

Common Schooling in the Politically Liberal Society: Implications for the Development of Citizens

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The issue I would like to address concerns the ability of a system of common schooling to accomplish the goals of common education in a politically liberal society. I propose to argue that common schooling fails in its attempt to accomplish these goals and is detrimental to the production of citizens for the politically liberal society. In order to do this I will first define my use of the term political liberalism, outlining its requirements and thus the requirements of a conception of common education for the politically liberal society. I will then discuss how a system of common schooling in such a society can attempt to accomplish the goals of common education but ultimately fails in such attempts. The implications for this failure involve a necessary transition from a notion of common education as primarily embodied in common schooling to a broader conception of common education as taking place through the institutions of private life.

POLITICAL LIBERALISM

The political liberalism on which these arguments are based sees itself as a “language developed in history to talk about civic affairs.”¹ It is a pragmatic liberalism, recognizing that “liberal discourse was constructed by real people in history making real arguments that addressed a real context.” It also emphasizes the role that the various ethical languages of those entering the discourse play in determining the details of the consensus and the fact that “the problem to be solved...is not just to find a common civic tongue, but to find a common tongue that allows [participants] to continue to speak their current ethical tongue.”² In this way, all citizens can enter the civic discourse without first setting aside their own moral convictions. These they bring to the table with them. The result is that rather than alienate or make second class citizens of certain members, ultimately creating a hostile relationship between them and the state, all members can participate in the discovery process that is civic discourse, an evolutionary process which seeks to facilitate the entry of new participants into the civic realm. Citizens are thus engaged to discover the political conception that most successfully finds the place at which the various comprehensive doctrines involved in the process can converge. It is in this way that political liberalism tries to resolve the problem of freedom of conscience, continuing to recognize the need for political stability. This sort of political liberalism begins with John Rawls, but, through an examination of how rationality is developed in persons, makes two important alterations to Rawls’s political liberalism.³

RAWLS REVISITED

Rawls, on my view, has not gone far enough in recognizing the near complete break that one makes from ethical liberalism as a political conception when one adopts a pragmatic view of political liberalism. His retention of the notion of the “original position,” in which persons agree on a political conception from behind a

“veil of ignorance” of their respective comprehensive doctrines, is problematic in its implications for the character of the overlapping consensus thus far described.

In response to Rawls, I would make two claims. First, I would assert that the overlapping consensus is a fluid entity, the product of an ongoing dialogue between the members of a society from within their various ethical conceptions at any given moment in history. This is a clear break from the idea of the original position, a position which I will argue is untenable. Second, I would make clear that in the development of the two moral powers ascribed to citizens, the second moral power is necessary in order to arrive at the first. In order to arrive at these two claims, an examination must be made of the development in citizens of a conception of the good and therefore of their ability to engage in practical rationality from whence political consensus is derived.

Let us consider two views concerning rationality and the self. The first, which Strike has called the “independence assumption,” sees rationality as derived from self-evident claims made prior to any involvement of any conception of the good.⁴ It assumes the independence of our reason from our conception of the good. The self is an entity possessing a universal quality called rationality, constituted prior to that entity’s conception of the good, by which it then chooses among various options the notion of the good which appears to be the most rational. This position becomes problematic when one attempts to determine how a choice can be made without assuming one or more prior choices about the good. One cannot make a choice about one’s good unless one has some “background” knowledge about what one believes the good to be. Was this background knowledge freely chosen? If so, how were those choices made? Ultimately, one must arrive at original values or goods that were not chosen, but simply happened to the self. Such a conclusion becomes problematic with regard to deriving any political theory from the notion of the self as free and rational.

The second view posits rationality as derived from a set of substantive assumptions into which the self must be initiated and through which the self is first constituted, the ability to reason about one’s good coming from having been initiated into a tradition which serves as a starting point for moral decision making.⁵ I will call this the tradition-dependent view and will argue for its superiority in describing the relationship between rationality, the self, and the development of an individual’s conception of the good. Freedom, on this view,

will not consist in the ability to make *ex nihilo* choices of goods or moral principles. It will instead be the capacity to judge, choose and act in ways consistent with one’s principles of choice, but it will be, even more fundamentally, the capacity to change one’s principles.⁶

