

Political Theory and the Teaching of Creationism

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A recent *New York Times* article reports that a publicly financed charter school scheduled to open in Rochester New York will present “creationism as a scientifically based theory competing with the theory of evolution.” A number of groups are listed as opposing opening of the school.¹ This is one more episode in an insurgency movement mounted by Christian evangelicals and their allies, an insurgency that refuses to accept the verdict of secular, mainstream biology concerning the origin of species, especially *homo sapiens*. My interest in this essay lies in the challenge this movement poses to those who wish to find a basis in contemporary democratic and liberal theory from which to refuse such a school public support. I shall argue that neither democratic theory nor the principal versions of liberal theory have the resources to effectively challenge its legitimacy. Although no information is given in the newspaper article, I will assume that the point of teaching both theories is to familiarize students with the claims made on behalf of each. I will also assume that the teacher is free to express her own opinion, which is likely to be in support of the creationist account.

DEMOCRATIC THEORY

The democratic case for teaching creationism in a community in which the majority supports its inclusion in the curriculum appears, at least *prima facie*, to be a strong one: On what basis might the demands of a majority of the citizenry be ignored? Consider Amy Gutmann’s argument against including creationism in public school curricula. Gutmann’s conception of democratic education is one that puts constraints on what the majority of parents or citizens may decide to teach its children in the name of the perpetuation of democratic values themselves. These constraints are formulated in two principles, those of nonrepression and nondiscrimination, violations of which interfere with the transmission of democratic values to all future citizens.

Such constraints protect future citizens from parents who might refuse to aid *all* “children in developing the capacity to understand and to evaluate competing conceptions of the good life and the good society.”² Given this aim of democratic education and given the injunction against any attempt to “restrict rational deliberation or consideration of different ways of life” (*DE*, 44), we might expect Gutmann to *support* the teaching of creationism in addition to evolutionary theory even if a majority opposes it. Restricting schools to the secular version of origins appears to reduce rather than expand opportunities to consider “competing conceptions of the good life.” Gutmann, however, rejects this apparent logic.

The distinctly democratic problem with teaching creationism stems from the fact that it... is believable only on the basis of a sectarian religious faith. Teaching creationism as science — even as one among several reasonable scientific theories — violates the principle of nonrepression in indirectly imposing a sectarian religious view on all children in the guise of science (*DE*, 103).

Note that teaching creationism, even as *one among many theories* is considered to be “imposing” a sectarian religious view on children whereas teaching Darwinism *alone* does not, according to Gutmann, constitute the imposition of a sectarian, *secular* view. The lack of symmetry here is glaring. Gutmann half realizes this when she asks whether it would be “repressive to teach children that they can choose either to believe in creationism, on the basis of faith in the God-given word of the Bible, or to believe in evolution, on the basis of secular reasoning and scientific evidence?” Here is her answer:

Most Americans have reconciled the tenets of their faith with the findings of science. This reconciliation has political as well as intellectual virtues. In a religiously diverse society, secular standards of reasoning accommodate greater agreement upon a common education than religious faith. The case for teaching secular but not religious standards of reasoning does not rest on the claim that secular standards are neutral among all religious beliefs. The case rests instead on the claim that secular standards constitute a better basis upon which to build a common education for citizenship than any set of sectarian religious beliefs — better because secular standards are both a fairer and a firmer basis for peacefully reconciling our differences (*DE*, 103).

It may be that the majority of Americans have reconciled religious faith and Darwinian biology but this majority includes neither ultra-orthodox Jews nor evangelical Christians, the latter of whom comprise “most Americans” in many school districts, the jurisdictions where many school matters are, and according to Gutmann, *should* be decided. When Gutmann claims that secular standards constitute a *better basis* upon which to build a common education for citizenship, what does she mean? She might mean that when there are majority and minority opinions about what “standards” to enforce, democrats need to abide by those supported by the majority. I do not think that is what she does mean, for it would imply that where evangelical Christians comprise the majority, their standards should apply.

I think Gutmann means, rather, that secular standards provide a better way to resolve controversies in a democracy, but there are two problems here. First, the claim appears far from self-evident and, indeed, Gutmann provides no evidence to support it. Recent, often bitter, debates about what approach to reading or mathematics to teach in public schools, debates based exclusively on secular standards, are hardly approaching resolution. And on some fundamental questions, that of human rights, for instance, it matters little that some reach their position on secular grounds, some, on religious.

