

Making a Place for the Good in Educational Deliberations

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In this essay I wish to take a step toward legitimating ethical-political perfectionism as a stance for citizens to take in public deliberations regarding educational policy. Perfectionism, as I will be thinking of it, is the position that public policy should be based upon, and aimed toward achieving, the best conceptions of a good life. Why do we need a perfectionist orientation? The most important reason is the well-being of young people. Schools should help their students lead lives that are genuinely good.

This latter assertion is controversial. I will not defend it here. Nor will I do much to suggest what educational policies might emerge from perfectionist deliberations. Instead, I will focus upon a prior issue. Whatever our ultimate decisions regarding the nature and role of the good in education, if we citizens are to carefully consider the issues we need to be articulate about them. However, I fear Charles Taylor is correct when he observes that there exists a pervasive and “extraordinary inarticulacy” about the good.¹ Taylor faults liberals for encouraging this inarticulacy because they “banish discussions about the good life to the margins of political debate.”² Taylor has a point, even though there is an issue of just how much liberalism is to blame for this inarticulacy. In this essay I will employ as a foil John Rawls’s liberal theory as presented in his *Political Liberalism*, a theory which does to some significant degree marginalize political discussions of the good life.³ Rawls explicitly contrasts his liberalism with perfectionism, and responding to his concerns will go some distance toward establishing a place for perfectionism in public debates of educational policy.

I want to be clear, though, that I see liberalism as an ally of perfectionism in a pluralistic, dialectical approach to educational policy. Perfectionists themselves see dangers in perfectionism as a single-principle approach to ethics and politics. Thomas Hurka concludes that pure perfectionism “does not guarantee individual rights...or place other constraints on the pursuit of good consequences.”⁴ So, he entertains the possibility that perfectionism can at most be part of a more complicated ethical-political theory. However, if many basic liberal aims are legitimate, as I believe they are, we cannot afford to take the stance that issues of the good should be marginalized. My worry is that such a stance, beyond stunting public debate of education, in effect surrenders the field to a few articulate “virtuecrats” who are more than happy to pronounce on issues of the good.⁵ And people are listening to them. We might bemoan that fact and criticize the illiberal tendencies of some educational policies being proposed, but if we are unwilling or unable to meet proponents of these proposals on the perfectionist field of play I have to wonder whether we can marshal an effective reply.

Rawls’s basic question is, “How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable

though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?”⁶ There are two parts to my perfectionist answer, corresponding to the two stages of Rawls’s argument for political liberalism. In his first stage, the stage of the deliberations of the representatives in the original position, Rawls shows how his principles of justice are consistent with freedom, equality, and other ideals. In effect, Rawls’s challenge is that perfectionism does not even belong on the field of play because it cannot speak an adequate language of freedom and equality.

Even if that challenge can be met, Rawls presents the further issue of political stability. In the second stage of his construction, Rawls employs his idea of public reason to show how, by confining their public deliberations to particular issues and to reasons all reasonable people can be expected to share, citizens who hold reasonable but incompatible conceptions of the good life can give their reasoned support to the basic political structure. Rawls’s challenge to perfectionism is that because of the fact of moral plurality, attempting to base public policy on particular conceptions of the good will be destabilizing.

My aim is to show how conceptions of the good can play a significant role in public debate about educational policy while still taking adequate account of some of Rawls’s basic concerns about perfectionism.⁷

PLURALIST PERFECTIONISM

Central to my argument is that perfectionism can take a pluralist form. The perfectionism I propose is pluralistic in two senses. I already have noted an intertheoretical pluralism prompted by the inability of perfectionism or liberalism alone to provide the basis for public educational policy. But perfectionism also can be pluralistic in an intratheoretical sense by recognizing a plurality of justifiable conceptions of a good life. In *Political Liberalism* Rawls portrays perfectionists as advocating monistic conceptions of human excellence, conceptions which would not be accepted as the bases for public policy by reasonable people who have differing conceptions. However, there is no conceptual necessity that perfectionists be monists. That perfectionists can be pluralists goes some distance to answer liberal concerns.

Just how far does that go, though? For example, perfectionists might be pluralists regarding the good, yet still consistently argue that, whatever kinds of goods there are, the aim is to maximize them. Hurka argues that perfectionism implies maximization: “We would not say of someone who was content with a reasonable development of his talents that he aimed at ‘excellence’ or was dedicated to ‘perfecting’ himself.... [A] concern for human development goes naturally with a maximizing approach.”⁸ Here we do appear to have a conceptual necessity, and one that raises again concerns about freedom and equality.

