

## Communitarian Liberalism and Common Schools

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Karen Adams is an unusual breed among philosophers: she employs the insights of communitarian thinking to *bolster* liberalism rather than critique it. Were I a cynic, I might say that she is a closet communitarian merely posing as a liberal. Or were her paper not so carefully argued, I might say that her communitarian views of the self undermine her stated goal of a politically liberal society. But Adams makes clear that she supports political liberalism, adopting Rawls' idea of an overlapping consensus as the fulcrum of civic engagement. Her paper is careful to avoid the standard problems of communitarian views of the self, which seem to me to undermine the individual autonomy necessary to espouse any robust version of liberalism. In this response I discuss and raise some questions about how these communitarian views inform her argument.

Adams's ultimate project is to show that common schooling fails the goals of common education in a politically liberal society. Instead, as she suggests in her conclusion, we ought to give greater prominence to the mediating structures of society — family, neighborhoods, churches, civic associations. These various institutions, she claims, simultaneously enable individuals to develop their comprehensive doctrines, provide multiple opportunities for critical reflection upon one's goods and ends, and constitute arenas for civic debate and engagement, places where an overlapping consensus may form.

Why does common schooling fail the goals of common education in a politically liberal society? According to Adams, a politically liberal society will provide significant opportunities for individuals to develop comprehensive doctrines, or robust conceptions of the good. But it will also demand that no single doctrine becomes the precondition for participation in civic life. Instead, individuals bring their comprehensive doctrines to civic discourse and attempt to find places where their respective beliefs converge, or places where their particular convictions may be set aside for political purposes to form an overlapping consensus. Common schools, Adams argues, fail these goals because they cannot simultaneously initiate children into comprehensive doctrines (robust ethical conceptions of the good) and develop in them the necessary political conception (thin civic language to bind people together politically) that will bind together a diverse citizenry.

All of this turns on Adams's communitarian views of the self. Adams herself never uses the term communitarian, but instead posits a "tradition-dependent" view of the self. To Adams, this means that each person is firmly located in a particular history. "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." We are not self-authors, radically free in choosing who we are to become; we are instead born into traditions and communities we do not choose, our freedom constrained insofar as we

cannot create for ourselves an existence or identity from whole cloth. Compare this “tradition-dependent” view to that of classic communitarians like Alasdair MacIntyre: “We enter human society...with one or more imputed characters — roles into which we have been drafted — and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.”<sup>1</sup> Or compare Michael Sandel: “To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments...is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth. For to have character is to know that I move in a history I neither summon nor command, which carries consequences nonetheless for my choices and conduct.”<sup>2</sup>

With this tradition-dependent, or communitarian view of the self, Adams inveighs against Rawls’s idea of the original position, a hypothetical ground where individuals, stripped of all essential characteristics, reason their way to principles of justice. She instead uses Rawls’s idea of an overlapping consensus, which does not strip away our historical encumbrances. She concludes that a healthy overlapping consensus depends upon individuals who bring robust and developed comprehensive doctrines to the table, and that the development of such comprehensive doctrines depends crucially not upon common schools, but upon “the communities and traditions of private life.” In other words, schools are insufficient for fostering the comprehensive doctrines in individuals and the political language necessary for the overlapping consensus to emerge. This must be left to mediating structures that are more local and particular than common schools.

Unlike MacIntyre and Sandel, thus, Adams’s communitarian view is used to support political liberalism rather than criticize it. Her view nevertheless raises several important questions that I pose here at the end of my response.

First, Rawls takes great pains, especially in the more recent reformulation of his theory in *Political Liberalism*, to argue that the original position is strictly hypothetical and that, *contra* Sandel, it implies no particular metaphysical view of self (that is, a self given before its ends).<sup>3</sup> Its ahistorical character is necessary to gain agreement about baseline principles of justice that then inform the basic structure of society. When Adams insists that individuals must retain their comprehensive doctrines when they enter civic discourse and attempt to reach an overlapping consensus, she never acknowledges that some comprehensive doctrines are incompatible with each other and simply admit of no agreement. Rawls’s original position places a veil of ignorance over these comprehensive doctrines precisely to establish consensus about the basic principles of justice. How can Adams guarantee that there will be convergence of comprehensive doctrines, even where it is assumed that such convergence will be politically rather than ethically circumscribed?

Second, Adams rejects relying on common schools to achieve the goals of common education. But could not common schools be seen as yet one more mediating structure? No theory of political liberalism ever claimed to rely exclusively on common schools as the medium of common education. Liberals, Rawls included, emphasize the educative function of families, communities, and civil society. Why not view schools as but one more mediating institution?

Finally, Adams tantalizingly suggests at the end of her paper that we rethink the amount of time children spend in schools. In the face of proposals to extend the school day or school year, in a situation where American children spend significantly less time in the classroom than their international peers, where school is a necessary form of daycare for working parents, I wonder where Adams thinks children will more profitably spend their time. And how will that time be structured? To this question, she only offers us a ringing platitude: strengthen families, religions, neighbors, work, and hobbies. But surely a politically liberal society, a place of, in her words, “pragmatic liberalism,” will want to debate more specific proposals. Active, informed citizens would settle for nothing less.

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1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 216.
  2. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 179.
  3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 22-28.