The second and more fundamental problem with privileging secular standards is that it appears odd to say that a standard which one party to a debate is bound by its deepest convictions to *reject* (if not entirely, at least to the extent that it is contradicted by the Holy Scriptures) provides a “firmer” basis for designing an education *common to all*.³ I can only conclude that Gutmann has applied her principles in a way that is not only not neutral but not fair to a very large group of American citizens. Indeed, Warren Nord in *Religion and American Education* is close to the mark in his contention that the curriculum of contemporary public schools through its omission of any, much less a sympathetic treatment of religion, provides an indoctrination in the secular world view. When speaking in general terms, Gutmann actually sounds the same notes as Nord: “The value of critical

deliberation among good lives and good societies would be neglected by a society that inculcated in children uncritical acceptance of any particular way or ways of (personal and political) life” (DE, 44). Gutmann’s problem is that she does not take that general conviction to heart when it comes to the teaching of human origins. According to the creationist, the way we got here has clear implication for how we should live.

A democratic theorist can justify setting aside a democratic decision about curriculum only if she can show that exposing future citizens to that curriculum would disable some or all of them from developing the capacity to fulfill their role as future citizens. On the issue of teaching creationism, I do not believe that Gutmann has come close to meeting that test. What about a majority decision to teach creationism *only*. Here, Gutmann would argue, correctly in my view, that this deprives students of strong evidence bearing on one important kind of “good life,” a secular life. A democratic decision to teach a religiously inspired creation narrative in addition to Darwinian evolutionary theory may strike many as regrettable, but even Gutmann admits that democratic deliberation yields only legitimate, not necessarily correct decisions. “The best democratic bodies, like the best juries, will sometimes make mistakes, even when their decisions are not repressive or discriminatory” (DE, 96). Must a democratic citizen, then, be resigned to having her children and other children taught doctrines that are incorrect? I shall return to this question below.

LIBERAL THEORY

Most contemporary theorists consider themselves both democrats and liberals, but the two theories are clearly distinct. There are, to be sure, almost as many versions of liberalism as there are liberal theorists; even so, the core idea, that no citizen “use state power to impose one’s own way of life on others,”⁴ in William Galston’s words would find widespread agreement. It is useful to follow Galston in drawing a basic distinction between those liberals for whom individual autonomy is the predominant value and those for whom cultural diversity is. For the latter, even when cultural groups within a society are themselves illiberal, the broader community may not impose the value of individual autonomy upon them or their children. This suggests that the teaching of creationism ought to be considered in two different liberal contexts: in what Galston calls the “diversity state” whose highest value is securing a *modus vivendi* among diverse cultural groups and in the state pledged to promote the individual autonomy of all citizens. Galston’s diversity state, though it will require a commitment to the virtue of tolerance among all its citizens, might actually be better off without public schools, though (somewhat strangely), Galston never raises the possibility.

A fundamentalist group within the diversity state would, presumably, support its own schools and might teach creationism as the sole account of human origins or as one among several accounts. Galston admits that any liberal state will need to support a number of public purposes, among them the development of what he calls “social rationality” (the kind of understanding needed to participate in the society, economy, and polity).⁵ Pursuing this purpose allows “the state to intervene against

forms of education that are systematically disabling when judged against the norm.”⁶ It is possible to argue that some educational programs and institutions are “systematically disabling,” but if the commitment to diversity is to mean anything, there’s no reason to think fundamentalist Christian schools would be disabling in that sense. Adult fundamentalists, after all, are not known for their refusal to participate in politics or the economy. Even those that do, such as the Amish, receive Galston’s blessing. In his opinion, the case of *Yoder v. Wisconsin* was correctly decided by a Supreme Court that refused to compel Amish children to attend school beyond the eighth grade.

Now consider the liberal polity committed to the ideal of individual autonomy: For individual autonomy to be meaningful, children must be exposed to multiple points of view and multiple ways of living well. That does not mean, of course, that every fact or account needs to be countered by some alternative that challenges it. But where alternative accounts of human origins have been historically connected to different visions of the flourishing life, a plurality of accounts, not limited to the secular and the fundamentalist Christian, ought to be presented. Many liberals of secular bent have no difficulty with having the public school present an exclusively secular account, permitting parents who wish their children to be exposed to a religious account the option of either removing their children from public school or sending them to a supplementary school. I do not think that this is what someone committed to individual autonomy ought to support. She ought, instead, to support measures that would guarantee children of religious parents exposure to a secular version of creation and children of secular parents exposure to religious versions of creation. Indeed, it is not at all far-fetched to argue as Nord has that a liberal education, especially one committed to nurture of individual autonomy, may *not remain exclusively secular*.