However, Hurka’s claim is misleading in that persons do not dedicate themselves to “excellence” or “perfection” as some abstract, singular aim. People choose ways of life because of what those lives concretely involve. They may still aim for a “best” life, but Michael Stocker distinguishes “best” as a “relative superlative” from “best” as an “absolute superlative.”⁹ Persons may be dedicated to living the best sort of life (absolute sense) without being dedicated to living a life that is better than

any other (relative sense). It is not incoherent to say a talented individual who dedicates herself to being an excellent teacher lives the best sort of life even if some other sort of life is better. For example, teaching music might not allow the development and expression of the teacher's musical talent that might be possible from living the life of a performer. Yet, such things as dedication to children, to helping them experience and appreciate music, count toward making the teacher's life genuinely the best sort of life.

Understanding this as an "absolute" best life does not imply that "relative" comparisons cannot be made. Clearly, that a life is best in the absolute sense means it is better than lives that are poor or merely good. The point is that comparisons aimed at determining the one life that is best relative to all possible others is neither needed nor desirable. Having determined whether or not a life belongs in the class of best lives, our work is done, so far as these sorts of comparative evaluations are concerned.

The maximizer's position is that if the teacher's life is justified, her life really must be better than the performer's. But we are not forced to that conclusion. And this is not just a matter of being unable to determine which is better. We can imagine that the performer's life really is better in some sense. The point is, that simply does not matter. The teacher's life is of the finest sort. From this point of view we can agree with Hurka that something is amiss if a person is content with a life that is merely "reasonable," but that does not force us to maximization. A perfectionist can say the person has a duty to do more than what is satisfactory without also claiming that the person's duty is done only when the person has achieved a life that is better than all possible others.

PERFECTIONISM AND THE ORIGINAL POSITION

Even if it is true that perfectionists can encourage or accept a range of conceptions of the good, it is also true that they must be willing to take some sort of stand against poor conceptions of the good. How can perfectionists provide conditions where people are treated fairly? For example, what is to stop perfectionists from being excessively punitive with people who adopt undesirable conceptions of the good? In order to explore further such issues I turn to some of the points Rawls makes through his device of the original position.¹⁰

First off, it may be that perfectionism cannot respond adequately to fairness issues without being complemented by liberal theory. On the other hand, we should not exaggerate the antagonism between perfectionism and Rawls's concerns. For example, Rawls writes consistently as if perfectionists must be concerned to institute particular (that is, their own) conceptions of the good. However, perfectionists desire that persons pursue conceptions of the good that are genuinely good; they do not endorse conceptions simply because they are (at the moment) theirs. Therefore, they have an interest in impartiality similar to what Rawls expresses in his veil of ignorance. Perfectionists can agree that principles of justice should not favor their particular conceptions of the good, conceptions that may be erroneous.

Regarding freedom, even if perfectionists are concerned to oppose degraded forms of life, they can be sensitive to pragmatic issues. People are inclined to resist

imposition, and pushing too hard against that resistance will be counter-productive. But beyond pragmatic issues, perfectionists have moral reasons to respect freedom. Even when conceptions of the good are less than the best, perfectionists will be wary of imposing better ones because self-determination is an excellence in itself. Perfectionism does not license wholesale imposition and coercion.

Even if this is so, we might wonder if it still condones selective imposition and coercion. Perfectionism might require more freedom and opportunities for people who achieve, or are capable of achieving, greater excellences than other people, whereas Rawls uses his second moral power as a basis for equality: all normal persons should be understood to have the capacity for a conception of the good. Perfectionists need not deny that, but the suspicion might persist that in its pursuit of lives that are best, perfectionism will favor those who are willing and able to achieve certain higher excellences.

Perfectionists do insist on the need and ability to discriminate between lives that are best and those that are not. However, that does not imply they cannot endorse a strong conception of equality. For instance, I suggest a perfectionist formulation of Rawls's second moral power: all normal persons have the capacity for a conception of what is truly best. This is a stronger claim than Rawls's. It may appear much more empirically problematic, therefore, but if we understand "best" in the inclusive way described above it is more plausible. And if it is more demanding in a normative sense — for example, in calling for greater expenditure of social resources to more fully develop *all* persons' capacity for what is genuinely good — then perfectionism may provide even stronger grounds for equality than Rawlsian liberalism does.

