

Is Liberal Education Illiberal? Political Liberalism and Liberal Education

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Here I argue two principal claims. The first is that liberal education is illiberal. Since I am not inclined to agree with Emerson that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, it follows that the sense of “liberal” in the phrase “liberal education” is different from the sense of “liberal” in the term “illiberal.” Second, I argue that the idea that liberals need to do more to accommodate ways of life that are disproportionately impacted by liberal culture is difficult to realize in practice and that educators should emphasize teaching their subjects with integrity. Liberal education, as I understand it here, has among its aspirations an *ideal of human flourishing*, the life of the mind is an essential component of human flourishing; an *ideal of cognitive liberation*, the life of the mind liberates people from servility to unreflective tradition and prejudice; and a *political ideal*, good citizens are people who are capable of critical reflection and rational dialogue. My argument emphasizes the ideal of human flourishing.

For some the idea of a liberal education is a conservative and elitist ideal bound up with a canon consisting of great books containing (largely) the writings of European dead white men and rooted in claims about the existence of a human essence. This is not my conception. A liberal education is an education that serves the aforementioned ideals and needs to be constantly revised to serve them.¹ Hence my definition is functional rather than substantive. Concerning substance, I assume only that liberal education will include the study of practices such as the arts, music, science, and literature. The illiberality I am concerned with is a failure of neutrality of the sort required by what Rawls calls political liberalism.² Political liberalism aims to accommodate reasonable pluralism. If so, it must be neutral among reasonable comprehensive doctrines. It seeks to do this by developing a conception of justice that is philosophically shallow in that it does not presuppose any particular comprehensive doctrine.

In his book, *Liberalism Beyond Justice*, John Tomasi, argues that neutrality must be more than neutrality of aims.³ Liberalism, Tomasi argues, will generate a culture rooted in a conception of public reason. This public culture will spill over into non-public cultures and will burden adherents of different comprehensive doctrines to different degrees. But, claims Tomasi, political liberals, by denying responsibility for this spillover, have absolved themselves from a serious discussion of the cultural consequences of political liberalism.⁴ Tomasi argues that some reasonable people may be reluctant to assent to a liberal regime if it is apparent to them that the culture it spawns will be inhospitable to their way of life. Hence the aspirations of political liberalism to create a political order that is consistent with reasonable pluralism require liberals to accept responsibility for the unintended, but foreseeable, consequences of liberal culture.⁵

This claim leads Tomasi to argue for a strategy that he calls tax-flattening. Here the idea is that when the background culture of political liberalism imposes greater burdens on some groups of reasonable citizens than on others, political liberalism needs to take steps to reduce these burdens.⁶

Tomasi's lead example of candidates for tax-flattening are the fundamentalist parents in *Mozert v Hawkins* who wished their children exempted from a reading curriculum they believed undermined their religious convictions.⁷ The 6th Circuit rejected the parents' free exercise argument holding that there was no significant burden on the conscience of these parents so long as the state did not coerce either belief or action. Tomasi wants schools to be more accommodating to the wishes of fundamentalist parents such as these.⁸

Above I claimed that a liberal education includes an ideal of human flourishing, a liberatory ideal, and a political ideal. For the most part these are familiar ideas, one that can be cashed out in quite different ways. It is not my intent here to develop a theory for any of these aspects of liberal education. Pointing in the rough direction will have to do. Let me begin by providing examples.

John Stuart Mill, in *Utilitarianism* gives this account of the ideal of human flourishing.

But there is no known Epicurean theory of life that does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensation [Hence]: It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.⁹

Rawls provides a somewhat different account which he calls the Aristotelian principle: "Other things being equal, people enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities,...and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity."¹⁰ As Rawls's account suggests, the ideal of human flourishing can be conceived in a way that is broader than the life of contemplation or the "academic" life. It is broad enough to encompass sports, crafts, and many occupations so long as they are able to encourage growth and express cognitive complexity. Its antithesis is not the active life or the useful life. It is the menial life, the life of banality. But it is not merely a theory of enjoyment. It involves a view of character development. Socrates, says Mill, attaches significant value to his own character.

