

Democracy, Education and the Critical Citizen

Tapio Puolimatka
University of Helsinki, Finland

In this paper I shall argue that democracy conceptually presupposes critical citizens; since the latter do not develop spontaneously, without education, education is a precondition of democracy. The concepts of “democracy,” of “education,” and of the “critical citizen” are normative rather than descriptive concepts. They cannot be unarbitrarily distinguished from their distortions without a framework of objective criteria. I shall argue, therefore, that these concepts cannot be adequately conceptualized outside the framework of objectivism about values and of moral realism.¹

DEMOCRACY PRESUPPOSES CRITICAL CITIZENS

This paper builds on an influential tradition in democratic theory which assumes that there is an intrinsic relationship between democracy and education. Democratic government is supposed to be responsive to the wishes of the people. But it obviously makes a great difference whether these wishes are rational and informed or irrational and uninformed. The democratic process is not well served either by constituency or by government ignorance and irrationality. Carlsnaes suggests that three different aspects are involved here, namely “an enlightened and critically reflective public, a corps of politicians sufficiently well-informed not to be the pawns of experts and professional bureaucrats, and a dynamic area of public debate not beholden to any particular — private or public — interest.”²

In this view, democracy presupposes rational and informed citizens, whose influence on the political decision-making process is not restricted to elections, but who are rational participators in the public debate about political issues. Unless citizens are educated to be critical, they lack the prerequisites for taking part in critical discussion and therefore in the rational guidance of society, since the values fostered by education as well as those applied to social and political life have to be established in the context of critical discussion.

Citizens should be provided with opportunities for exerting political influence through taking part in the processes of debate, criticism, and cooperative effort.³ The establishment of public space should go together with equipping citizens with the capacity for making constructive use of it. Only an enlightened electorate can use its political power to promote policies that are in line with its real interest.

DEMOCRACY PRESUPPOSES EDUCATION

Public policy cannot be changed through reasoned persuasion and informed consent unless citizens are appropriately educated. The demands made upon education are essential to the democratic vision. Education is not an instrument through which rulers mold the minds of the ruled, but it is meant to strengthen the critical powers of the mind so that citizens may take part in the processes of critical discussion on which the social structure depends. Policy-makers should not simply enunciate policy, but support it with reasons, inviting counter-arguments. Without

education citizens lack the capacity to take part in the process of shaping public policy, which would deprive them of the exercise of their basic democratic right.⁴

Education is, therefore, not ancillary but essential to democracy: "A society committed to the democratic ideal is one that makes peculiarly difficult and challenging demands on its members; it accordingly also makes stringent demands on those processes through which its members are educated."⁵ The democratic ideal implies a principle of social organization which aims to structure social arrangements so as to rest them ultimately upon the freely given consent of its members. "Such an aim requires the institutionalization of reasoned procedures for the critical and public review of policy."⁶ Judgments of policy are not the fixed privilege of an elite but the common task of all. Public policy is not subject to arbitrary alteration but should be institutionally channeled and "ordered by reasoned persuasion and informed consent."⁷

Education is essential to democracy also in the sense that it is essential to the concept of dynamic equality which implies that the citizen's possibility of furthering her interests through democratic procedures depends on her educational opportunities. The moral concept of democracy assumes this concept instead of the "passive" equality of the market democrats. Implicit in the concept of dynamic equality is the presupposition that human beings are capable of cognitive and moral development upon which education can have a positive effect. This implies that "provision shall be made within the institutions of society, especially the political system, for the means of human improvement."⁸ An adequate democratic theory regards the cognitive development of citizens as intrinsically valuable and perceives every citizen as an individual whose educational development enables her to take part in discussions about the good society.⁹

The following chain of arguments may be advanced for the claim that education is logically necessary for an adequate conception of democracy:¹⁰

(1) It is a necessary condition of democracy that it be possible to change the government at regular intervals through the actions of the vast majority of the adult population. "It would be a negation of the democrats' own values not to equip succeeding generations for the performance of an act that was a logical condition of democracy."¹¹

(2) The decision to exercise one's right to participate in the democratic process is a rational and moral decision. The citizen needs sufficient education to understand that she is confronted with a choice and to understand its significance.

(3) In order to make this decision in a responsible manner, the citizen "must be equipped for making choices of a moral kind." The concept of democracy assumes a society of moral agents.