Just how far does this egalitarian impulse go? One issue to confront is that tension between pursuit of the good conceived (somehow) as the summation of excellences achieved by a group of people, and of the good judged as the achievements of individuals. Under the latter conception, if one individual achieves excellence of value ten and another person achieves excellence of value two, say, that would be preferable to a situation where both individuals achieved excellence of nine. It is the highest individual value that is relevant, not the sum. Hence, this conception could justify extremely unequal distribution of resources to maximize the achievements or opportunities of a few individuals, or perhaps just one individual. The other conception would favor a more balanced distribution of resources. In keeping with pluralism, I do not say one of these concerns — for groups or for individuals — must always take priority over the other. But perfectionism certainly does not preclude concern for good in the aggregate sense; it need not be concerned for outstanding individuals only. However, it may be unclear just how significant that is, how much pressure for differential distribution of resources would exist in such a conception. For example, Rawls denies the principle of diminishing marginal utility, arguing that

[t]here is little reason to suppose that, in general, rights and resources allocated to encourage and to cultivate highly talented persons contribute less and less to the total beyond some point in the relevant range. To the contrary, this contribution may grow (or stay constant) indefinitely.¹¹

The problem Rawls identifies is that if talented persons' contributions to aggregate excellence at least stay constant open-endedly, then perfectionists have no nonarbitrary grounds for distributing resources away from these persons to those persons who lack basic goods. However, it is not clear that Rawls is correct in his claim.

First, what advantage must perfectionists see in open-ended "cultivation?" Given the conception of "best" with which we are working, once a person has achieved some best way of life there is diminished value in carrying that even further. Even if that person were able to achieve another marginally better or equivalently good life, perfectionist gains would be greater if a new person were able to achieve a best life. Furthermore, it is likely that the gains in real goods open to a person who has already achieved a best life are relatively inexpensive. Initial high costs for education, for example, need not continue. Finally, the greatest excellences probably are better achieved in a cooperative environment where all persons are appropriately encouraged and supported in their efforts at excellence than in an adversarial one. Perfectionists certainly can see merit in Rawls's conception of society as a fair system of social cooperation.

PERFECTIONISM AND PUBLIC REASON

At this point I will close discussion of the first stage of Rawls's construction of principles of justice. I have attempted to show how a perfectionist pluralism can respond to liberal concerns for freedom and equality. Rawls's second stage is meant to show how we can expect reasonable persons to accept the basic political structure. Rawls's notion of public reason plays a key role here. And a key part of that is a duty of reciprocity, "to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason."¹² The idea is that rather than appeal to particular conceptions of the good that may be inaccessible to some people, in public deliberations citizens should appeal to reasons that all citizens can recognize as legitimate.

There is an issue of just how broad the scope of reciprocity must be. It is possible that under certain conditions reasonable people could accept coercion based on reasons that are not accessible to them.¹³ Nonetheless, reciprocity surely is an important political principle. Can perfectionists conform to it?

Let me begin by questioning just how well some liberal theories serve reciprocity. I will shift away from Rawls here to a difficult educational example discussed by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson.¹⁴ Gutmann and Thompson discuss the 1983 incident where some Hawkins County, Tennessee parents objected on religious grounds to several features of a reading series adopted by the local public schools. For example, the parents objected to "a passage describing a central idea of the Renaissance as 'a belief in the dignity and worth of human beings,' because such a belief is incompatible with true religious faith."¹⁵ Gutmann and Thompson argue that the parents' reasons do not pass the reciprocity test: "The parents' reasoning appeals to values that can and should be rejected by citizens of a pluralist society committed to protecting the basic liberties and opportunities of all citizens."¹⁶ The

basis of this rejection is that belief that the every human being has dignity and worth is necessary for basic liberty and opportunity.¹⁷