The liberatory ideal may best be expressed by the Socratic maxim, "the unexamined life is not worth living." The antithesis of the liberatory ideal is moral and cognitive servility. The political ideal is nicely captured in this quote from Martha Nussbaum.

In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs.... To unmask prejudice and to secure justice, we need argument, an essential tool of civic freedom.¹¹

The antithesis of the political ideal is a lack of a sense of justice and commitment to the common good as well as the lack of the capacity to engage in deliberations in their pursuit.

These three ideals of liberal education may be difficult to separate in practice because they depend on the acquisition of a conceptually linked set of aspirations and an intersecting set of capacities. Recall that for Rawls, political liberalism is juxtaposed to ethical liberalism.¹² Ethical liberalism is a comprehensive doctrine to which autonomy is central. This fact has generated a literature that is most concerned to discover whether people who do not value autonomy can still be good liberal citizens.¹³ Insofar as this debate concerns liberal education, it has tended to ignore the ideal of human flourishing while emphasizing the connection between the liberatory ideal and the political ideal. For this reason and because I think a consideration of the ideal of human flourishing adds some additional complexity to the discussion, the argument I make below emphasizes the ideal of human flourishing and proceeds independently (for the most part) of any connection it may have with the other aims of liberal education.

I want to expand the account of the ideal of human flourishing by using MacIntyre's conception of a practice. MacIntyre characterizes a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.¹⁴

Consider three features of practices. First, practices are social and cooperative activities. They depend on communities who "own them" and whose conversations, arguments, and expositions are essential to their maintenance, development, communication, and the initiation of new members. Second, practices are constituted by goods that are internal to them as well as the excellences required to achieve these goods. Achieving these constitutive goods contributes to human flourishing. Third, engaging in practices extends both human capacities to accomplish the goods internal to the practices and the understanding of the nature of the goods and excellences involved.

The goods internal to practices include many that contribute to human flourishing in that they are intrinsic goods. The arts aim at beauty and certain forms of understanding. The sciences aim at understanding, not just as an instrument of control, but as a good in its own right. There is also what might be termed epistemological goods. Those who engage in practices must value truth, wisdom, and excellence. When the practices are academic in character, rigor, coherence and elegance of argument are internal to them. These goods as well are likely to be experienced as intrinsic goods by those who have begun to master a practice.

Mastery of a practice involves the expansion of both capacity and comprehension. People are changed for the better by engaging in practices. Mastery involves capacity to see the world in new and better ways and the alteration of the self in ways that those who are so altered will view as good. The dissatisfied Socrates would not trade places with the satisfied fool. The ideal of human flourishing includes an ideal of the self.

Finally, to engage in practices is to be involved with others in certain forms of community. Practices are forms of cooperative activity in pursuit of shared aims.

They provide a basis for shared understandings of others, and they elicit collegiality, community, and friendship. The experience of cooperation towards shared ends and the experience of sharing practices with others is itself a good. It is these kinds of goods at which practices aim and which are part of the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education. The preceding discussion suggests that these goods are part of the nature of practices in such a way that to exclude them or ignore them is to misrepresent what these practices are and the ways they contribute to human flourishing. If so, then any education that engages students in the attempt to master these practices is already committed to the ideal of human flourishing implicit in liberal education, and any education that attempts to take an exclusively instrumental approach to academic subject matter or that focuses on technical mastery apart from the internalization of these aspects of academic subjects distorts them. Hence if we are to teach ordinary subjects with integrity, we must aim at the kinds of goods that the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education involves.

This does not mean that the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education is inconsistent with pluralism. It is big tented. It can be expressed and realized through different cultures, religions, and philosophies. Yet liberal education, so conceived, still cannot meet the requirements of liberal neutrality. It involves a commitment to a picture of human flourishing, a partially comprehensive doctrine. Hence, good education, insofar as it engages people in practices and does so with integrity, is not neutral. It is not neutral in intent, and its pursuit is like to generate a culture that burdens some citizens. By the standards of political liberalism, liberal education is illiberal. Consider two examples, one real and the second fictional. These examples are intended, first to illustrate the way in which the ideal of human flourishing is embedded in intellectual practices, but also some difficulties involved in Tomasi's view.