This is a radical transformation from the independence assumption with regard to the notion of the individual. When one denies the independence assumption one accepts that the substantive assumptions which inform one’s rationality are necessarily part of one or more traditions into which one has been initiated. One discovers oneself to be not at the beginning of knowledge (an *ex nihilo* starting place), but rather in the midst of an ongoing tradition that “is rational in the wider sense that it is the product of a process of deliberation that has produced considerations that tend to justify it.”⁷

It is in the midst of this process that the individual finds himself and to which he can then contribute. The individual does not lose his capacity for moral reflection and decision. In fact, inasmuch as one's conception of the good defines the self, the importance of the self's continuing engagement with it is magnified. This engagement involves applying the substantive assumptions one is possessed of, as well as evaluating the assumptions themselves.

Rationality seen in this context poses obvious problems for the notion of the original position. If rationality requires initiation into a tradition or ethical language, it would seem impossible to engage in political consensus with regard to ideas of justice from behind a "veil of ignorance" about one's own ethical language. While Rawls does imbue the original position with some ethical content (inasmuch as one must assume that people are free and equal), these thin assumptions are not sufficiently robust to ground any substantive notions of justice. Rawls makes a leap when he goes from an original position of freedom and equality to a system of justice as fairness. The leap ignores the reality of how people actually make progress toward an overlapping consensus by negotiating from within their own ethical conception. In reality, people often find reasons other than simply the notions of freedom and equality or a promise of freedom of conscience for participating in the political consensus. They do not operate behind a veil of ignorance, but rather exercise rationality from within an historical tradition as described above. In addition, the complex reality of how people arrive at a sense of justice makes clear the relationship between the two moral powers. The capacity for a sense of justice (Rawls's first moral power) is necessarily dependent upon the ability to form a conception of the good (the second moral power).

If the overlapping consensus is formulated by an ongoing discovery process among individuals in their various ethical conceptions, and initiation into a tradition is required for rationality about the good to take place, then it follows that political liberalism not only allows much room for the robust communities and traditions of private life, but seems to require them. Maintaining an environment in which the various cultural and intellectual traditions of a pluralistic society are able to flourish in their varying natural progressions is necessary not only for the sake of freedom of conscience but also for the stability of the polity.

This high level of involvement of people's various comprehensive or ethical doctrines in the discovery process assumes the centrality of private life or the "intermediate associative structures" of family, churches, and local associations.⁸ The purpose of finding an overlapping consensus is to develop a civic language by which people of different moral convictions can find a way to discuss matters relating to the civic realm in which they each live part of their lives. The purview of this language, I would assert is "only that which can be given a public rationale."⁹ The overlapping consensus is thus a thin thread that holds various peoples together politically; it is not a robust view of life in general.

REQUIREMENTS OF POLITICAL LIBERALISM AND THE GOALS OF COMMON EDUCATION

Thus far I have attempted to show that political liberalism involves the construction of an overlapping consensus among people who disagree about a

conception of the good life. The formation of the overlapping consensus is an ongoing discovery process in which people are engaged from within their ethical conception or comprehensive doctrine. Implied in this form of political liberalism is (1) that the civic language that is the overlapping consensus will necessarily be a thin language, not able to address the full range of issues one would encounter in a full life; (2) that the place where much of life will be lived will be the private sphere; and (3) that the formation of a comprehensive doctrine is crucial to both living a complete life as well as to entering the civic discovery process to find one's place in the overlapping consensus.

A society in which this form of liberalism would be able to reproduce itself in a stable manner would have three important requirements. The first is that citizens would have robust opportunity for the development of the second moral power, their own conception of the good.

Second, the society must be one in which engagement with the current political conception flourishes. If we see this conception as a civic language, this language, as it continues to develop as part of the negotiation process, will also facilitate the occurrence of public speech. Thus, "discourse about the overlapping consensus can also be discourse within it."¹⁰

This ongoing engagement not only involves examination of the political conception, but also requires examination of the various cultural and intellectual traditions from within those traditions. In this way, examination occurs on both sides. The political conception is being examined for its ability to accommodate freedom of conscience and provide political stability. At the same time, holders of comprehensive doctrines examine their own ethical position in light of the engagement and are able to evaluate its ability to solve new challenges or express new ideas. Thus we arrive at a third requirement for the politically liberal society, which is that opportunities exist for "private justificatory projects." A justificatory project is an exercise performed strictly within an ethical tradition whereby holders of the tradition "address the question of whether and how it is possible for members of their group to participate conscientiously in the current, or a suitably revised, version of an overlapping consensus."¹¹

With regard to the aims of a common education, these three requirements of the politically liberal society offer a serious and complex agenda indeed. The thrust of the task can be summed up as the need to establish in citizens both a commitment to a strong private conception and a commitment to a public space. The challenge I would like to pose is whether a system of common schooling is capable of fulfilling these aims.