However, there is an important shift in the argument here. To attack the parents' rejection of the belief in the dignity and worth of human beings is to attack their conclusions, not the reasoning behind it: at least it is not a direct attack on the reasoning. This might just be a slip on Gutmann and Thompson's part, but I have to wonder whether it is indicative of a fundamental problem. Rawls says appeal to conceptions of the good can be acceptable, if they are necessary for serving the aims of public reason.¹⁸ Besides running the risk of circularity, this judges the accessibility of reasons by the acceptability of the conclusions toward which the reasons are thought to lead. These parents might well be criticized for offering an argument that does not establish their conclusions, but the point of reciprocity is not to talk only with people who offer good arguments, but to take an attitude that makes argument possible. I admit that the distinction between reasons and conclusions can be slippery. Even so, the example shows that if the point of reciprocity is to connect on the level of reasons we need to keep in mind the degrees of freedom we have there. If we cannot connect on beliefs about the dignity of human beings, perhaps we can at least credit the parents' appeal to religious faith.

But this raises an issue for perfectionists. Just how accessible is these parents' appeal to their religious faith? Perhaps their claim is intelligible, but that is not the same as being accessible, in the sense that other people are "in a position to evaluate and credit the insights drawn from the experience."¹⁹ Here too, though, we have some degrees of freedom. For example, even if other people are not in the position to credit the insights from an experience of religious revelation which they simply cannot have, they can have significant access through evidence of "the fruits of conviction," those benefits such experience has provided the people who have undergone it, and benefits conferred indirectly on others.²⁰

A different situation arises when adherents of a faith deny others can have access to relevant experiences. This may or may not be justified, but in either case this denial would be important for reciprocity. It could be that reciprocity requires citizens to refrain from appealing to the inaccessible grounds. So, my claim is not that perfectionism demands no restraint in appeals to the good in public deliberations, but that the proper restraint is not so tight as some liberals suggest. At least in the example considered here, Gutmann and Thompson's arguments for restraint are not strong.

I am not saying that perfectionists must disagree with Gutmann and Thompson that the parents' proposals should be opposed. The perfectionist point regards the nature of the deliberation. Parties to the deliberation need to address the reasons the parents offer at the level of conceptions of the good (religious and otherwise) and not only at the level of liberal political values. They also need to show how their own alternatives can be grounded in conceptions of the good that can be accessible to the parents (assuming the parents are genuinely concerned to gain access to them). The parents still might object to the grounds offered, of course. It is not clear, though, that their objections must be any stronger than the objections they have to a liberal

political grounding. And it is possible that their objections will actually be less strong if the opposition is at the level of the good, since this kind of opposition better fits their own conception of the kinds of reason suitable in public life, especially if the grounds include religious grounds.²¹

IS PERFECTIONIST DELIBERATION WORKABLE?

This brings me to a final issue. Even if perfectionist deliberation satisfies relevant moral criteria of the kinds we have been considering, is it workable in practice? Rawls is concerned about the political “workability” of perfectionist deliberations:

[T]he form of public reason they [general and comprehensive teleological principles] specify tends to be politically unworkable. For if the elaborate theoretical calculations involved in applying their principles are publicly admitted in questions of political justice, the highly speculative nature and enormous complexity of these calculations are bound to make citizens with opposing views and interests highly suspicious of one another’s arguments The information they presuppose is difficult if not impossible to obtain, and often there are insuperable problems in reaching an objective and agreed assessment.²²

It may be that if the perfectionist aim were to encourage only those conceptions of the good which are best in the relative sense, then fine-grained, complex calculations would be needed. But, as has been shown, that need not be the aim. Perfectionists are concerned to make some ordinal ranking of conceptions of the good. But this interest need not go beyond broad distinctions between conceptions that are best (in the absolute sense), those that are good but less than the best, and those that are not good. These sorts of calculations need not be highly elaborate and speculative. That people might disagree about specific rankings within the broad categories does not preclude agreement on what belongs in the categories. Where the latter sort of agreement does not exist, perfectionists can acknowledge that and the limitations that places on public deliberation.

Also, to be clear, the aim of deliberation about education is not necessarily to judge conceptions of the good. For one thing, we have good reason to wonder whether debates about public policy are a good venue for doing that.²³ More importantly, the point is to think about what constitutes good education, and while conceptions of the good are relevant to that, decisions about education do not require any encompassing decisions about whole ways of life. To the parents in the Hawkins County case, a perfectionist could argue that the schooling they propose is not among the best. Surely this would involve casting doubt on some number of their beliefs, but this would not require claims that their sort of religious life is inferior to a secular life or some other sort of religious life. At the same time, though, a perfectionist could confirm their religious life to the extent of exploring the issue in terms actually important to the parents. This would not exclude liberal concerns for religious rights and so on, but it would not be restricted to that.