Consider the Louisiana equal time for Creationism law that was rejected in *Edwards v Aguillard*.¹⁵ The crafters of this law hoped to avoid its rejection by the Supreme Court by asserting its secular purpose, the academic freedom of students. Students were to be free to choose between two conflicting views of origins. Teachers were to present the evidence for both and to allow students to choose. The Court rejected this claim holding that the statute lacked a secular purpose and hence violated the Establishment clause of the First Amendment.

Note the curious characterization of academic freedom. The law did not envision or enable a debate about the evidence for evolution and creation. It forbade it. Teachers were to be told what evidence for creation they were required to present. They were to be required to present this evidence without appraisal. And they were to claim that the evidence did not compel either creationism or evolution. Since this is hardly the view of modern biology, teachers were to be required by the statute to lie to their students about what modern biology has concluded.

They were also expected to misrepresent their subject matter in deeper ways. Evolution is central to the way in which biologists think about living things. Treating it as optional is to disassociate it from the norms of inquiry and explanatory ideals of biology and much of science and to reject membership in the community of

biologists. Here the ideal of human flourishing is implicated. Evolution provides a way of seeing the world. To deny it is to deny to oneself the ability to see the world in a powerful way. It is to reject the character shaping activity of inquiry and membership in a community of scholars. It is to be an outsider to whatever goods are internal to biology and to the community that shapes them.

The fictional example: Imagine that a school board required that all subjects be taught with an emphasis on career skills and career potential. How might one teach poetry? Perhaps one might emphasize career opportunities in the greeting card industry or with advertising agencies. The curriculum might contain units such as “Rhyming made easy,” “Three easy steps to sentimentality,” or “How to manipulate with jingles.” The example illustrates what happens to practices when they are taught with an excessive emphasis on their technical execution and instrumental applications and are disconnected from their internal goods. With poetry, the outcome is farcical because poetry has few instrumental uses and the absurdity of substituting these for the goods internal to the practice is evident.

These examples illustrate the ways in which the ideal of human flourishing is internal to subject matter and how teaching with integrity assumes it. They are also suggestive concerning the difficulties involved in pursuing liberal neutrality, especially as Tomasi develops it. Tomasi’s argument that political liberals must take responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of liberal culture and must accommodate those who are disproportionately burdened assumes that it is fundamentalist who are burdened by the educational culture of political liberalism.¹⁶ But who is burdened and by what is far less clear than Tomasi supposes.

To see this I will ask two questions: Who might be burdened by an education committed to the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education? Who might be burdened by an education that sought neutrality with respect to this ideal? Who might be burdened by the ideal of human flourishing? My examples suggest that two groups might be burdened. The first consists of those who might dissent from the ideal for religious reasons. The second consists of those who wish an education intended to enhance their economic prospects, power, or status (a groups that seems numerous), but who want no part of the ideal. I will call these groups fundamentalists and philistines.

For the sake of the argument I want to assume that such people are or can be reasonable in Rawls’s sense. That is, they are willing to deal fairly with those who do not share their comprehensive doctrine. Hence, according to Tomasi, political liberals need to accommodate them. If they are burdened by the ideal of human flourishing, liberal neutrality might require an education that does not emphasize it.

However, while religious parents such as the Mozerts may be burdened by the liberatory ideal and the political ideal of liberal education, it is far less clear that they will be burdened by its ideal of human flourishing. Few religious traditions explicitly reject the ideal and some affirm it, Thomism for example, might be thought to explicitly accept it. Generally those fundamentalists who advance scientific creationism do not see themselves as rejecting science, per se, because its teachings are inconsistent with Scripture. They see themselves as holding that all

truth is one; hence science and revealed truth *must* be consistent. To say this is to affirm science, not to reject it. It may also be, in cases such as creationism, to engage in some measure of self-delusion, and I think we should be mindful about the potential erosion of character that may result from such self-delusion, but that is not the same thing as an explicit rejection of science. Moreover, often the educational institutions created by fundamentalists explicitly affirm a recognizable version of the ideal of human flourishing.¹⁷ We should also remember that court cases focus attention on the most extreme cases and on people whose views may not well represent those of their own group or their own theological traditions. We should not allow the *Mozert* parents or the Amish to represent all religious conservatives let alone all religious people. To address the extent to which the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education burdens or can be affirmed by religious people, we shall need a detailed understanding of diverse religious and theological traditions the outcome of which (I would conjecture) will depend more on the specific features of the tradition than on the fact that it is a religious tradition.