(4) Moral agency in this sense assumes acquaintance with areas of human knowledge that are "constitutive of reflection upon the norms of society or social and political problems."¹²

(5) Whatever is regarded as a necessary condition of reflection focused on the moral worth of policies and on the good society in general is to be included in the curriculum.

(6) History, philosophy, religion, art, literature, drama and music “present a view of the good society, inviting reflection on existing institutions, challenging current cultural norms and preoccupations, raising individual consciousness above the immediate and the facile.”¹³ Therefore, they should be included in the curriculum. Schools should make students acquainted with politics, economics and legal studies.

(7) These subjects should be taught in a manner which is not trivial, simplistic or facile. The aim should not be to introduce the child to “an endless procession of inert facts, but to achieve a converseance with alternative styles of life in the shape of alternative clusters of values.”¹⁴

The very concept of democracy entails the concept of critical citizenship, since democracy means the political rule by the people, which the latter cannot really exercise unless their political choices are based upon informed deliberation on the alternatives. We cannot conceive of critical citizens without education, since human beings are not born with the characteristics necessary for enlightened citizenship. Although their act-structure has the potential for opening up critical directions, the unfolding of this potential has to be educationally fostered.

Through educating critical citizens we intend to foster the development of citizens as characterized by critical rationality and moral integrity and to educate them to be participants in public policy formation so that, through their critical attentiveness, they would control those in positions of power. Democratic citizens are not supposed to be capable merely of enlightened judgment and critical dialogue. They should also be morally committed to the fundamental values of democracy: freedom, equality and justice. Without such a moral commitment, democratic procedures can be used for antidemocratic ends. Morally committed citizens are needed to counteract tendencies towards apathy, corruption and exploitation.

EDUCATION PRESUPPOSES OBJECTIVE VALUES

Education as the precondition of democracy has to be understood as a normative rather than a descriptive concept, as an enterprise which fosters desirable dispositions by satisfactory methods. The descriptive models regard the dispositions merely as valued or desired by society or by the one being educated without a proper distinction between what is merely desired and what is desirable. The normative model requires that the dispositions should be desirable or valuable according to an independent standard. According to the descriptive models, the methods are supposed to be regarded as satisfactory by society or by the one being educated. The normative model requires that the methods should be satisfactory according to a standard that is not dependent on prevalent opinions or individual conceptions.¹⁵

Descriptive concepts of education do not account for the critical rationality which is supposed to characterize education for critical citizenship. Since education implies a comprehensive intervention in human life, it can be justified only if something of value is conveyed. This assumes a world in which some states of affairs are more valuable than others. The aims of education are not adequately justified merely by the fact that they represent something valued by society or by the one being educated. Education means a comprehensive intervention in people's lives of such proportions that it requires justification by reference to objective criteria.

Otherwise the foundations of education fail to satisfy those standards of rationality which should be inherent in the concept of education. The aims of education implicitly assume a conception about what kind of life is worth living.¹⁶ The direction given to the development of children “derives from a vision of life, a commitment to those things which are most important.”¹⁷ By making such a claim, the aims of education claim implicit validity; without such a claim educational intervention cannot be fully justified.

Education as a normative concept presupposes the distinction between objective value and prevalent valuations; the realm of objective values is more extensive than the value conceptions of any individual or society and may contradict them. The following problems arise: (1) How can one decide which dispositions are desirable (and not simply desired by society or by the one being educated)? Assuming that people accept different views about what is truly desirable, we would in practical contexts encounter the question of (2) Who is to determine what dispositions are desirable and what methods are satisfactory?¹⁸

Although the normative definition encounters serious problems, the latter are not as serious as those encountered by the relativist assumptions, since the latter make the very idea of education questionable. Education assumes the possibility of appraising valuable dispositions and satisfactory methods. It presupposes that desires can be assessed with reference to what is desirable according to non arbitrary criteria. A set of dispositions set as educational aims should be capable of rational appraisal.

Education for critical citizenship presupposes a rational context which enables nonarbitrary discussion of educational aims and educational methods: what should be the dispositions fostered by education and methods practiced by it. The descriptive definitions of education limit educational discourse to the valuations prevalent in society or within the individual herself and are, therefore, inadequate for the purposes of education for critical citizenship.

EDUCATION PRESUPPOSES MORAL REALISM

The assumption that there is an objective foundation for appraising what is valuable and satisfactory concerns the ontology of values and norms, their mode of existence and their place in reality. They are assumed to be real in the sense of providing an objective foundation for value judgments and for rational solutions to value disputes. There are normative conditions to which we may ultimately appeal in determining the nature of goodness and rightness.