THE COMMON SCHOOL AS COMMON EDUCATOR

Terence McLaughlin has stated that while a case for common schooling does not *necessarily* follow from a conception of common education, a general conception of common education arising from a "broadly liberal democratic perspective...is particularly harmonious with the notion of the common school."¹² Let us examine this common assumption.

THE NECESSARY CHARACTER OF THE COMMON SCHOOL IN A
POLITICALLY LIBERAL SOCIETY

The common school is constrained to limit its grounding to the political conception alone. It is assumed that the main task of the common school is to initiate students into the political conception. As argued above, however, initiation of the student into a comprehensive doctrine, however, must be considered an integral part of his or her becoming a complete citizen and participant in the overlapping consensus. The relationship between the development in citizens of both the political conception and an ethical conception, therefore, becomes a crucial part of a system of common schooling in a politically liberal society. The dynamics of this relationship can be addressed by the common school in one of three ways.

The first possibility, which I will call *self-initiation*, is that the school provide students with opportunities to adopt their own ethical conception by offering a wide range of goods from which to choose. The student is simultaneously initiated into the political conception within the common school. This seems to be the most prevalent assumption within the common schooling system in America today. Bruce Ackerman represents well this view. He states that children are presented with a task of “self-definition” in which the school participates by providing access to a “wide range of cultural materials” useful in the development of moral ideals and patterns of life.¹³

The difficulty of this approach can be illustrated by a more extensive discussion of the process of encountering cultural goods. It is helpful here to use Alasdair MacIntyre’s¹⁴ notion of goods being internal to a practice. The term practice can be used to describe the various subjects presented to students in the context of schooling (that is, academic subjects, art, music, agriculture, sports, or games). There are three important features to note about a practice. First, they have history. Initiates into a practice submit to the authority and standards already established within the practice. Once one becomes initiated, one is qualified to criticize within the practice, thus extending the conceptions of the ends and goods involved. This is another way of saying that rationality cannot exist prior to initiation into a moral language which provides the tools with which rationality can be put into practice. Second, it is impossible for the uninitiated to appreciate fully and comprehend the goods and ends associated with the practice in question. Third, to become initiated into a practice requires a commitment to the ends of that practice and thus a willingness to submit to the authorities and standards associated with that practice. A problem thus arises. How can commitment to the ends and goods of a practice occur if the novice cannot fully appreciate or comprehend those ends or goods until after he is already initiated? This is the problem which faces schools as they attempt to initiate students into the various subjects, which are practices, and thus present them with a range of goods from which they are expected to form their own conception of the good. Kenneth Strike calls this a problem of “ownership.”¹⁵ How can schools produce ownership of the goods and ends of a certain subject area prior to the development of the ability to reason about those goods and ends? The view of ownership most prevalent in common school situations, is what Strike calls “liberal paternalism.” While placing high value on the autonomy of the individual, it admits that students will most likely

not possess the ability to choose wisely among practices based upon current interests and desires, and so attempts to serve the interests and desires that students will possess as an autonomous adult. Also, it recognizes that society has an interest in students' developing certain virtues that they may not naturally be inclined to desire. Strike describes the methods used by school authorities to get students to commit to certain goods and ends that they do not yet know how to evaluate and appreciate as "liberal seduction." Simply put, authorities appeal to the current interests and desires of students (making school entertaining, promising rewards external to the goods of the practice, such as grades or extracurricular activities) in order to lead them into those practices which they may not fully appreciate or understand. Strike argues that while these methods of inducing ownership may eventually succeed in getting students to appreciate the ends that are internal to practice, they are somewhat manipulative and run the risk of more insidious consequences than mere ineffectiveness. Students will come to see the connection between the satisfaction of their desires and their willingness to participate in the practices presented by the school as "artificially maintained by the authority of the school," undermining the possibility for true ownership in the practice. When teachers are seen as merely engaging in manipulation of students' desires, students will fail to respect their position as legitimate authorities of the practice in question and will engage in their own forms of manipulation to gratify their desires for good grades, entertaining activities, and other goods external to the practice. Strike concludes that the overall outcome of this type of situation is "a kind of alienated compliance" by students, lacking in the "transformation of their desires that a good education should effect."