What of the philistines? They are obviously burdened in some measure by an education that takes the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education seriously. While the ideal might not pose a threat to the conscience, it would be a challenge to their conception of the good and is likely to be seen as a waste of time and resources. Suppose that we ask how we might conceive a curriculum that manages to be neutral and who that curriculum would burden. One strategy might be to create deliberative forums that consider all visions of the good, but privileges none. Such a strategy might be preferred because it promotes the liberatory and political ideals. It is, however, likely to generate a school culture that is unaccommodating to both some fundamentalists and the philistines. And, insofar as this strategy aims at the liberatory ideal, it may not be neutral on the standards of political liberalism even if we limit the neutrality requirement to neutrality of aim.

Another strategy is to instrumentalize the curriculum. We might seek a curriculum that sought to transmit the knowledge and skills required for the widest possible range of good lives. We might also emphasize the public interest in the acquisition of knowledge and skills that add to economic productivity. This curriculum will emphasize the instrumental uses of practices. It is also the one most likely to accommodate both the fundamentalists and the philistines. An approach that values knowledge instrumentally may not explicitly affirm the values of philistines, but it is unlikely to burden them. (And it need not explicitly reject the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education. It need only privatize it.) Perhaps this curriculum achieves neutrality of intent. But it may also produce a culture that burdens those who accept the ideal of human flourishing. In effect, it says to them “You may come to internalize some of the non-instrumental goods associated with intellectual practices. You may come to respect rigorous argument, to be inspired by an elegant proof, and to have your character and wants shaped by your association with other practitioners. Or not. We allow this, but political liberalism requires that we not promote it.” But to say this externalizes the goods of practices. It also undercuts the communal aspects of practices by understanding their point in a way that makes their

value depend on a market appraisal of their skills. The ideal of human flourishing is unlikely to thrive where the market dominates.

How might religious people fare in the culture promoted by an instrumentalized curriculum? Let us return to Tomasi's claim that political liberalism must aim not only for neutrality of intent, but must also be concerned for its foreseeable consequences. The people for whom he expresses most concern are those he calls C people. C people ascribe to some traditional view, normally religious in character, but are reasonable citizens in Rawls's sense of this term. This distinguishes them from those he calls D people who are unreasonable. If political liberals are to take responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of liberalism, Tomasi claims, they must be more accommodating of C people whom he sees as disproportionately burdened by the liberal background culture. But many C people may, in fact, find an instrumentalist education to be more accommodating than one that takes seriously the aspirations of liberal education. An instrumentalist education that privatizes comprehensive doctrines may generate less material that threatens religious convictions. A biology curriculum that aspires to help students see the world as biologist see it will inevitably offend creationists. Biology taught from an instrumentalist perspective may find it easier to let go of evolution.

Teaching intellectual practices with integrity is likely to be difficult when the curriculum is seen instrumentally. The ideal of human flourishing consists largely of the goods inherent to the nature of practices. To attempt to externalize these goods as though they were optional and contingent benefits of academic practices is to misrepresent these practices. Hence, those who wish to claim that political liberalism requires a neutral curriculum and seek this through an instrumentalized curriculum will find it difficult to teach academic disciplines without some distortion. They are on the horns of a dilemma. Either they must fail to be neutral in that they advance a partial conception of human flourishing or they distort their subject matters.

Where does this leave us? Much in this discussion suggests that it is difficult to apply standards of neutrality to education. Consider: If we are to teach academic practices such as mathematics or science with integrity, then we will advance an ideal of human flourishing. We will not succeed on the criterion of neutrality of intent, and we may burden some fundamentalists and philistines. If we seek neutrality of intent we are likely to instrumentalize the curriculum. This, in turn, will burden those who are committed to the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education. And it may fail to realize the other two aims of liberal education, the liberatory ideal and the political ideal. Concerning neutrality, we seem damned if we do and damned if we don't.