In the philosophical tradition, this dispute between moral realists and anti realists has mostly been conducted in relation to moral values and norms. The ontological version of moral realism assumes that morality is a unique aspect of reality.¹⁹ Morality can be richer than our knowledge of it, and cannot be reduced to subjective preferences, “inventions,” or social contracts as moral anti realism claims. The truth or falsity of a particular moral proposition is not dependent on our capacity to demonstrate its truth or falsity.²⁰ The truth conditions of moral statements are independent of subjective stances. The meaning of the morally good and the right can be explicated without reference to what moral agents approve of, desire, or commit themselves to.²¹

The assumption of objectivism about values is connected to that of moral realism. Objective theories of value claim that “a valuable life consists in the possession of certain character traits, the development and exercise of certain capacities, and the possession of certain relationships to others and the world, and that the value of these things is independent of the pleasure they produce or of their being the object of desire.”²²

Moral realism and objectivism about values imply two basic presuppositions:

(1) Moral truth transcends epistemic recognition conditions. The truth or falsity of a particular moral proposition does not depend on our capacity to assign truth or falsity to it. Since moral truth can be more complex than the views of any individual, a tension exists between prevalent morality and true morality. This tension makes it possible to argue for an educational approach which differs from the moral conceptions either of the learner or of society.

Similar considerations apply to values and norms in general. There is a tension between what is valuable and what is valued by society or the individual. Value judgments do not merely express personal taste, but they imply a claim to validity. The educator should determine her educational aims in relation to what is valuable while taking into account the values of the recipient and society. In this way the normative concept of education provides a basis for developing educational processes, curricula, institutions etc.

(2) Moral truth transcends motivational acceptance conditions. The truth of a moral proposition does not depend on what moral agents approve of or commit themselves to. What the one being educated (or society) desires is not necessarily desirable. Without this presupposition it is difficult either to justify an education which does not motivate the recipient or to criticize the educational aims preferred by the majority in society.

A culture dominated by moral relativism implicitly regards the central democratic values of freedom, equality, justice and truth as lacking objective validity. In the absence of critical standards, the education for critical citizenship would involve the uncritical effort to mold the citizens to prevalent views on knowledge, justice and social order.

Constructivist solutions are inadequate for the determination of fundamental moral values. My hypothesis is that constructivist approaches either implicitly assume a prior normative framework, or collapse to relativism. For example, Rawls²³ cannot justify what he regards as the appropriate conditions for the fair agreement between free and equal citizens without implicit reference to moral considerations that are valid prior to the agreement. The viewpoint involved in the original position is not the viewpoint of the empirical citizen who is often moved by partisan considerations in his political behavior. Its appeal lies in its close resemblance to the moral point of view, and without this moral appeal it would function like an empty abstraction.

An adequate conception of democracy, therefore, assumes the concept of the critical citizen which assumes the normative concept of education. All three in turn

assume moral realism and objectivism about values. Tarrant²⁴ makes the contrary assumption in saying that values cannot be true or false. My claim is, however, that the concepts of the critical citizen, education and democracy fail to do the conceptual work which Tarrant assumes they do within her assumption about the nature of values. Reasoned persuasion and informed consent are not possible unless there are criteria as to what counts as rational reasons. By what criteria does the critical citizen form his evaluations of social alternatives? Of what kind of rational processes does the critical evaluation consist? If there are no valid criteria, the whole idea of a critical judgment becomes arbitrary.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF CRITICAL THINKING

The concept of critical thinking presupposes an epistemological framework on the basis of which good reasons afford warrant for the claims for which they are reasons. Such an epistemology must (1) maintain a distinction between rational justification and truth. Since truth is a non-epistemic concept, it does not depend on the limitations of rational justification. In certain conditions a person may justifiably believe that which is false, or unjustifiably believe that which is true. (2) Since the principles of rational justification are universally valid, the validity of rational arguments is not culturally relative. (3) Rational justification provides a *prima facie* reason for regarding something as true, even though it is fallible in principle.²⁵

Critical thinking does not function properly without such an epistemological framework. The validity of statements cannot be assessed unless there are criteria derived from independent concepts of truth and rationality. Moral truth is conceptually distinct from what we are justified in believing at any particular time. While we regard as false those views which contradict with ours, we realize that we may be mistaken. This sense of finiteness and fallibility calls for cultural and educational pluralism in the hope of reaching a more adequate conception of values through critical interaction between various perspectives. Without a rational framework, social criticism and appraisal lack significance.