It is important to remember that at the same time that students are engaged in this artificial and ineffective mode of development of an ethical conception, they are being initiated into a thin political conception, the foundation of which is neutrality between competing conceptions of the good. This neutrality, of course, is intended to be limited to the realm of the political, but in an educational setting in which students are encouraged to choose among a variety of cultural goods, it demands a highly sophisticated differentiation between, on the one hand, neutrality among cultural goods and, on the other hand, the necessity of living privately according to a particular conception of the good. This "moral bilingualism" may in fact be too demanding and only add to the overall failure of the development in citizens of conceptions of the good.¹⁶ McLaughlin aptly points out that: "'public evaluation' is conducted in a morally circumscribed language and that wider moral perspectives exist from which fuller moral appraisal is possible and necessary. A failure to clarify this point may lead to pupils gaining a distorted perception of the moral life."¹⁷ This distortion may undermine tolerance significantly. Those with strong private affiliation who wish to find their place in the overlapping consensus may find themselves shut out of the dialogue because the majority have failed to draw the proper public/private distinctions. This state of affairs severely undermines the continuation of the political conception, which eventually loses its status as the product of an ongoing discovery process between members of different ethical backgrounds. Moreover, a schooling system that offers "a kind of liberal cafeteria of cultural wares" to its students in the context of commitment only to a common "thin" political culture,

because of the resulting lack of rationality developed by thick cultural grounding, leaves its students to be guided by their often shallow and self-centered desires, thus adding to its failure in producing competent citizens.¹⁸

A situation of self-initiation, by failing to initiate students adequately into a comprehensive doctrine, and by distorting the difference between private ethical conceptions and the political conceptions, makes it impossible for students to participate properly in the overlapping consensus and thus undermines political stability.

The second possibility, that of *pre-initiation*, is that students enter the common school having already been initiated into a comprehensive doctrine. With a conception of the good already in place, students are then initiated into the political conception, which somehow finds a place within their overall ethical conception.

This has several problems of its own. First, the assumption that students can enter the common school having already been initiated into an ethical conception is tenuous. The process of schooling itself is one in which students are forming their ethical conception as they become initiated into a view or views of the good and learn to make choices about their own vision of the good. With the school instead providing initiation only into a thin political conception, students run the risk of viewing the political conception as a complete view of the good, which it is not. In this way, students fail to adopt a full conception of the good, thereby inhibiting their ability to participate in the political conception. Most likely, as the student will inevitably encounter various goods in addition to the political conception within the context of schooling, this state of affairs will evolve into a self-initiation situation.

Even if the school does attempt to operate under the assumption that the comprehensive doctrine has already been formed, the institutions of private life (that is, families, religions, and so forth) would continue in their role in the development process of the student, resulting in the third possibility — a situation of *para-initiation*. McLaughlin points out that “since common schools cannot be based on an overall philosophy of life, or indeed of education...parents and others may feel a lack of complete identification with them.”¹⁹ This fact, he states, may be the price we have to pay, but it may be a larger price than he imagines it to be. Inasmuch as the members of various ethical traditions view the school as somehow counterproductive to their role, they will be ultimately in a position of antagonism toward the political conception upon which the school is supposedly based. This antagonism would not be misguided. The life of a school is very much tied to the activities of private life. In it, students explore various subjects, make choices about the goods attached to those subjects, and decide which paths their own lives will take. However, if school life can be grounded only on a thin political conception, students receive the message that the stuff of life can be separated from one’s comprehensive doctrine, which is strictly relegated to outside of the school. Here again moral bilingualism is very difficult for students to achieve. Moreover, the problem remains of the inability to exercise rationality about goods encountered apart from initiation into a moral language. Most importantly, to have set up a situation in which members of particular cultural or intellectual traditions see themselves in a struggle with the

political conception could be quite corrosive to the occurrence both of private justificatory projects and participation in the discovery process of the overlapping consensus.

In each of these three ways in which the common school can address the relationship between development in students of both an ethical conception and the political conception, the common school actually seems to undermine both of these developmental aspects of the complete citizen. Therefore, I would conclude that the common school can be detrimental to the task of producing politically liberal citizens.

