

Thinking of Civic Education in Korea: The Opposite Spillover Problem of Liberalism

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INTRODUCTION

Civic education has recently been a hot issue in educational thought. Indeed, our conception of an educated person is closely related with the conception of a good citizen. For ancient Greeks the good life could not be imagined without involving social relations and institutions. Aristotle's definition of man as "an animal that is by nature political," originally meant that "man is a creature by nature adapted for life in a polis, the city-state."¹ Likewise Yael Tamir points out,

political philosophy and the philosophy of education were born together in Plato's *Republic*, and...their fates have remained entwined. Plato held...that the inculcation of civic virtue is essential to a just and harmonious political order, and the ensuing tradition has largely accepted this idea, especially with respect to democracies.²

Thus Amy Gutmann argues, "political education — the cultivation of the virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation — has moral primacy over other purposes of public education in a democratic society."³

What then is a desirable civic education?⁴ In this article I approach civic education by asking whether it could be free from the cultures of societies. In particular I am interested in cultural influences on civic education in countries where liberal democracy is pursued.⁵ First, let's think about societies where liberal democracy is full-blown as in America. Can a civic education based on political liberalism be independent of its background cultures in such societies? In principle it should be so because political liberalism presumes value-neutrality, "neutrality of aim," doing nothing intentionally to favor any particular comprehensive view. However, it is not so in practice. John Rawls says, "Neutrality of effect or influence political liberalism abandons as impracticable."⁶

In his book, *Liberalism Beyond Justice*, John Tomasi interestingly explains these cultural influences in terms of "the spillover of potentially homogenizing effects of liberal doctrine and practice from public to nonpublic spheres."⁷ According to Tomasi, "the spillover problem" refers to the phenomenon that "the ethical background culture," which is presupposed by the public norms, unintentionally affects people's nonpublic comprehensive views. For example, the concept of an autonomous person unintentionally creeps into people's shaping of personality in nonpublic domains although their comprehensive views of life emphasize communitarian virtues more. So Tomasi worries that such a spillover might erode various nonpublic views in a society (*LBJ*, 102).⁸ In this respect, we can say that a liberal society is not entirely free from influencing its background cultures.

Now we can think of some East Asian countries that are becoming liberal democratic societies in the process of modernization. Such societies frequently have communitarian traditions, which emphasize "we-feeling" and caring among their

members. These communitarian traditions, however, are not so friendly to the liberal norms. In fact, in Korea we can observe the opposite spillover phenomena from the one emphasized by Tomasi. Koreans are accustomed to caring for the community with strong we-feeling for whatever groups they belong to. So without intentional educational efforts, people naturally transfer their we-feeling, which might be formed in the family and kinship groups, to any community to which they belong, whether it is a school, a company, a church, or even a nation. People tend to put more emphasis on kinship, regional relationship, academic relationship, or religious relationship, than to behaving justly and fairly to everyone in the public sphere. People sometimes even behave according to nonpublic norms in a public sphere. Nonpublic norms frequently trump the public norms in the public sphere. This tendency, called “personal connectionism,” is criticized as a social evil that hinders the development of modern liberal society.⁹

Here we observe the opposite spillover problem caused by the background cultures of the society, namely, a “spillover” from the nonpublic to the public sphere. We may ask whether the American mode of civic education can be directly applied to Korean civic education. We might need different approaches to civic education depending on the background cultures of a society. For example, American civic education may need to prevent the spillover from the public to nonpublic spheres, while Korean civic education may need to prevent the spillover from the nonpublic norms to the public domain, and emphasize teaching public norms and rights talk. Thus we have some questions: How should the cultural backgrounds of a society be considered in liberal civic education? With these opposite spillover phenomena at hand, how can we approach civic education in Korea? How can the opposite spillover phenomena help us to rethink the problems of civic education? In order to prevent the negative spillover phenomena what do we have to do in civic education? I expect that a different perspective could give us new insights on civic education in general.

In this paper, I am going to think of civic education by comparing the different spillover problems in America and in Korea, and suggest some implications for civic education. First, I will present Tomasi’s analysis of the spillover problem in liberal society. Second, I will illustrate the opposite spillover phenomena in Korea. Third, I will examine whether Tomasi’s conception of civic education is tenable in Korea, and how we can consider the cultural factor in civic education. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting some implications of the spillover problem for civic education in general.