The permissibility, to say nothing of the necessity of teaching religious views of human origins, has not been embraced by many liberals, even those ostensibly dedicated to according respect to diverse cultures consistent with maintaining a liberal polity. Consider, for a noteworthy example, Stephen Macedo’s discussion in his recent *Diversity and Distrust*. Macedo sees his own work as in large part drawing out the implications of John Rawls, especially those of his more recent *Political Liberalism*.

Rawls’s political liberalism starts with the conviction that reasonable people disagree deeply and permanently about their religious beliefs and philosophical ideals of life. The liberalism of public reason bids us to acknowledge that, given the difficult matters of judgment involved, people may reasonably disagree about the justifiability of even purportedly liberal ideals of life as a whole, such as Kantian autonomy or Millian individuality.⁷

One might think that upon such a foundation an argument advocating the teaching of *both* creationism and evolutionary theory would be erected, but this is not the case. The linchpin of the argument *against* teaching the two is based on Rawls and on Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s elaboration of the concept of “public reason.” The school, claims Macedo, echoing Gutmann and Thompson, must honor

relatively reliable methods of inquiry and avoid implausible assertions. It must make no appeal to

any authority that is impervious to critical assessment from a variety of reasonable points of view. For public power is held in common by us all, and we should exercise it together based on reasons and arguments we can all share in spite of our differences.⁸

To see where this argument leads, consider Macedo's criticism of Stephen Carter's position that both religious and secular versions of creation be taught in school:

Carter is simply being fair-minded in recognizing that creationists have as much claim to be accommodated as the favored constituencies of the political left. But why stop there? If creationism has an equal claim to legitimacy with mainstream science, then so presumably do voodoo and witchcraft. And what of the long tradition of "Christian Identity," according to which Jews and homosexuals are agents of Satan?...This radically pluralist march away from public reason is a decisive step *away* from liberalism.⁹

Although some may find this appeal to public reason convincing, I do not. There are two sets of issues that Macedo has failed to separate. First there are epistemological issues — whether a particular view depends on authority at some point, and if so, where; whether it is revisable, and if so on what basis. Second, is the issue of whether, *irrespective of its provenance*, a stance or doctrine might be incompatible with the respect for all humans necessary to sustain a liberal polity.

Now the first question is a very deep one that I can but touch on. Elsewhere, Macedo says of public reasons that "appeals to inner conviction or faith, special insight, secret information, or very difficult forms of reasoning, are ruled out."¹⁰ I do not know the extent to which Macedo has followed the debate between Darwinists and their critics, even those addressed to general audiences, but they appear to me to involve very difficult forms of reasoning, indeed. (See, for example, the 1996 debate between David Berlinski and his critics in *Commentary* in which Berlinski defends the skeptical view against many biologists and philosophers.¹¹) I daresay that very few citizens, even those with Ph.Ds in branches of science other than evolution could enumerate the evidence showing the course of evolution from inert matter to the first members of *homo sapiens*. Most of us, myself included, depend on authorities in the matter.

Macedo would no doubt claim that there is a great difference between a doctrine that is *in principle* capable of making the basis of its claims public and one that is not. That may be so, but I am not sure how Macedo *knows* that the evolutionary account of origins is such a doctrine. I have full confidence in those biologists and paleontologists who say the earth is more than 10,000 years old, but I have no evidence of my own on which to draw such an inference; indeed if the evidence were put before me, I would not know how to draw the appropriate inference. Others, of course, place their full confidence in the Hebrew or Christian scriptures.

Is there not a difference here, however? Consider two arguments Macedo might make: first, he might argue that despite our present limitations, both of us could be trained to understand and evaluate the evidence even if we cannot do so now. But why could not a fundamentalist theologian make a parallel claim, namely, that if I undertook the proper training, I would appreciate why the *Bible* contained the inerrant word of God? Granted the two kinds of training will differ substantially, but

in either case, I would maintain, *some* propositions will need to be taken as indisputable if the training is to get off the ground. Nor could Macedo claim that after biological training I would be bound to *accept* evolutionary theory, since there are at least a few respectable scientists with the requisite training who do not accept it.

