

Citizenship Education and the Philosophy of Affirmation: A Study in the Formation of a Liberal Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Shelley Burt has written that autonomy based on the “free choice” or consumerist model of liberalism is inherently hostile to comprehensive educations, those most commonly attributed to religious and/or cultural traditions. In this essay I draw on Burt’s analysis to argue that an affirmative rather than challenging approach to value systems that are based on inherited comprehensive conceptions of the good is more effective for cultivating the characteristics of the liberal-democratic citizen.

THE CONSUMERIST LIBERAL MODEL

Consumerist liberals often consider tradition as a stumbling block to moral education. Although tradition is widely acknowledged as the basis for children’s initial moral roles and commitments,¹ moral education must sooner or later foster a capacity to distance oneself from these traditional commitments in order to assess their real worth. The longer one waits to develop this capacity, the greater the risk of allowing traditional commitments to become entrenched, and hence permanently immune to reflection.

A consumerist model to moral or citizenship education for autonomy purports to provide children with the cognitive capacities they need to reflectively distinguish and select between those aspects of their tradition that are genuinely valuable or at least benign from some particular perspective (for instance, from the life of a good citizen or a good person), on the one hand, and from those aspects of their tradition which obstruct or undermine such a life, such as close-mindedness or intolerance. By distancing oneself from specific traditional values, roles, or commitments, children are supposed to be able to determine objectively the relative worth that those commitments hold for them. Those that lack worth must be discarded and, if necessary, replaced by more worthy commitments.

My claim in this essay is that a moral education based on this conception of autonomy leaves students without any basis for making the crucial objective distinction between competing values, aggravating in the process a divisiveness that is derived from the supposed incompatibility of liberal (rationality-based) and nonliberal (tradition-based) values that are evaluated. If there were some morally legitimate alternative basis for moral reflection then liberal consumerists could recommend that moral education should reject an upbringing in tradition altogether. That way, moral education could proceed at the outset from the morally preferable basis, and traditional values and commitments could be objectively evaluated (from a distance, as it were) from that moral point of view. But no such independent values seem forthcoming or even possible. I argue that there is no standard for moral educators and their students in citizenship education by which to judge what aspects of their traditions need to be scrutinized and discarded and what aspects need to be

integrated or accepted as worthy of dedication into the morally autonomous reflective and deliberative process, particularly because in the act of challenging tradition, the values prescribed in the challenging are also often present in the tradition. This seems obviously incoherent. I recommend as a remedy to this unstructured process a more affirmative approach that deemphasizes above all the challenging aspect of autonomy demanded by consumerist liberals, while at the same time acknowledging an effective and coherent standard of acceptance and affirmation.

THE PITFALLS OF OBJECTIVITY

Burt targets Eamonn Callan as perpetuating the autonomy demanded by liberal theorists: autonomy based on the “consumerist menu” metaphor, where citizens are encouraged to select values and virtues based on which is “the most attractive item on a spiritual menu of possibilities.” Burt accuses Callan of representing the autonomous individual as “one who has distanced himself sufficiently from his parents’ and community’s values to see them not as heritage or birthright but as one of many possible ends awaiting his selection (or rejection) as a thoughtful adult.” In other words, this view is grounded in the belief that children select rather than accept the values and principles that govern their lives. According to Burt this represents a narrow conception of autonomy, and she recommends that we reconceptualize the autonomous individual as one who has developed the capacity to exercise independent thought and action in regard to the acceptance of their own inherited value system. This reconceptualization denies the possibility of objective evaluation from a distance and avoids the pitfalls of determining a separate set of values against which such an evaluation is measured.²

Communitarian critics of classical and contemporary liberalism have consistently outlined the pitfalls of objectivity; this critique, perhaps best known in the works of Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre, developed at least in part out of the avalanche of analysis and dialogue that emerged from the influential publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*.³ While this great work rejuvenated an interest in moral theory and the concept of justice as inherited from the Enlightenment, it also met with criticism from theorists such as Sandel who accused Rawls of perpetuating an independent choice model of moral selfhood that presumed the ability of the self to become “unencumbered.” This is similar to Burt’s criticisms of Callan’s overemphasis on selection as a basis for autonomy, particularly when this selection takes the form of a challenging approach to inherited conceptions of the good life, as reflected in religious upbringings, for example. The idea that the self can objectively select between varying and even contradictory comprehensive conceptions of the good — the basis of the consumerist model — is, for Burt, unpersuasive. As an example of the inadequacy of this demand for autonomy Burt refers to her own children who, brought up in a household that values women’s equality, could not realistically consider adopting the lives of veiled Muslim women living in London. Being a veiled Muslim woman, in other words, seems fundamentally incompatible with who these Westernized women are. The fallacy of objectivity undermines the consumerist strategy.

