their views are used to justify state coercion. As Harry Brighouse says, “Two people can believe the same things about what is morally required of and permissible for them, and they can agree that the same is required and permissible for others, while disagreeing on just one thing: the extent to which they should use those beliefs to justify coercive political action.”⁶

Why does clarifying the basis of the distinction between public reasonableness and unreasonableness matter? One reason is that it helps to prevent possible confusion about the relationship between the aim of promoting the liberal civic virtues associated with public reasonableness, on the one hand, and the particular comprehensive doctrines that citizens affirm, on the other. Boyd claims that if citizens seek to address the problem of seeking reasonable public agreement in conditions of moral disagreement and diversity “while anchored within one particular ‘comprehensive doctrine,’ even classical liberalism, one must face up to a deep and difficult paradox.” But it seems important to recognize that the paradox involved seems deeper and more difficult for some citizens, and for some comprehensive doctrines, than for others. One reason for this is that not all comprehensive doctrines are the same, in Rawlsian terms. John Rawls distinguishes between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive conceptions by highlighting on one crucial condition — the extent to which the conception recognizes (or not) the “burdens of judgment.”⁷ Accepting the burdens of judgment just means recognizing the many sources of reasonable disagreement that obtain among reasonable persons. Thus, because reasonable comprehensive doctrines accept the burdens of judgment, they

already contain within themselves the essential conditions of public reasonableness — the recognition of reasonable moral diversity and the need to keep this in mind when exercising political authority. The point I want to stress is just that citizens whose moral perspectives are “anchored” in reasonable doctrines need not experience the paradox between their commitment to a particular comprehensive doctrine, on the one hand, and the shared moral perspective of liberal citizenship, on the other, as particularly deep or demanding. But the same is not true of citizens who adhere to unreasonable conceptions.

Second, the distinction between public reasonableness and unreasonableness highlights an important practical question for liberal educators. How should the liberal state respond to unreasonable educational views? Can liberals afford simply to dismiss or ignore these threats? After all, there is no reason of principle why the liberal state and liberal citizens must respond to or engage with them. Because the views of unreasonable citizens are unreasonable, they are as a matter of principle irrelevant to the legitimacy of the state and its educational policies. Nevertheless, there are important practical reasons why this dismissive response is inadequate. First, as Boyd’s critique implies, even if a small minority of citizens hold unreasonable views, their influence may grow and spread if they go unchecked. And numbers clearly *do* make an important difference to the legitimacy of the liberal state. Thus, the liberal state has a responsibility to adopt educational policies that will eliminate or at least diminish unreasonableness among the citizenry.

The second reason liberal educators and state educational policy should seek to eliminate rather than dismiss unreasonableness is one that Boyd’s essay does not explicitly address. It is children, not their unreasonable parents, who are likely to bear the most severe costs of dismissal. The desire on the part of some citizens for a certain form of character education reflects their desire that children *not* be educated in accordance with the demands of liberal public reasonableness. When that happens, as Brighouse has recently noted, these children are “locked out of the public reason-giving community, not through their own fault or that of the rest of society but because their parents have locked them out.”⁸ This is a very high cost for children to bear. Thus, there are strong grounds for supporting educational policies that promote reasonableness in young citizens even if doing so pushes the boundaries of *de facto* parental rights in liberal societies.

Boyd’s essay reminds us that ensuring that all children receive an education in liberal civic virtue is crucially important to such remediation. Even if unreasonable conceptions of civic education are not necessarily “lethal to liberal democracy,” they will at least be lethal to many children’s chances of participating as liberal citizens.

1. Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). See especially Chapter 2.

2. Macedo, *Liberal Virtues*, 46.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 199.

5. William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116.
6. Harry Brighouse, "Religious Belief, Religious Schooling, and the Demands of Reciprocity," in *Deliberative Democracy in Practice*, eds. David Kahane, Daniel Weinstock, Dominique Loydet, and Melissa Williams (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 43.
7. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 116.
8. Brighouse, "Religious Belief," 44.