Various postmodern and neopragmatist lines of thought challenge the whole concept of truth in the non-epistemic sense. For example, Rorty defends the value of discussion as such since there are no grounds for assessing the truth of competing views. Because rationality provides merely a picture of existing alternatives, it does not offer criteria for deciding between them. Rorty's view does not provide the epistemological grounds for taking issue with injustice and suffering in the effort to create a non-tyrannizing society.

Rorty [argues] that "what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right." This is, of course, a sentiment that is best complemented by political complacency and quietism.²⁶

If there are no criteria for assessing the validity of arguments, political criticism loses its edge. The status quo can be defended as deserving respect simply because it is prevalent. It cannot be rationally challenged because it expresses one viewpoint among others without any basis for rational comparison. Political practice is therefore beyond the reach of critical deliberation.

To talk meaningfully about the ideal of the critical citizen we have to assume that it is possible to acquire knowledge about values, and not only about valuations.

If democratic freedom, equality and justice lack an objective basis in moral reality, it is arbitrary to legislate them as principles guiding the organization of society. There would ultimately be no rational reason to prefer these values to their opposites.

To say that an action is right, or that some course ought to be followed is not simply to express one's taste or preference; it is also to make a claim. It is to convey that the judgment is backed by reasons, and it is further to invite discussion of such reasons. It is, finally, to suggest that these reasons will be found compelling when looked at objectively, that is to say, taking all relevant facts and interests into account and judging the matter as fairly as possible. To make a claim is, typically, to rule out the simple expression of feelings, the mere giving of commands, or the mere citation of authorities. It is to commit oneself at least in principle, to a superordinate point of view, that is, to the judgment that one's recommended course has a rationale which can be seen by anyone taking the trouble to survey the situation comprehensively, with impartial and sympathetic consideration of the interests at stake, and with respect for the persons involved in the issue.²⁷

The concept of democracy assumes that citizens should expose their claims to the critical scrutiny of others and assess the claims of others critically. Every citizen should, therefore, be educationally developed to enable him to take part in public discussion about the good society. Such an education assumes objective values since a critical citizen cannot assess the validity of reasons and judge them fairly outside a nonarbitrary framework of criteria.

IS RATIONAL MORAL DISCOURSE POSSIBLE IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY?

Alasdair MacIntyre regards pluralistic society as too fragmented by conceptual diversity to sustain rational discourse. He claims that the public discourse of liberal democratic societies has degenerated into "an inharmonious melange of ill-assorted fragments" which are incommensurable with each other so that mutual understanding has become an illusion.²⁸ There is no neutral court of appeal to decide between rival moral claims since no particular conceptualization is used by all participants in the discussion. How then could there be critical evaluation and rational discussion?

MacIntyre does not think that moral knowledge is impossible in principle. He assumes, however, that rational public discourse assumes a community dedicated to the common good as embodied in its habits, dispositions and shared assumptions. Since our society is not likely to become such a community in our lifetime, the only hope for moral rationality is "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life may be sustained."²⁹

A complete absence of agreement on the good may indeed render rational moral discourse impossible. MacIntyre's analysis does not exclude, however, that pluralistic society is held together by a relatively limited but nevertheless significant agreement on the good.

In other words, certain features of our society can be seen as justified by a self-limiting consensus on the good — an agreement consisting partly in the realization that it would be a bad thing, that it would make life worse for us all, to press too hard or too far for agreement on all details in a given vision of the good.³⁰

Admittedly, many fundamental disagreements remain. Those disagreements reflect the complexities of moral problems as well as the human limitations of the discussants. Although fundamental disagreement may pose a threat to peaceful

coexistence when the proper sense of human finitude is replaced by an attitude of condescension, the open expression of disagreement may prevent simplistic and unfair solutions.

Even though various moral languages and conceptual systems may seem incommensurable at certain stages of their development, they need not remain so forever. The rival traditions are not hermeneutically sealed nor are their conceptual and linguistic systems static. A tradition may enrich its conceptual and linguistic system by creating new linguistic contexts for expressing thoughts peculiar to rival traditions. The problems of translation may be overcome by hermeneutical innovation.³¹

Even though our moral vocabularies and concepts are largely inherited from the cultures and traditions in which we have been socialized and our epistemological situations may be culturally limited in this sense, moral knowledge is possible because our experience provides us with morally relevant points of contact with reality and rational argumentation is a universally valid although not infallible way of appraising the validity of rival claims. It seems, therefore, consistent to suppose with Siegel that "though we judge from the perspectives of our own schemes, our judgments and their legitimacy regularly extend beyond the bounds of those schemes."³² The same point is expressed by Thomas MacCarthy:

While we may have no idea of standards of rationality wholly independent of historically concrete languages and practices, it remains that reason serves as an ideal with reference to which we can criticize the standards we inherit....To put this another way, we can, and typically do, make historically situated and fallible claims to universal validity.³³

We have reason to pursue the rational solution of moral dilemmas and controversies about values guiding education. Given human fallibility, it seems questionable to prefer a monolithic cultural situation to a pluralistic one. Assuming that moral reality is wider than our knowledge of it, the existence of various moral vocabularies and conceptual systems may help us to gain a more comprehensive and accurate view on moral truth through the process of critical evaluation.

While every educator has to promote what she regards as valuable, she should respect the freedom of students to see things differently and express their rival conceptions. The articulation of rival viewpoints in their best possible form and their critical evaluation helps to approximate more closely to moral truth. Differences in value systems need not always be indications of contradictions, even though certain features may initially strike us as foreign. Different perspectives on values may be complementary, and their interaction may lead to mutual enrichment. Democracy provides a societal environment which is conducive to the discovery of moral truth precisely because it allows and encourages free expression of ideas and their critical evaluation.³⁴

CONCLUSION

Without objective values and non-arbitrary criteria for the relevant knowledge education cannot be justified. The difference between education and its coercive distortions becomes arbitrary. The concept of the critical citizen loses its significance. Democracy becomes a procedural routine with symbolic significance at best.³⁵

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- 1 Cf. Tapio Puolimatka: *Democracy and Education: The Critical Citizen as an Educational Aim* (Helsinki: The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 1995).
 2. W. Carlsnaes, "Foreign Policy and the Democratic Process," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 3 (1981): 88. Cf. Dag Anckar, "A Definition of Democracy," in *Essays on Democratic Theory*, ed. Dag Anckar and Erkki Berndtson (Tampere: The Finnish Political Science Association, 1984), 25-26.
 3. Israel Scheffler, *Of Human Potential* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 124.
 4. *Ibid.*, 121-26.
 5. *Ibid.*, 122.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. J.M. Tarrant, *Democracy and Education* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1989), 82.
 9. *Ibid.*, 161.
 10. *Ibid.*, 160-68.
 11. *Ibid.*, 160.
 12. *Ibid.*, 161.
 13. *Ibid.*, 161-162.
 14. *Ibid.*, 168.
 15. William K. Frankena, "The Concept of Education Today," in *Educational Judgments, Papers in the Philosophy of Education*, ed. J.F. Doyle (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 20-26.
 16. Anneli Sarvimäki, *Knowledge in Interactive Practice Disciplines* (Helsinki: Department of Education, University of Helsinki, 1989), 84.
 17. D.G. Blomberg, "The Development of Curriculum with Relation to the Philosophy of the Cosmomic Idea" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sydney, 1978), 356.
 18. Frankena, "The Concept of Education Today," 26-27.
 19. I have discussed moral realism in more detail in Tapio Puolimatka, *Moral Realism and Justification* (Helsinki: The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 1989).
 20. Cf. Philippa Foot, "Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma," *The Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983): 397.
 21. Cf. David Zimmerman, "Moral Realism and Explanatory Necessity," in *Morality, Reason and Truth. New Essays on the Foundations of Ethics*, ed. D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 79-80.
 22. D.O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10.
 23. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
 24. Tarrant, *Democracy and Education*, 21.
 25. Harvey Siegel, "The Generalizability of Critical Thinking," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 23, no. 1 (1991): 24-25.
 26. A.J. Damico, "The Politics after Deconstruction: Rorty, Dewey, and Marx" (Unpublished manuscript, 1986), 14; quoted in H.A. Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Critical Pedagogy in the Modern Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 64-65.
 27. Scheffler, *Of Human Potential*, 124-25.
 28. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 10.
 29. *Ibid.*, 263.
 30. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel, The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 211-12.
 31. *Ibid.*, 62-65.

32. Harvey Siegel, "'Radical' Pedagogy Requires 'Conservative' Epistemology," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 1 (March 1995): 41.

33. Thomas MacCarthy, "Scientific Rationality and the 'Strong Program' in the Sociology of Knowledge," in *Construction and Constraint: The Shaping of Scientific Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 82.

34. Cf. Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, ch. 3.

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