CONCLUSION

I have done little in this paper to show the impact of perfectionism on public policy regarding education. One reason for that is that the complexity of the issue precludes adequate attention to it here. But the more important point is that perfectionist theory does not directly imply educational policy. It could be, for

instance, that a society “well-ordered” along perfectionist principles would or should be “liberal” in its educational policies. If the society as a whole is vigorous in its pursuit of the good there need be little reason for the state to encourage it through its schools or other agencies. Determining educational policy is a task for public deliberation, not something to be decided by theory. My point is that public deliberation is attenuated if perfectionist ideals are excluded. I have tried to show how perfectionism can have a legitimate place in the formulation of public policy regarding education. Liberalism and perfectionism are partners in a pluralistic approach to policy-making. But they do need to be partners.

Of course, I am motivated to advocate perfectionism because I do not believe our society is well-ordered in the relevant sense. Liberals do not necessarily deny perfectionist aims. But they do deny they should be a direct public concern. They rely instead on nonpublic associations and mechanisms to help people develop and pursue particular conceptions of the good. But the success of this approach requires a vibrant nonpublic culture where ideals of the good are beneficially pursued. Do we have such a culture presently? I believe we have reason to be skeptical. Can our public, political culture do better? I am not convinced of that, either. But that is no reason to dismiss the possibility *a priori*.

But whatever our conclusions about the efficacy of public versus nonpublic pursuit of the good, perfectionism is still a legitimate public stance. Liberals such as Rawls fear that perfectionism is hostile to justice and political stability. We need to question that. Far from being necessarily divisive, pursuit of the good can provide opportunity for people of diverse points of view to come together in a common project of making life worthwhile for all citizens.

1. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 18.

2. *Ibid.*, 18.

3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

4. Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 190.

5. See Robert J. Nash, *Answering the “Virtuecrats”* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

6. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xviii.

7. It is appropriate to say a few words about why it is proper for me to use Rawls to talk about liberalism in educational policy. A principal question is whether it is fair to associate Rawls with the move to banish conceptions of the good to the margins of political debate. For example, Rawls does not say appeals to conceptions of the good are inappropriate to all political debates but only to those concerned with constitutional essentials (excepting a few special cases). Perhaps a case can be made that schooling is not a constitutional essential, and if it can, then Rawls need not object to perfectionism in public deliberations about schooling. However, constitutional essentials — such as religious and speech rights — often are the issues in debates about educational policy. Rawls acknowledges that “fundamental matters” can be involved in deliberations that are not explicitly about constitutional essentials. Where this is the case, Rawls says his restrictions of public reason still apply. So, even if there is an issue of just what the proper scope of public reason is in public deliberations about education, Rawls still makes public reason central. I want to question its centrality, or at least the centrality of Rawls’s conception of public reason. Beyond that, this issue of the status of educational deliberations (and other examples) prompts questions about the practical usefulness of Rawls’s distinction between issues of constitutional essentials and other issues. See Kent Greenawalt, *Private Consciences and Public Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 117-19.

8. Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 56.
9. Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 331.
10. A number of the points made in what follows are drawn from Hurka. He provides more thorough arguments.
11. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 330.
12. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 217.
13. Greenawalt, *Private Conscience and Public Reason*, 77.
14. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). On relevant issues, Gutmann and Thompson take a position similar to Rawls, so I do not think this shift is problematic. Part of the need for the shift is that Rawls simply does not do much to discuss the conduct of actual deliberation. This is the principal advantage Gutmann and Thompson see in their “deliberative” approach as compared to Rawls’s.
15. Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 64. I rely on Gutmann and Thompson’s account of the incident.
16. *Ibid.*, 65.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 248-51.
19. Greenawalt, *Private Conscience and Public Reason*, 40.
20. *Ibid.*, 41.
21. It might be objected that my recommendations simply confirm Rawls’s claim that appeals to the good are acceptable if they serve public reason. Surely, what I am recommending serves public reason to the extent that reciprocity is a central concern. However, the idea of “public reason” which I am advocating is rather different than Rawls’s.
22. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 162.
23. Greenawalt, *Private Conscience and Public Reason*, 163-64.