Moreover, Burt contends that the common belief that tradition-based value systems such as those linked to metaphysical preconceptions need to be challenged to expose their intransigence is based on the misassumption that religious or cultural educations based on comprehensive conceptions of the good consistently claim that their values and ways of life represent the ultimate and absolute values of all humanity. I agree with Burt that this claim would certainly be an obstacle to any open-minded approach to pluralistic dialogue, and would need to be challenged, but while it is certainly true of some fundamentalist religious sects, it cannot be applied to all comprehensive traditions. As an example, Burt refers to Hasidic Jews who “do not raise their children to understand their faith as ‘the locus of meaning and fulfillment for human beings always and everywhere.’” Rather their Jewish faith is presented to them “as the right way to live *their* spiritual life, because of who they are, how their parents grew up, what their grandparents did, etc.” Individuals who accept and cultivate this sort of relationship act autonomously “when they reason responsibly and critically about what it means to be the sort of person characterized by the ends they accept as given.” Thus the assumption that tradition-based comprehensive educations are incompatible with liberal educations dedicated to cultivating autonomous reflection is based on extreme versions of fundamentalism; this alienates those dedicated to comprehensive conceptions of the good and who wish to participate in the democratic project by forcing them to challenge or distance themselves from their “illiberal” preconceptions. The assumption that the very values that provide a basis for this challenge — such as tolerance and discursiveness — do not exist in the value system being challenged is perilously misconstrued.⁴

Yet suspicion regarding compatibility still persists because of the emphasis consumerist liberals place on the free choice model of autonomy that perpetuates the possibility of the unencumbered self, and further, it persists in relation to “the characterization of what comprehensive conceptions of the good life point toward.”⁵ This latter suspicion again involves the misconception that those dedicated to comprehensive traditions or belief systems understand their faith as the locus of meaning and fulfillment for people everywhere. This is often not the case, and basing a challenge to tradition on this misconception of certain faith-based belief systems initiates a misguided and arrogant attack on personal identity as tied to tradition.

In response Burt commonsensically recognizes a compatibility between the conception of autonomy as independent thought and action demanded by liberals and the autonomy nurtured in more benign forms of comprehensive educations. The reality is that the continued perpetuation of the challenging aspect of liberalism based on the consumerist model is far too divisive. Burt concludes that we would do better to think of an education for autonomy as “equipping children with the cognitive and emotional tools with which to sort out what it means to live well, given who they are.”⁶ These tools can easily be found within as well as outside the tradition.

To sum up, the basis for the kind of consumerist liberal autonomy that Burt sees as unpersuasive is: “no critical comparison; no autonomy.” Burt’s evaluation rests on Callan’s work, which she sees as requiring that “children who attend public schools receive educations which challenge rather than affirm their parents’ values

and ways of life, and that such education is necessary to ensure their autonomy.” Burt views such a claim, based on the menu metaphor, as “astonishingly arrogant,” and one that is rarely applied to the mainstream secular consumerist culture. Furthermore, Burt asks why such engagement with other ways of life is deemed so essential. Educations committed to comprehensive conceptions of the good life can expose students not only to the different ways in which people choose to live their lives, but just as effectively expose them to “different ways in which persons committed to similar understandings of the good life or similar cultural identities interpreted these ends.” This more affirmative approach to comprehensive conceptions of the good not only avoids the pitfalls of objectivity that lead to divisiveness, it also properly looks to tradition itself as furnishing liberal conceptions of justice with the appropriate amount of care.⁷

LIBERALISM, EVALUATOR OR GATEWAY?