TOMASI’S ANALYSIS OF THE SPILLOVER PROBLEM

Liberalism pursues a society in which all people are respected as free and equal citizens and a reasonable degree of pluralism is protected by some public conception of justice. However, liberalism has been criticized for defeating this aim. Rawls describes this criticism of liberalism as follows: “It is a long-standing objection to liberalism that it is hostile to certain ways of life and biased in favor of others, or that it favors the values of autonomy and individuality and opposes those of community and of associational allegiance.”¹⁰ Rawls replies to this objection in the following

way: The principles of liberal political theory indeed permit only reasonable comprehensive views and ways of life, discouraging unreasonable ones. Here what is important is the way the society encourages or discourages certain comprehensive doctrines, that is, whether it acts justly or not. Liberalism supports the just political regime that treats all comprehensive views equally so long as they are reasonable. Rawls defends his position in terms of political liberalism, distinguishing it from ethical liberalism. While ethical liberalism advocates the ideal of moral personality of autonomy or individuality, political liberalism does not promote these ideals as a comprehensive way of life.

Is Rawls's political liberalism really successful in accomplishing the ideal of respecting reasonable pluralism? I hope to show that it is not by giving the example of religious education. On the one hand, many countries forbid teaching religion in public schools in order to respect pluralism especially among different religions. However the result is not entirely neutral: It might be neutral between religions, but it is not so between religious and secular perspectives. Public schools teach students secular perspectives and attitudes, so that forbidding religious education indirectly imbues students with the false idea that religion is something unimportant or shameful that should be hidden in the private space.

On the other hand, even though religions are discussed in classrooms due to the recent movement of multiculturalism, the way they are taught could bring negative results too. Usually the main purpose of religious education is limited to introducing different religions from an objective and critical viewpoint; so that students may later choose any religion as theirs and they may deal with religious issues more effectively when necessary. This critical and detached approach to religion brings up cynical or skeptical attitudes to religion such that all religions have the same values and that mine is only one among them. Furthermore, teaching religion is argued to include one's freedom of exit especially for illiberal groups.¹¹ As this example shows, although political liberals claim neutrality of aim, the results are not neutral, even with respect to religious views that fall within the domain of the "reasonable."

We can understand Tomasi's spillover problem in this context. Tomasi strongly argues that political liberalism is not neutral in its effects. He illustrates his point with the phenomena of cultural erosions. He distinguishes four types of people. The A-people affirm the values of autonomy and individuality as principles governing their lives. These people are safe from erosion because their ideals correspond to the values embedded in liberalism. The D-people who affirm comprehensive values that conflict with the core values of political liberalism are rejected or discouraged in the society. The B-people affirm the liberal idea that people are politically free and equal beings, but they do not have their own deep consistent comprehensive views in their nonpublic lives. They are wandering among various values. The C-people affirm the same liberal values as the B-people, but they have firmer traditional doctrines in their lives. However, the comprehensive views of these two groups of people (the B and C people), which are reasonable from a political perspective, erode over time, Tomasi argues (*LBJ*, 17-22).

Why do the admissible views of these two groups erode in a liberal society that believes in pluralism? Tomasi argues that this is due to what he calls the *ethical background culture*. He explains:

Political liberals are right to reject neutrality of effect as impracticable. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine any set of norms that succeeded in binding people together into a polity that could be neutral in this sense. Political arrangements intimately affect people's life prospects and thus shape their ethical orientations. These effects typically extend well beyond the formal requirements of citizens' allegiance to the political institutions of their society, influencing the wider culture of the society as a whole....Let's call the wide social culture generated by any regime's public norms the *ethical background culture* of that regime. An ethical background culture provides a kind of map of meaning to citizens of each regime type. This map influences the personal values, the basic ways of world perception, of the people making their lives there (*LBJ*, 10-11).

With this concept of the ethical background culture, Tomasi explains the spillover problem. Political liberalism has its own ethical background culture, and this background culture unintentionally affects people's comprehensive values in their nonpublic lives. Tomasi calls this phenomenon the spillover of the public norms to the nonpublic domain. This spillover phenomenon occurs unintentionally and influentially. Rawls says: "The institutions of the basic structure have deep and long-term social effects and in fundamental ways shape citizens' character and aims, the kinds of persons they are and aspire to be."¹² Tomasi warns this is the reason why the society should be just: "Political norms, even gently and indirectly, cannot help but shape the character of people in their own image. Political institutions have a wider educative function. Society is itself a kind of schoolhouse" (*LBJ*, 10-11).

