

Deliberative Democracy and Moral Development

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In “Democratic Education and Social Learning Theory,” Charles Howell critiques democratic educational theory for its reliance on a cognitive developmentalist perspective. Howell offers a competing theory of moral development, a revised version of social learning theory, claiming that this view both undercuts the work of democratic theorists like Amy Gutmann and calls into question whether schools are the most appropriate institutions in which to cultivate children’s capacity for moral judgment.

I agree with Howell that democratic theorists should give more attention in general to theories of moral development, and in particular to the kinds of school experiences that shape students’ capacity for moral judgment. However, I also find important grounds for disagreement with Howell’s analysis. I have three areas of concern: (1) that Howell’s critique of democratic educational theory ignores the deliberative or participatory orientation that characterizes many recent efforts in this area; (2) that Howell’s revised version of social learning theory fails to escape its behaviorist roots and that it would be more appropriate to see the work of democratic educational theorists through a socio-cultural lens; and (3) that Howell’s rejection of public schools as effective sites for the promotion of moral development among children is unwarranted.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATIONAL THEORY AND DELIBERATIVE VIRTUES

Howell is correct in claiming that democratic educational theorists, including Gutmann, hold that public schools should “integrate the value of critical deliberation among good lives.”¹ To leave the description there, however, suggests that democratic educational theory focuses *only* on building the capacity of individual students to engage in rational deliberation over (their own) conceptions of the good. While these roots in traditional liberalism are clear enough in the work of democratic educational theorists, so to is the commitment of many (including Gutmann, see also Kenneth Howe²) to the requirements of *deliberative* or *participatory* democracy, wherein one of the primary goals of public schooling is to help students learn to deliberate *with each other* over the policies, practices, and roles that shape society.

The fact that democratic educational theory contains a cognitive component should not lead us to overlook its broadly socio-cultural orientation. Gutmann, for example, clearly holds that cultivating the capacity for moral reasoning is insufficient by itself to achieve the goals of democratic education. She notes that a “sturdy moral character” is also required for citizens to participate in the process of conscious social reproduction (*DE*, 51). While much more could be said about the qualities that citizens need to engage in deliberative democracy, it is clear in Gutmann’s work that the list is broad and not limited to the capacity for rational assessment of alternative conceptions of the good:

deliberation is not a single skill or virtue. It calls upon skills of literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, as well as contextual knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of other people's perspectives. The virtues that deliberation encompasses include veracity, nonviolence, practical judgment, civic integrity and magnanimity. (*DE*, xiii)

Gutmann concludes that "education in character and in moral reasoning are therefore both necessary, neither sufficient, for creating democratic citizens" (*DE*, 51). But what does this "education in character" look like, and is it sufficient to answer Howell's argument that "the lack of a connection between moral reasoning and action poses a serious problem for Gutmann"?

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND MORAL EDUCATION

To deliver on the promise of "a link between adult teaching strategies and children's behavior," Howell appeals to the Grusec-Goodnow model of internalization as "a process of persuasion, culminating in a child's conscious decision to abide by a norm for what she considers good reasons." "Empathic arousal" and "indirect messages" are especially important aspects of parental persuasion, as well as "environmental characteristics and social reinforcement." Howell concludes that the model "is tailored specifically for *counter*-socialization — training of the child to resist social reinforcement...precisely the kind of moral education Gutmann envisions for common schools."

Howell's description of the Grusec-Goodnow model does not address the problems of behaviorism quite as neatly as he suggests. The question comes down to whether behaviorists can have their cake and eat it, too. One might argue, for example, that the Grusec-Goodnow model simply displaces or broadens the extrinsic reinforcers that are available to parents. Whether it is through humor, role-playing, or some other indirect route, the approach still seeks to modify behavior through the indirect provision of positive or negative consequences and thus leaves the approach open to traditional critiques. To say that a child comes to "abide by a norm for what she considers good reasons" imports a cognitive element with what looks like a wave of the hand. But this is just the sketch of an argument that must be left for later. More important here is whether Gutmann and other democratic educational theorists can offer the kind of *pedagogical* elements or classroom environment that Howell elicits from the Grusec-Goodnow model, or whether their inability to do so can be used to "seal the objection" against this approach.

Gutmann holds that democratic virtues are to be taught in contextually relevant ways and by engaging the social relations that shape school experience. She argues, for example, that schools teach democratic virtues when they create a diverse environment where students must learn to live and work together, and where racial and religious (among other) differences are respected (*DE*, 63). Gutmann's approach to racism and sexism reflects a similarly contextual or socio-cultural perspective, as evidenced by her support for combining desegregation with cooperative learning and the elimination of tracking to promote racial understanding (*DE*, 163), and for policies that would increase the number of women in educational leadership positions in order to subvert the current authority structure in schools

where (quoting Letty Cottin Pogrebin) “men rule women and women rule children” (*DE*, 113).

Granted, there is little actual instructional detail here and nothing that approaches the documentation that Howell cites with respect to the brown-eyes/blue eyes simulation. Still, I think one is hard pressed to conclude on this basis that democratic educational theorists like Gutmann do not consider the kinds of affective, motivational, and contextual elements that Howell admires in the Grusec-Goodnow model. Indeed, one might argue that Gutmann succeeds at describing the kind of context in which an artful teacher might draw on a myriad of resources for the day-to-day construction of a curriculum that aims at cultivating students’ capacity for moral judgment through the development of deliberative virtues.

MORAL EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Howell’s analysis leads him to be skeptical of the role that public schools might play in promoting the moral development of children. His first argument is that Gutmann’s concern about parental manipulation is unfounded because, “if the Grusec-Goodnow model is correct...parents can only ‘predispose’ children to adopt their own values if they appeal to reason and promote their values in a way that respects children’s autonomy.” This answer skates perilously close to begging the question (by holding that children will *only* accept appeals to reason and therefore can *never* be persuaded by sophistic or manipulative adults) and seems highly implausible on its face. While parents may not be able to “effectively disable children’s critical faculties,” this is an overstatement of Gutmann’s concern (and the conditions necessary for manipulation), insofar as it suggests that this critical capacity can be removed or suppressed altogether. Gutmann’s view, rather, promotes a concern for both the degree to which the capacity for rational deliberation is developed in students (surely a continuum and one that may indeed be harder for parents to shape, but even so, the limits are not self-evident), as well as the related deliberative virtues that appear much more responsive to parental influence. For Gutmann, examples of the latter include, “character traits, such as honesty, religious toleration, and mutual respect for persons” (*DE*, 44), qualities that seem all too open to manipulation by parents.

Howell’s remaining arguments similarly question the capacity of public schools to help students “resist social pressure and act on their considered moral judgment” because the Grusec-Goodnow model suggests “a larger structure that is not obviously better suited to common schools than other educational contexts.” Even stated in this rather modest way, Howell’s conclusion remains rooted in the mistaken identification of democratic educational theories like Gutmann’s with a narrowly conceived cognitive developmentalism. I have tried to show that the kind of schooling promoted by democratic educational theorists also aims broadly at the deliberative virtues associated with moral development in a socio-cultural context. Though space does not permit further exploration of the latter connection, I believe we should proceed in this direction to examine the underlying models of moral development implicit in democratic educational theory. In this sense, Howell’s

essay provides welcome motivation to continue the pursuit of an important question about democratic education.

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1. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 44. This work will be cited as *DE* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Kenneth Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice, Democracy, and Schooling* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).