Callan readily acknowledges that relying on justice without care as an approach to moral education perpetuates a remedial attitude towards caring. Callan observes that an education steeped in an ethic of care is often needed to “remedy the frailties of justice.”⁸ Furthermore, caring is “necessary to buttress respect for rights against the pressure of opposing motives in public life.”⁹ In other words, the often-perceived disconnected voice of justice needs to be combined with a different voice in order for pluralistic social dialogue to be effective. In reality, justice without care is cold and inhuman, certainly an unrealistic and detached view of human interaction upon which to base an education for future citizenship. Conversely, emotional attachment to tradition, without the reflective scrutiny and discursive character of justice, creates a close-mindedness or even hostility toward contrary value systems. My argument is that, as Callan points out, tradition sets the groundwork for the type of caring that supports liberal conceptions of justice. A problem arises when we adopt the consumerist liberal framework as a basis for an autonomy-centered education as outlined by Burt. While liberalism serves as a reminder of the principles of justice that citizens need to cultivate in order to function in liberal-democratic societies, the source of the care which remedies this frail or cold conception of justice can be effectively developed from the traditions for which liberalism provides a social forum and union for dialogue based on justice. Otherwise, keeping in mind the challenging approach to tradition as a basis for autonomy, it seems that the consumerist liberal is forced to cultivate alternative principles which support an ethic of care from liberalism itself, and use these principles and values to challenge the tradition as objective evaluators. The assumption that the values or virtues that act as the basis of this challenge and evaluation do not exist to be affirmed in the tradition itself is, as Burt observed, an astonishingly arrogant claim and a roadblock to effective, careful dialogue.

Despite Callan’s recognition of the fruitfulness of the kind of care that is cultivated and nurtured most commonly through a dedication to value systems identified and internalized through exposure to inherited tradition, he elsewhere¹⁰ argues that all traditions must face critical scrutiny if they are to have hope of survival; and why not? Who wouldn’t want to strengthen their belief by testing the

validity and practicality of the virtues it expounds and defends? But the question remains of what are the values or standards that Callan appeals to as a basis for this critical scrutiny or downright challenge to tradition. As Burt observed, any claim that the values that guide liberalism are exclusive only to liberalism is extremely arrogant. If the main virtues or principles of a liberal education serve to create a gateway to establish a forum for traditions, than this scrutiny cannot take the form of a test that determines qualification for dialogue. It must serve rather to affirm the existence within the particular tradition of similar pervasive values upon which a dialogue can be initiated and constructed. As Amy Gutmann observed: "The potential of communitarianism lies, I think, in indicating the ways in which we can strive to realize not only justice but community through the many social unions of which the liberal state is the super social union."¹¹ The liberal state as the super social union acts therefore as a gateway for, as opposed to an independent evaluator of, the pluralistic traditions that pervade contemporary society.

The question of whether or not values conducive to civil public discourse can be found to exist and affirmed in most, if not all, religious and cultural traditions seems ridiculous to me, although an exhaustive study and identification of these common values and virtues is lacking. The question that now remains is the following: can liberalism provide, as an independent value system, the requisite care to remedy the frailties of justice if it is determined to challenge the tradition that fosters this care? My answer is no, for the only appeal would be a rationalist one, but if justice that is cold and inhuman needs care as a buttress, the qualities that need to be cultivated must be recognized as more often than not inextricably linked to metaphysical preconceptions that are not rationally verifiable.

In order to better illustrate this last point, consider the following two examples taken from classroom situations. Recently, in a graduate class dealing with the problems associated with cultivating tolerance to alternative viewpoints that directly clash with some religious or cultural commitments — such as legalizing gay marriage — one of the religious students agreed that he would tolerate certain laws even if they opposed some of his deepest beliefs, yet he could never accept it in his heart as "right." In response, a more liberal-minded student took offence to this half-hearted toleration and expressed her wish that everyone love and respect each other's wishes, decisions, and unions. Indeed it seems, in Callan's words, that an ethic of care needs to be introduced to remedy the frailties of the male student's conception of justice — in the form of toleration — but is this something that a consumerist liberal education should demand, or, more importantly as far as the consumerist model is concerned, how can it? Has the religious student — although expressing his subdued indignation — stood in violation of the liberal imperative by bolstering his own belief system with a principle of justice even if his heart is not in it? Accordingly, a public virtue such as tolerance is one that he is willing to express in his social dialogue. He may not, in other words, vote for the legalization of gay marriage, but he is willing to tolerate it and go on with his life if the public allows for its legislation. Has the liberal project succeeded by helping the male student recognize that tolerance is needed for social dialogue, or has it failed for not

changing the student's mind and heart? The introduction of liberalism as a super-social union of values that sets the rules for civil public discourse has arguably succeeded, and can only further succeed by encouraging the religious student to change his own mind by accessing the ethics of care present in his own tradition (the basis of Christian love and the condemnation of judgment).