What are the features of the background ethical culture of political liberalism? The components of the ethical culture of political liberalism include accepting the principles of political liberalism, appreciating the concept of the person as free and equal with respect to rights, and accepting the corresponding concept of society. For their public interactions people use public reason, rights talk, and legal-discourse (*LBJ*, 13). Tomasi says, "Michael Sandel, for example, hit a resonant chord when he worried about the way a quasi-legal discourse has come to define the terms of American interpersonal life" (*LBJ*, 27-28). The threat of spillover of rights-based liberal norms to the nonpublic domain may alienate and erode even admissible comprehensive views. This is the negative aspect of liberalism. Thus Tomasi raises the issue:

If liberals cannot prevent the spillover of potentially homogenizing effects of liberal doctrine and practice from public to nonpublic spheres, how accommodating of ethical diversity can a political liberal regime actually be?...To what degree can a political liberal society be a home to the people it was formally designed to include?" (*LBJ*, 16).

THE OPPOSITE SPILLOVER PHENOMENA IN KOREA

We have examined Tomasi's worries about the spillover threat of the public norms of justice to the nonpublic domain. Does the spillover of the justice-based thinking to the nonpublic sphere occur in any society where liberalism is pursued? If so, it is better to prevent in advance the negative spillover phenomena Tomasi warns us about, in the process of developing liberal democracy. However, spillover phenomena may not be so simple. They could appear in various ways according to

the norms of different cultures. In this section let's think about the opposite spillover phenomena in Korea.

Korea strives to be a liberal democratic society. It is a racially homogeneous unitary country, which has a communitarian tradition with strong we-feeling. Unlike America, which is based on the tradition of liberalism and individualism that takes the principles of justice and rights talk for granted, Korean people hesitate to use legal or rights talk. Even though Koreans know that they have "rights" to do something or that they can legally solve some problems, people usually do not think or behave in that way. Koreans generally value and feel more comfortable with intimate relationship talk or considering the internal goods of their communities. From this tendency Koreans have an opposite problem of "personal connectionism," a way of action that follows the nonpublic norms of personal relationships in the public domain, creating an opposite spillover of the nonpublic norms to the public domain.

Let me illustrate this point with some examples related to schooling. When students face some problems in school such as severe corporal punishment, sexual harassment, school violence, being left out by other students, problems of teaching methods, or curriculum issues, students and their parents usually do not bring the case to the court except for some explicitly criminal cases. Problems are rather dealt with inside the school according to the norms of the school community. If a parent brings a *Mozert*-like case to the court in Korea, the student would run the risk of being driven out of the school.¹³ Of course, such a lawsuit is not legally prohibited, but culturally, people hesitate to solve the problem outside of the community, especially in the legal court. Resorting to the legal court is the last method to be used, and implies breaking the relationship to the community.

Recently a high school student wrestler in Korea died because of severe diet and weight control together with extremely severe training.¹⁴ Americans might bring this case to the court, asking who is responsible for it, what is the role of the school in managing student athletes, to what extent are the coach and the trainer responsible for it, and so forth. The results of the court decision would serve as a guideline in teaching and managing student athletes in the future. However, the reaction of the Korean parents of the wrestler was different. They did not bring the case to the court although they got the help of a lawyer. Instead they asked the school for clarification of the cause of death; they requested sincere apologies of the responsible parties including the school, the trainer and the coach; and they asked for appropriate compensation for their son's death. If everything goes smoothly and consensus is arrived at, then everything is decided within the school community, never being brought to the outside court. This is the general way to solve problems in Korea. Koreans appeal more to the authority of community norms, intimate relationships among members, and the good and the welfare of the whole community and its members, than to individual rights and justice.

Now let me push the point further. Any society needs the public norms of justice in order to sustain itself. However the mechanism of justifying the public norms seems to vary according to the culture. In Korea the public norms of justice seem to

be justified in terms of caring and national feeling. That is to say, the reason why one follows the principles of justice in Korea seems to be because it is good for 'our whole nation' rather than because one is a free and equal individual.

Let me give some examples. Although Korea is homogeneous in race, it is multicultural and heterogeneous with respect to religion. The various religious groups in Korea get along well with each other without severe conflicts. It may not be simply because the constitution of Korea guarantees freedom of religion. Other countries troubled with severe religious conflicts may have the same legislation. One hypothesis is this: It may be because the umbrella concept of "race" absorbs other differences and conflicts among people. When unification between South and North Korea is discussed, Koreans appeal to racial feeling. Koreans think that differences of ideologies and political regimes could be and should be overcome under the name of unitary racial identity. Here we observe the opposite spillover of the nonpublic norms to the public domain, which is influenced by Korean background cultures. The spillover could be either positive, such as justifying the public norms of justice, or negative such as personal connectionism, for developing a democratic society.

IS TOMASI'S CONCEPTION OF CIVIC EDUCATION TENABLE IN KOREA?