As noted above, the debate about the educational consequences of political liberalism has been dominated by Rawls's distinction between ethical liberalism and political liberalism. The main difference between them concerns the status of autonomy. The principle questions tend to be: "Is there a right to autonomy?" And "Can an education not committed to autonomy educate good citizens?" Given this, it also seems clear that those whose interests are threatened by a liberal education are

those who wish to lead a life fully embedded in some religious tradition that does not value autonomy. Attention becomes focused on the Amish and on people such as the Mozerts.

My argument alters this discussion in two ways. First, it adds to the debate questions concerning the status of the ideal of human flourishing that is part of the package of liberal education. This in turn makes the question of what neutrality of intent requires more complex because an education that teaches academic subjects with integrity is unlikely to be neutral. Second, my argument adds to the mix a consideration of what would be required were we to take seriously Tomasi's claim that political liberals must be concerned for the foreseeable consequences of liberal culture and must engage in tax-flattening on behalf of those disproportionately disadvantaged. Tomasi's argument adds a significant consequentialist component to the debate about liberal neutrality. We must now do some form of assessment of benefits and burdens to decide who is entitled to tax-flattening and of what sort. Like many consequentialist arguments such an assessment is complex and subject to many vagaries of interpretation.

When we put these two additional concerns together, the matter becomes quite messy. Tomasi's discussion still holds to the view that it is primarily religious fundamentalists that are burdened by liberal society. When we add a concern for human flourishing to Tomasi's consequentialist requirements, my argument suggests that it is far from obvious who is burdened and by what. This argument I have given is, of course, both highly speculative and quite incomplete. I think it takes the matter far enough, however, to suggest that the likely result of a consequentialist appraisal of the requirements of liberal neutrality will produce a bewildering array of claims for accommodation and the redistribution of benefits and burdens.

What to do? I would suggest that one implication of my argument is that educators focus on the question of teaching their intellectual crafts with integrity and avoid attempts at accommodation that require complex calculations of educational benefits and burdens. This, of course, will not deal fully with the set of issues. The demand to teach with integrity is framed hypothetically. In effect it says "If you are to teach academic subjects with integrity, then you must give the ideal of human flourishing of liberal education its due." This falls short of requiring a liberal education. Moreover, the ideal of human flourishing, as I have developed it, may be met in some measure through crafts or other non-academic practices. Hence nothing I have said here requires that we round up the Amish and give them a liberal education. At most, it may require, when fundamentalists (or philistines) want a curriculum that is instrumentalized or otherwise made safe for their views, that they be resisted. But arguments to require liberal education will have to appeal to the liberatory ideal or the political ideal. The ideal of human flourishing leads only to a demand to teach with integrity.¹⁸

1. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

2. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

3. John Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice: Citizens, Society, and the Boundaries of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
4. *Ibid.*, 36.
5. *Ibid.*, 37-38.
6. *Ibid.*, 37-39.
7. *Mozert v. Hawkins County Public Schools*, 827 F. 2d 1058 (6th Cir. 1987).
8. Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice*, 91-95.
9. John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in *The Utilitarians* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1973), 408, 410.
10. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 426.
11. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 19.
12. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.
13. For an exemplary case see Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997).
14. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 175.
15. *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578 (1987).
16. See also Steven Macedo, "Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls," *Ethics* 105, no 3 (April 1995): 468-97.
17. The following is taken from an officially sanctioned statement on the web site of Bob Jones University: "all truth is God's truth and therefore that the pursuit of knowledge can be conducted in a way that honors the God of all truth. The second is that an acquaintance with a broad range of standard subject matters, including the most enduring of human intellectual and artistic achievements, makes the Christian more richly developed as a human being and therefore more attractive and valuable in the service of God." Ron Horton, "Christian Education at Bob Jones University," <http://www.bju.edu/academics/ed_purpose>.
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