In other words, liberalism cannot claim tolerance as its own exclusive virtue, for, as I have suggested, many traditions can claim to promote this and other virtues as part of their value systems. Simply put, if we want the religious student to change his heart, the answer will no doubt lie in an acceptance of the values present in the very tradition that he accepts as part of his identity. Moral educators will surely run into problems challenging what they perceive to be the inadequacies of this tradition if they base their evaluations and criticism on liberal, or rational, conceptions of tolerance alone. The religious student is not likely to select a new liberal identity at the expense of who he believes himself to be — a Christian Canadian with French Canadian/Catholic roots — at the expense of abandoning his old identity that, as Burt put it, his parents “bought.” It seems that if more is expected of the student than his tolerance — such as a change of heart — than a challenge based on tolerance, a value that already exists within the tradition and can be cultivated from that perspective, seems incoherent, oppressive, and divisive.

Consider another practical example. Recently, a teacher friend of mine related the following story. In the midst of conducting an exercise in her sixth-grade ethics class that dealt with bridge building between varying religions and cultures, Sara took advantage of the view outside her Montreal classroom window, particularly the view of the cross adorning Mount Royal. She asked the students to relate to her what they thought of when they looked at the cross, thinking it a good way to begin a dialogue on common values. The exercise began well, but hit a snag when Sara focused her attention on a Muslim boy who had remained silent up to that point. When she asked him the same question that she had asked the other students, he replied simply, “I am not allowed to look at the cross.” Sara had a decision to make as to how she would handle the situation — should she offer an alternative value system as a form of entrance into the present dialogue? If the child in the classroom refuses to look at the cross because he believes that Christ is a prophet of Islam rather than the Son of God, is the consumerist liberal's duty to counter this belief with the imperative to distance and challenge? Should the liberal challenge the child's fundamental metaphysical belief, which is part of his spiritual identity? After all, that identity is tied in with his illiberal attitude towards the discussion of the cross. Undermining his faith-based commitment on the basis of a rationalist challenge — the only one that could exist as an independent evaluator — is unlikely to “get him on the liberal side.”

Sara's mission, I believe, more effectively lies in understanding the child's commitment and building on the virtues of reflectiveness contained within his tradition-based identity, as opposed to providing the opportunity for selection on the basis of a direct challenge to his current comprehensive conception of the good, however illiberal it seems in certain respects (though it is more than likely the result

of a lack of independent thought concerning his own tradition). A direct challenge runs into problems in the realm of metaphysical commitments, commitments that are irreconcilable with purely rational requirements of evaluation, if these are promoted as the standard. The rational requirements, however, can certainly be excavated from the foundation of care that is linked to faith, rather than the other way around.

CONCLUSION

Liberal justice, as Gutmann writes, “does not provide us with a comprehensive morality; it regulates our social institutions, not our entire lives.”¹² The final aim of liberal justice is “to find principles appropriate for a society in which people disagree fundamentally over many questions, including such metaphysical questions as the nature of personal identity.”¹³ These questions cannot be found in the tradition of liberalism alone, which acts as a standard of evaluation for all traditions wishing to pass entry into the democratic project. Certainly, as Kenneth Strike notes, “Liberal societies have an interest in diminishing the educational capacity of illiberal comprehensive doctrines.”¹⁴ However the principles that guide this diminishment, I am arguing, lie first and foremost within the traditions themselves, existing not as outside evaluators of that tradition exclusive to liberalism. Certainly liberalism exists not to pinpoint the metaphysical angles from which this diminishment can be approached, but to highlight the rational aspects which are often overlooked, yet are still present to remedy the frailties of obstinate care. As Walter Feinberg observed, “liberalism is in part intended as a fallback position which will allow traditions to live together when they are unable to come to the level of self-reflection that MacIntyre attaches to traditions at advanced stages.”¹⁵ This is because liberalism, as a super social union and facilitator, does not itself presume to contain within itself the categorical roots of democracy and the values for all humanity but rather serves as a gateway to determining what those values are at the present time.

Consumerist liberalism is one branch of liberal philosophy that is particularly cumbersome. The values of many benign traditions encourage children to interact with members of other groups and to understand the reasonableness of other ways of life, and these values need not be challenged as a prerequisite for autonomy. Can our child in the classroom develop liberal autonomy without the distancing that free-choice liberals demand? This point is crucial, for, as I suggested, the logistics of this distancing need to be determined beforehand and the independent values outlined, for reason or justice alone, as a liberal evaluative standard will most likely create divisiveness by asking the child to choose between her/his illiberal and unreasonable faith and a spot in the democratic dialogue. In other words, distancing as a whole, with the expressed conviction to challenge, can be both hostile and oppressive, especially if morality is based on this sort of critical autonomy which views all manner of tradition as equally inimical to some sort of free identity. Furthermore, even a rationalist challenge (such as that of challenging the refusal to look at the cross) cannot avoid an extension into the realm of metaphysics where faith determines affiliation as opposed to “cold” reason. What happens when one challenges the very faith that supplies the buttressing care? As Callan suggested,

“frail” justice is dependent on these faith-based or moral commitments. The distancing requirement seems unaware of the difficulties inherent in the demand to disentangle one’s self from one’s inherited culture, belief, and identity.