We have examined Tomasi's analysis of the spillover problem in the United States and the opposite spillover phenomena in Korea. Do the opposite spillover phenomena in Korea make Tomasi's analysis of the spillover problem untenable? I do not think the opposite case nullifies his whole analysis, but it reveals the neglected factor in his analysis. Tomasi's analysis of the spillover of the public norms to nonpublic domains is not context-free. His analysis assumes certain background cultures of a society; it assumes a society where liberal norms and the ideal of individualism are rooted as a way of life. So we can criticize that Tomasi's analysis does not consider cultural backgrounds of societies.

Against this criticism, one may retort that of course Tomasi considers the cultural factor by pointing out the "ethical background culture." Tomasi's concept of "ethical background culture" is indeed a cultural factor. But it is different from what I mean by "the background cultures of societies." Tomasi's concept refers only to ethical norms embedded in the principles of justice. It is an ethical counterpart of the principles of political liberalism. The background cultures of societies have a broad meaning, which subsumes diverse domains of a society including the political domain as one part.

Then what kind of influence does Tomasi's neglect of the broad background cultures of societies have on his conception of civic education? For solving the spillover problem, Tomasi suggests that civic education has to diminish the spillover of public values to the nonpublic domain; it has to deal with the interface problem, that is, balancing the public and the nonpublic spheres, especially by strengthening the teaching of nonpublic norms; it has to teach more than the skills and attitudes for political liberal society. Rather it has to prepare a student "to play her socially constructive role in making her society flourish as the type of society it is" (*LBJ*, 86).¹⁵ (Her "society" here refers to her own group's way of life, not to the society as a whole.)

Is Tomasi's conception of civic education tenable in Korea? Tomasi's suggestion of civic education could not be applied directly to Korea. In Korea to worry about the spillover of the public values to the nonpublic domain appears too hasty. And to strengthen merely the nonpublic norms is likely to aggravate personal connectionism. Then do we have to deny Tomasi's whole project on civic education? I do not think so. I think that Tomasi's basic framework of the argument, such as the spillover problem, the interface problem, and the substantive conception of citizens, can be accepted. What is necessary is to adapt them in appropriate forms by considering the background cultures of societies. Then how can we take into account the cultural factor in Korean civic education? I will suggest two ways.

On the one hand, the cultural background should be recognized and used as a starting point in civic education. For example, communitarian we-feeling and racial spirit could be used pedagogically as a platform for justifying and teaching the principles of justice. On the other hand, however, civic education should not stop at the present stage. It should go beyond the present culture in terms of bringing up good citizens and developing a good society. Korean civic education should emphasize what it lacks. First, it needs to emphasize respecting diverse cultures and diverse races. Nowadays respecting other cultures or foreigners has become an issue because of globalization and the influx of foreign workers. Thus, teaching how to balance between racial spirit and cosmopolitanism should be a task of civic education. Second, it also needs to emphasize respecting persons as free and equal beings. Improving women's status in a family and in a society, and amending unequal clauses in the family law has been an issue in Korea. For this the concept of the autonomous person needs to be taught in a balanced way with the traditional concept of the embedded person. However, in the process of imparting political virtues, Korean civic education should be ready for the danger Tomasi insinuates such that political liberalism might well erode the 'we-feeling' Koreans now share. Korean civic education has to be cautious of preserving positive background cultures of the society such as we-feeling as a source of nonpublic values.

CONCLUSION: SUGGESTIONS ON CIVIC EDUCATION

I have examined Tomasi's spillover problem and the opposite spillover phenomena in Korea. From this discussion I pointed out that the spillover phenomena in liberalism vary with cultures, and that Tomasi ignored this cultural factor in his analysis. I also argued that Tomasi's conception of civic education could not apply directly to Korean civic education, and that it should be adapted by considering the cultural factor. Thus I suggested both using cultural features as a starting point, and overcoming the present culture by supplementing what is lacking in the culture with liberal democratic values. Although I criticized Tomasi's neglect of the cultural factor in the spillover problem, I agree to his spillover problem itself. Indeed, this problem helps us to see some hidden tasks of civic education, which need further study. I will suggest some of these tasks of civic education.

First, civic education has a task to develop bilingualism or multilingualism, teaching the kinds of languages or norms used in different domains — whether domains are two between the public and the nonpublic as Tomasi assumes, or many by dividing the nonpublic into several concrete domains.¹⁶ The spillover problem

occurs because the norms and languages of different domains are not solidly established. So civic education should teach the fact that there exist different domains and languages. In this process, we need to emphasize appreciating and respecting diverse domains equally.

Second, teaching different languages of different domains requires teaching the ability of interfacing among different domains. The interface problem in civic education is a complicated issue. Students have to learn how to balance between the public norms and the nonpublic norms; they have to learn how to justify or criticize the public norms with their nonpublic norms, and vice versa.