Secondly, Macedo might argue that there is a big difference between me and the fundamentalist because I am open to revising my position in the light of reasonable evidence whereas the mind of the fundamentalist is closed, at least on the matter of human origins. I am not sure whether this is so; certainly neither of us looks for disconfirming evidence. Some fundamentalists may be immune to doubt and to questioning of their most basic beliefs — that the Christian Bible is the word of God, for example — but others experience nagging doubts. Some of these eventually break radically with their earlier beliefs and become converted to the secular world view. By the same token some secular folk experience their own crisis of “faith” and join fundamentalist movements, revising their beliefs accordingly.

Once we distinguish the second set of issues (exclusion on the basis of disrespect for some citizens) from the first (accessibility and epistemic warrant), we see that there is within liberal theory itself a perfectly reasonable basis for excluding “Christian Identity” theory, namely that holding it is incompatible with a universal respect necessary to the preservation of the liberal polity, itself. To be consistent here, liberals ought to argue for exclusion of the teaching of any view of human diversity which concluded that one or more segment of the citizenry were better (or worse) equipped for democratic deliberation than another *even* if that view were to become accepted by the *scientific* community. I am not sure liberals have faced up to this issue.

Now Macedo might argue that if I accept the standard that excludes any view disrespectful of other citizens, then I ought *not* to grant the Biblical account of origins access to the classroom because of the role and status it assigns women. Even were I to concede that the attitude of all fundamentalist religious groups to female equality is reprehensible (which I do not), the religious account of human origins no more *requires* the exclusion of women from the rights and obligations of citizenship than the secular account of human origins *requires* hastening the demise of the terminally ill in order to harvest their organs.

WHAT ROLE FOR TRUTH?

Though it is important for any version of liberal theory to provide a basis for excluding the teaching of Christian Identity or witchcraft, this does not solve all the problems raised by Macedo’s examples, for the principle of according all citizens respect does not throw up a net fine enough to exclude a variety of popular theories, doctrines, or practices that are (so far as I know) not simply without scientific support but condemned in no uncertain terms by the scientific community — astrology and voodoo, for example. Must liberal citizens be taught astrology or voodoo in public schools if parents demand it? Do children not have the right to avoid being exposed in public schools to doctrines that have long been debunked? Here we come back to the proper role of scientific expertise in educational decision-making, a question that arises within the context of both democratic and liberal political theory.

Gutmann is a theorist who, in fact, does countenance an independent role for the professional expertise of educators. In presenting the case for the Platonic rule by experts, a case she subsequently challenges and rejects, Gutmann nonetheless acknowledges that “Plato presents a forceful case for resting educational authority exclusively with a centralized state, a case grounded on the principle that knowledge should be translated into political power” (*DE*, 28). She claims, therefore, that neither democratic majorities nor parents exhaust the legitimate authorities over education. Their authority must be shared with that of “professional educators” (*DE*, 42). But what independent role does she see for educators, and how is that role justified?

We might conceive of their role as supporting a complementary division of labor between popular authority and expertise:

democratic governments perpetuating a common culture, teachers cultivating the capacity for critical reflection on that culture?...The professional responsibility of teachers is to uphold the principle of nonrepression by cultivating the capacity for democratic deliberation (*DE*, 76).

What does this imply? Were a community to manifest a monolithic vision of the good, it would be the teachers’ responsibility to “shed critical light” on that vision and to provide alternatives for students to explore (*Ibid.*). As Gutmann says, such a responsibility would require “biology teachers, for example, to resist communal pressures to teach creationism *instead* of evolution” (*Ibid.*, emphasis added). By parity of reasoning, I would say that the professional responsibility of teachers in a devoutly secular community would require biology teachers to resist communal pressures to teach evolution *alone*. As we know, that is *not* Gutmann’s view, but I see no basis within her theory to reject it. The point I wish to emphasize here is that in neither Macedo’s liberal theory nor in Gutmann’s democratic theory do notions of truth play an *independent* role.¹² Only in some version of a Platonic political theory that posits an objective truth accessible to rulers only will we find a basis on which professional experts may legitimately reject a demand by the citizenry to teach voodoo or astrology.

An objector will say: Is it not obvious that the truth of the claims put forward by adherents of such doctrines must be determined by *scientists* trained in judging the evidence bearing on those claims, and not by the citizenry through democratic deliberation? I believe the correct answer to this question is an unequivocal “yes,” but from the political-theoretical point of view, this result is far from decisive for the question at hand. For the question, recall, is *not* whether the deliberative, democratic process is an appropriate means of determining truths about the world, but whether it is the appropriate means for determining what children ought to be taught in school — subject of course to the proviso that the skills and dispositions needed for preservation of the polity not be jeopardized.

