

A Framework for Thinking About the “Principle of Curricular Fairness”

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Twice in the course of his exploration of what the call for “equal time” for creation science in the classroom entails, Bryan Warnick advises advocates of creation science to consider whether they really want to subject their worldviews to the sort of critical scrutiny that would follow from their demand. The first time we encounter this “heads up” is when Warnick notes that, if creationism were to be given equal consideration in the context of a science classroom, the tenets of evolution would not be the only thing under scrutiny. Religious beliefs would similarly be subject to critical evaluation. As Warnick puts it, “the critical knife now cuts both ways.” The second time we encounter this counsel is in the context of Warnick’s considerations of the value of granting equal time to the claims of intelligent design. Here the critical knife cuts more sharply one way than the other, in favor of the “mountains of accumulated evidence for the existence of evolutionary processes.” Warnick again asks whether this is what “religious advocates for equal time...really want.”

These two admonitions suggest that under the “principle of curricular fairness,” the odds are stacked against those who hope that arguments for “equal time” will help them forward a Christian religious agenda in the biology classroom. But Warnick concludes that, while some advocates of creationism will not want to subject aspects of their belief system to critical scrutiny, others will respond enthusiastically, and even somewhat combatively, to the “principle of curricular fairness” in the biology classroom: “Bring it on!” At this point, it becomes clear that Warnick’s “principle of curricular fairness” needs the broader support of John Rawls’s political framework if it is to get beyond the idea that the purpose of the inclusion of comprehensive beliefs in the curriculum of public schools in pluralist societies is to subject particular views, whether of scientific understanding or religious belief, to critical scrutiny. It is not so much that subjecting comprehensive beliefs and practices to critical scrutiny does not seem fair — I agree with Warnick that the call for equal time in the *science* curriculum means that one’s claims need to be about science. My reservation is that the principle of curricular fairness should not be seen as a trump card for or against particular ways of life, but rather as a building block of a broader project of thinking about the role of public schools in Rawls’s conception of political liberalism.

To be fair, Warnick does not claim to have worked out “the full set of principles that should guide the fair inclusion or exclusion of different comprehensive viewpoints in the public school curriculum.” Neither have I. Nonetheless, since Warnick invokes Rawls on behalf of his principle of curricular fairness, I want to press the connection, because it might be fruitful for Warnick’s thinking about the

larger question of how his formulation of the “principle of curricular fairness” fits into the civic project of political liberalism.

In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Rawls makes it clear that his theory of justice is best understood not as a comprehensive moral doctrine but as a “political conception.”¹ This is relevant to Warnick’s project, because it calls into question the assumption that the purpose of exposure to multiple perspectives on the origins of life in the science classroom is to cultivate the capacity for autonomy in young people. This Brighousian-inflected interpretation of Rawls is too strong a foundation for political liberalism, which, as I understand it, makes a much more minimal demand of public schooling. This is how Rawls explains the difference:

The liberalism of [Immanuel] Kant and [John Stuart] Mill may lead to requirements designed to foster the values of autonomy and individuality as ideals to govern much if not all of life. But political liberalism has a different aim and requires far less. It will ask that children’s education include such things as knowledge of their constitutional and civic rights, so that, for example they know that liberty of conscience exists in their society and that apostasy is not a legal crime, all this to ensure that their continued religious membership when they come of age is not based simply on ignorance of their basic rights or fear of punishment for offenses that are only considered offenses within their religious sect. Their education should also prepare them to be fully cooperating members of society and enable them to be self-supporting; it should also encourage the political virtues so that they want to honor the fair terms of social cooperation in their relations with the rest of society.²

I have quoted Rawls here at some length not to settle the question of what a public education under political liberalism requires. Rather, I want to press the question of how to foster the political virtues required of people in a pluralistic society that seeks to honor the range of comprehensive views within it while maintaining political and civic institutions that are stable and seek to be fair.

Whereas Warnick values exposure to “serious advocacy” of a range of comprehensive conceptions because it helps students to make up their own minds on matters of social importance, political liberalism has a different end in view. The point is not to cultivate autonomy in young people (although Rawls admits that this might happen). Nor is it to cultivate mutual respect (although this helps). Rather, the aim is to lay the groundwork for cultivating the capacities of citizens to recognize the many sources of reasonable disagreement about matters of shared concern, and further, to help citizens (or future citizens) to ascertain when we are likely to be able to come to agreement about these matters, and when we will have to live with moral disagreement. In other words, one does not engage in debate in order to win over the other side, but rather to figure out the most that each party to the agreement can set aside in order to live in a politically stable pluralist society without compromising their most deeply held convictions.

There is some dispute about whether or not such a view is in accordance with Rawls’s seemingly stripped down view of public schooling, which he writes must take place “entirely within the political conception,” but reservations about my interpretation can be countered by Rawls’s stipulation that schools seek to foster the development of the political virtues that are required of political liberalism.³ The

onus is on the teacher to help young people navigate the many quagmires of such exchanges so that they can move in the direction required by political liberalism.

This is a demanding agenda, and not one that fits all that well in the biology curriculum as currently conceived. If the study of biology included an examination of policymaking in scientific arenas, then the science curriculum would be a legitimate place for students to begin to come to grips with the burdens of judgment. Teachers would also have the necessary motivation (and would need the requisite professional development opportunities) to develop the kinds of skills and understandings that are needed to teach their subject in view of this broader political project. In the absence of both of these prerequisites, however, I think it is better to address calls for equal time where they truly belong: in the civics classroom. Of course, there are some legal considerations that will have to be addressed, but I think that a Rawlsian framework may well supply the basis for a legal argument that the inclusion of religious viewpoints in a civics classroom, for civic purposes, does not contravene the separation of church and state. This is not to say that this sort of inclusion will be easily achieved, although the civics curriculum would provide a more legitimate basis for the inclusion of religious perspectives than does the science curriculum. This is not to suggest that the science curriculum is off the hook. While I have suggested that the Rawlsian civic project may not fit into the existing science curriculum, there is a way in which science education needs to be cognizant of Rawls’s core premise, which is that “the diversity of religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines found in modern democratic societies is not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy.”⁴ In keeping with this view, science education needs to recognize that there are limits to what science itself can claim to be about; science cannot answer all of our questions.⁵ Far from sidestepping the civic project of political liberalism, such an approach is another way of enacting it, although it is admittedly less robust, and ultimately, from the civic perspective explored above, less satisfactory.

1. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 186.

2. *Ibid.*, 156.

3. *Ibid.*, 157.

4. *Ibid.*, 34.

5. Mike U. Smith and Harvey Siegel, “Knowing, Believing, and Understanding: What Goals for Science Education?” *Science and Education* 13, no. 6 (2004): 574.