We must begin to think of the common education of the citizenry of a politically liberal society in a context other than the common school. We must find a place where the requirements of the politically liberal society can be achieved.

FOSTERING BELIEF IN PUBLIC SPACE VIA PRIVATE MEANS

I have argued that the key to the common education of a politically liberal society is fostering in citizens both belief in a private ethical conception and in a public space. How do these two spheres work together? Where is the bridge located that will connect them? I would like to propose that it is precisely our notion of how this bridge is built which will determine the course of successful common education in the politically liberal society. The two-fold process of common education — fostering belief in a public space, but also gleaning the public value of private space — can be successful, I believe, by recognition and utilization of the bridges which already exist to connect these two spheres.

MEDIATING STRUCTURES AS BRIDGES TO POLITICAL CONSENSUS

Twenty years ago, Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus²⁰ called these bridges “mediating structures,” defined as “those institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life.” The main focus of Berger and Neuhaus’s work is on the mediating structures of family, neighborhoods, churches and civic associations and their use to maintain the benefits of the modern welfare state without the “statism” and the moral emptiness of the “megastructures” of modern society.

To recognize the educative nature of mediating structures is to say that it is through these structures that the three requirements of the politically liberal society, as outlined above, occur. It is through mediating structures that private traditions flourish and are communicated from one generation to the next. It is also through these structures that justificatory projects, by which members negotiate their place as a group within the larger political society, are carried out within the traditions of private life. Finally, it is through mediating structures that ongoing discussion between members of differing ethical conceptions concerning the political consensus is conducted.

I would recommend first what Berger and Neuhaus call a “minimalist” approach, which is simply to “foster and protect” mediating structures. A first step would be to examine how much time we are devoting to them. If, as I argue, common

schooling is actually a hindrance to the development of the politically liberal citizen, we need to examine seriously the ways in which fostering and protecting that institution is a choice against fostering and protecting the alternative of mediating structures. Time commitment alone, especially when debates arise over extending the amount of time American children spend in the public school, is a good place to begin.

The decision of where to commit our time is of the most basic with regard to the exercise of our political will. While it can certainly be argued that, whether through misuse of political power, media distortion or sheer indifference, the “great majority of Americans have little or no political will...on the great questions of domestic and international policy,” on the most basic matters of life -- of family, religion, neighbors, vocations and avocations, people have very clear ideas of where their interests lie. In conclusion, the words of 1977 ring true in 1997:

If we are truly committed to the democratic process, it is *their* political will that public policy should be designed to empower.... Indeed policies that disable political will where it does exist preclude the development of political will where it does not now exist, thus further enfeebling the democratic process and opening the door to its alternatives....The possibility to be explored is not how far unitary policies can be extended before encountering the backlash of particularity. Rather, [it] is how a common purpose can be achieved through the enhancement of myriad particular interests.”²¹

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1. Kenneth A. Strike, “Liberal Discourse and Ethical Pluralism: an Educational Agenda,” *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 226.
 2. *Ibid.*,” 227.
 3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
 4. Kenneth A. Strike, “Autonomy, Community and the Self,” *Philosophy of Education 1987*, ed. Barbara Arnstine (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1988):79-90.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. *Ibid.*, 87.
 7. *Ibid.*, 86.
 8. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
 9. Kenneth A. Strike, “Community and Individualism: Two Views,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education 12* (1993): 15.
 10. Kenneth A. Strike, “On the Construction of Public Speech: Pluralism and Public Reason.” *Educational Theory 44*, no. 1 (1994): 22.
 11. *Ibid.*, 23.
 12. Terence H. McLaughlin, “Liberalism, Education, and the Common School,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education 29*, no. 2 (1995): 244.
 13. Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice and the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), chap. 5.
 14. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
 15. Strike, “Humanizing Education: Subjective and Objective Aspects,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education 11* (1992): 17-30.

16. Strike, "Community and Individualism."
17. McLaughlin, "Liberalism, Education, and the Common School," 248.
18. Strike, "Humanizing Education," 30.
19. McLaughlin, "Liberalism, Education, and the Common School," 244.
20. P.L. Berger and R.J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, D.C: American Enterprise Institute, 1977), 2.
21. *Ibid.*, 43.