Third, in relation to the interface problem, we need to add teaching the language shifting ability, which is not directly mentioned by Tomasi. Different domains do not necessarily mean different spaces. For example, in a family or in a religious sect that is regarded as a nonpublic domain with a nonpublic language, we need to use the public language such as the right of exit or the right to equal treatment as well. Thus students need to learn how to judge the appropriate situation to use proper languages, and how to shift them. This is one important way to prevent the negative spillover problem.

Fourth, though Tomasi describes the spillover problem negatively, it is not necessarily negative by itself. The spillover phenomenon could be used positively. For example, on the one hand, we observe positive spillover phenomenon such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s use of the language of Christianity for addressing social wrongdoings in the public sphere. In this case the values of the religion in the nonpublic domain were spilled over to the public domain. On the other hand, the public norms of equality and freedom could challenge bad practices in a family or in a church. That could be a positive spillover of the public norms to the nonpublic domain.

Metaphorically speaking, the spillover phenomenon is like an osmotic action, in which stronger values give influences to weaker ones. Thus we need to analyze power dynamics of spillovers, and control them in a balanced way if societies are to flourish. We need to figure out whether the values involved promote the flourishing of human beings. If certain values are very strong but extremely harmful to the flourishing of human beings such as supporting slavery, then there should be some screening to protect the good but weaker values whether the values are public or nonpublic ones.

In dealing with the above tasks of civic education, we need to consider the cultural factor we have examined in this paper. When we teach different languages of different domains, we have to figure out what languages need more emphasis in civic education and how each language can be understood and justified pedagogically in light of the background cultures of a society. Or when we teach the interfacing ability or the language shifting ability, we need to analyze dynamics of the spillover phenomena in light of the cultures of the society, and construct appropriate methods of teaching for civic education. This paper rather expands the questions about civic education on the basis of the cultural factor, than giving any answers. The questions of civic education suggested here need further study.¹⁷

1. Renford Bambrough, *The Philosophy of Aristotle* (New York: The New American Library, 1963), 379.
2. Yael Tamir, "Education and the Politics of Identity," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randal Curren (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 501.
3. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, with a new preface and epilogue (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 287.
- 4 I believe that the concept of "civic education" should be distinguished from "public education" or "political education." Civic education could be understood to have a broad meaning that deals with various domains of society, while political education is limited to teaching political principles, norms, virtues, attitudes and skills. The spillover phenomena of liberalism that I am going to deal with in this paper may belong to political education in the strict sense. However, I will use the term "civic education" instead of "political education" because the issue of the spillover problem and cultural influence on it can be applied to education of other domains of a society and political education is one example of it.
5. We can call the upbringing of its citizens in a despotic country 'civic education' in a descriptive sense. But I do not deal with the problem of bad civic education here.
6. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 193-94.
7. John Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice: Citizens, Society, and the Boundaries of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 16. This book will be cited as *LBJ* in the text for all subsequent references.
8. Since such spillovers do in fact occur, Tomasi argues that it is incumbent on political liberalism to create ways of minimizing those effects such as "the tax flattening principle."
9. Kyung-Sik Hwang, "Liberalism and Communitarianism," in *Trends of Social Philosophies 2*, ed. Jae-Ki Kim et al. (Seoul, Korea: Mineumsa, 1993), 421-22 (published in Korean.)
10. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 153.
11. More broadly, the advocates of multiculturalism argue, "while multicultural education should enable students to understand and appreciate their own ethnic identities, it should also enable them to *break free* from these identities, should they so choose"; National Council for the Social Studies, "Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education," *Social Education* 55 (1992), 278, quoted from Robert K. Fullinwider, "Multicultural Education," in Curren, *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, 494.
12. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 68.
13. *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education* is a case filed by some fundamentalist Christian Families against the school board, saying that forcing the students to read the textbooks that include religiously unacceptable contents is a violation of their rights to the free exercise of religion.
14. Available at: <kr.dailynews.yahoo.com/headlines/so/20031012/hankook/hk2003101284785.html>.
15. Tomasi as a political philosopher is more concerned with political theory than civic education. Indeed he suggests expanding the boundary of liberal political theorizing, providing the substantive ideal of citizen, and supplementing the theory of justice with the tax-flattening principle. But I do not deal with his whole political theories here. I rather limit my concern to the spillover problem and its implications on civic education.
16. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983) and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 2d ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 38-39 may insinuate its possibility.
17. I give thanks to Emily Robertson, Barbara Applebaum, and Kenneth A. Strike for their constructive comments on this paper.