Burt’s more affirmative approach and her efforts in uncovering how some benign forms of comprehensive educations are compatible with less arrogant and objective-based demands for liberal autonomy represent a necessary step towards combating the divisiveness which consumerist liberals perpetuate. The liberal challenge is either to underline the virtues exclusive to it as a standard of evaluation or reconceptualize its approach to cultivating autonomy in the public school classroom as dependent on the traditions the students bring to the table to provide the ethics of care that combat the frailties of justice.

To conclude, I return to the example of the religious student in the classroom and his view on gay marriage. It goes without saying that the wish to be loved rather than tolerated by fellow members of a society recognizes the basic human need for whole acceptance. Who among us would not rather be loved than tolerated? This is why family is the sole priority for most people, because family loves you despite your flaws, rather than tolerates you despite the perceived existence of whatever they believe your flaws to be. But if liberalism is indeed the super social union or the fallback position that provides the bridge between varying traditions in the public sphere in order that a rich and diverse, civil dialogue surrounding common needs, goals, and values is established, it is dependent on the very values it is attempting to bring together in the social sphere in order to articulate these common goals. It cannot therefore logically challenge these values based on an alternative model, which acts as the basis for a rejection of any tradition. This is because liberalism as a super system and facilitator does not presume to contain within itself the categorical roots of democracy and the values for all humanity but rather reminds citizens of the values that are conducive to effective deliberation in the public realm that are present in their own traditions. If the religious student in the classroom is expected to change his heart and mind, he needs to learn to love, as opposed to tolerate, his neighbor, and such are the qualities we should no doubt be cultivating in ideal citizens. However, this love must be derived from the Christian message that he is presumably espousing.

It is my suggestion that the persistent challenging aspect of the consumerist model is incoherent and counterproductive and should be jettisoned all together. We should reapply the effort dedicated to challenging from some perceived independent standard to amassing a thick and comprehensive foundation for justice and the virtues of reflective dialogue gathered and nurtured from traditions steeped in poetry, art, and religion. Sacrificing the value of this affirmative framework by focusing on and classifying traditions in terms of fundamentalist extremes and irrelevant metaphysical preconceptions perpetuates divisiveness by undermining these traditions’ claims to cultivating and nurturing what are assumed to be singularly liberal virtues — an arrogant and close-minded stance to be sure.

1. See, for example, Hanan Alexander, "Moral Education and Liberal Democracy: Spirituality, Community, and Character in an Open Society," *Educational Theory* 53, no. 4 (2003); Terence McLaughlin, *The Contemporary Catholic School: Context, Identity, and Diversity* (Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press, 1996); and McLaughlin and J. Mark Halstead, eds., *Education in Morality* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
2. Shelley Burt, "Comprehensive Educations and the Liberal Understanding of Autonomy," in *Citizenship Education in Liberal Democratic Societies*, eds. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 180 and 184.
3. See, for example, Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Public and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984): 81–96. Callan traces the revival in normative political theory and ethics to Rawls's opus; see Eamonn Callan, "Citizenship Education," *Annual Review of Political Science* 7 (2004): 71.
4. Burt, "Comprehensive Educations and the Liberal Understanding of Autonomy," 187 (emphasis in original).
5. *Ibid.*, 186.
6. *Ibid.*, 192.
7. *Ibid.*, 201–2.
8. Eamonn Callan, "Finding a Common Voice," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 4 (1992): 429–41.
9. *Ibid.*, 439–40.
10. Eamonn Callan, "Tradition and Integrity in Moral Education," *American Journal of Education* 101, no. 1 (1992): 1–28.
11. Amy Gutmann, "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 308–22.
12. *Ibid.*, 317.
13. *Ibid.*, 318.
14. Kenneth Strike, "Liberalism, Citizenship, and the Private Interest in Schooling," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 17, no. 4 (1998): 221–9.
15. Walter Feinberg, "The Communitarian Challenge to Liberal Social and Educational Theory," *Peabody Journal of Education* 70, no. 4 (1995): 34–55.