Let me add a word here about my understanding of scientific truth: I have assumed in my discussion a position some will find self-evident, others, preposterous at this late date, namely that there are objective truths about the influence of the stars (if any) on human affairs and that natural scientists are in the best position to determine these truths. Let us suppose that I am wrong about this, that astrology is

no more and no less a social construction than astronomy. If that is so, my position favoring the inclusion of creationism becomes that much *stronger*, not weaker. If the line between truth and falsity is blurred or eliminated, if all is a matter of power, then the only reason to exclude creationism is that its proponents do not have the power to enforce its inclusion. But then there really is no *reason* for its exclusion, unless one means by “reason” a causal factor that explains such a result.

I have been assuming throughout the discussion that a democratic majority may well reach a conclusions at variance with that of the scientific community. Neither Gutmann nor Macedo would be surprised at such a possibility, but it is worth reflecting on how, John Dewey, another theorist of democracy, would judge the discrepancy. Dewey, recall, perceived science and democracy to share common features: a commitment to open discussion and access to evidence, the absence of deference to those who happen to hold power, a fair weighing of evidence by all participants, a willingness to revise one’s hypotheses after experiencing consequences, and so on. Almost a hundred years ago, Dewey said, “Scientific method is not just a method which it has been found profitable.... It represents the only method of thinking that has proved fruitful in any subject — that is what we mean when we call it scientific.”¹³ Earlier in the same essay Dewey said that when they leave school, students “should go forth with a lively interest in the ways in which knowledge is imposed and a marked distaste for all conclusions reached in disharmony with the methods of scientific inquiry.”¹⁴

Dewey would no doubt be disheartened by the tenacious resistance of segments of the population to the ethos and verdicts of secular science. Dewey would probably agree with Gutmann in her claim that “secular standards are both a fairer and a firmer basis for peacefully reconciling our differences.” What we in hindsight can, I think, agree on is that firm and fair are not the same thing and do not always pull in the same direction. I think it is pretty clear that secular standards are not fairer if by that one means standards that are impartial among adherents of diverse worldviews. Liberal pluralists must recognize that mature, educated citizens may and do disagree not only on which way the evidence points, but on *what kind* of evidence is relevant to settling a dispute. If liberal democracy is based on a notion of respect for all citizens, it cannot adopt standards that are acknowledged by only some citizens, even when those constitute a majority.

If I am correct, citizens in a liberal, democratic polity need to uphold something like the following general stance: If after appropriate deliberation, a majority of citizens favors inclusion in the curriculum of some doctrine that scientific experts find incredible; and if that doctrine a. neither evinces nor promotes disrespect for individuals or groups, and b. is intended as *an addition* to rather than a replacement for a more scientifically credible alternative, then it ought to be included. (Note that this stance does not depend on a claim of parental rights, only on the idea that in a liberal democracy, experts cannot override the will of the majority.)

1. Edward Wyatt, “Charter School to Raise Topic of Creationism,” *New York Times*, 8 February 2000, section B1, 18.

2. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 44. This text will be cited as *DE* for all subsequent references.
3. It may be that fundamentalists apply inconsistent standards, but then, it may be that secularists are less consistent than they think they are. Many might make decisions at certain important points in their lives, for example, which they would acknowledge are irrational by secular standards.
4. William Galston, "Two Concepts of Liberalism," *Ethics* 105 (April 1995): 524.
5. *Ibid.*, 525.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 169.
8. *Ibid.*, 172.
9. *Ibid.*, 225.
10. Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 46.
11. David Berlinski, "The Deniable Darwin," *Commentary* 102, no. 3 (June 1996): 19-29 and David Berlinski, "Denying Darwin: David Berlinski and Critics," *Commentary* 102, no. 4 (September 1996): 4-39.
12. Of course reason does have a special role in most theories of liberalism and Macedo might argue that once the proper norms of reasoning are inculcated, students exposed to both creationism and evolutionary theory will reject the former. This may well be the case; it is an empirical question.
13. John Dewey, "Science as Subject-Matter and as Method," in *John Dewey on Education*, ed. Reginald D. Archambault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 191.
14. *Ibid.*, 190.