

Character Education in Pluralistic Democracies: Can (Political) Liberals Teach Civic Virtue?

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POLITICAL LIBERALISM AND ITS CRITICS

Advocates of political liberalism such as John Rawls and Richard Rorty maintain that democratic states should act only on principles that could be justified in terms acceptable to all of its citizens, that is, with reference to whatever overlapping consensus happens to exist regarding the proper norms and priorities for the state's key political, social, and economic institutions. On controversial moral questions, where by definition an overlapping consensus does not exist, the state should remain neutral.

Political liberals typically assign public schools a limited role in developing civic virtues to sustain democratic culture and institutions.¹ This reflects the pluralism that characterizes modern democratic states, whose citizens represent a wide range of religious, moral, political, and cultural traditions with different and sometimes incompatible views of the good. To be consistent with political liberalism, character education should not advance any particular view of the good life unless its goals could be justified with reference to an overlapping consensus. For Rawls, the kind of goals for civic character education that could be justified in pluralistic social contexts would be those that help students cultivate "the disposition to co-operate with others on reciprocal terms and to accept that there are many sources of reasonable disagreement among citizens."²

Critical of political liberalism's "procedural republic," Michael Sandel argues that its minimalist educational initiatives would *not* suffice to prepare young people to participate in and preserve a democratic way of life. He advocates a more robust form of civic character education that would help students develop a more complete complement of intellectual and moral virtues. As Jon Fennell reports, Sandel defends his educational aims against objections from Rawls and Rorty in part by challenging the procedural republic's claims to neutrality. Sandel argues that political liberals do not and cannot remain neutral on controversial moral issues when establishing state policies and enacting its laws. Rather, their moral beliefs come into play when they rule on what kinds of considerations can and cannot be included in public debate. Should abortion be legal and, if so, under what conditions? According to Sandel, when political liberals rule that debate on the legality of abortion must "bracket" controversial moral beliefs — such as those based upon religious beliefs about the status of the fetus — political liberals thereby favor some comprehensive views of human life at the expense of others. This and similar examples show that the procedural republic is really a form of comprehensive liberalism in disguise.³

Fennell claims that this argument fails to find its target. Accusing Rawls and Rorty of nonneutrality is ineffective because it misinterprets their position on

political justification, that is, what they mean when they assert that “democracy is prior to philosophy.” Commitment to political liberalism does *not* require that a democratic state’s institutions, policies, or laws are value-neutral *or* that they are equally hospitable to all views of the good. Instead, the kind of neutrality to which the procedural republic is committed is one that avoids justifying its actions on grounds “that could be reasonably rejected by some of its citizens.”⁴ Conversely, the state can legitimately enforce principles of justice that might restrict individuals or groups in the pursuit of their vision of the good life if those principles can be justified in terms of an overlapping consensus on democratic ideals. Fennell concludes — rightly, in my view — that if Sandel is to overcome objections to his educational aims from advocates of the procedural republic then he must “move to different ground.”

THE PRIORITY OF DEMOCRACY TO PHILOSOPHY: A CLOSER LOOK

Fennell challenges Rorty’s claim that democracy in the procedural republic is prior to philosophy in order to provide Sandel’s proposals for civic character education a “deeper defense that Rorty, on his own grounds, ought to accept.” As I read it, Fennell’s case can be constructed as an argument with the following premises:

1. Political liberalism’s commitment to democracy in the form of the procedural republic is philosophical because democracy is based upon the belief that all men are created equal.
2. A democratic state will only persist if some significant portion of each new generation comes to share a belief in human equality and to understand its implications for public institutions and policies.
3. Achieving the objective of (2) requires a robust form of civic character education.

In Fennell’s words:

Sandel...stops short of forthrightly expressing the logic that alone anchors his educational program and the non-neutral objectives...to which it gives rise. That “all men are created equal” may well be self-evident. But that perception is not a gift of birth; one must learn to see that the principle is true. The social and political implications of equality, including the corresponding understanding of rights and responsibilities, must also be learned. Civic education (including character education, linked to a sense of identity and infused by a sense of the good) is in this sense necessary.

Fennell concludes that because Rorty cares about democracy he should support the robust civic character education that democratic states need to survive. Waiting for broad public consent to teach democratic virtues is unrealistic because political conflict simply runs too deep:

One wishes that democratic principles and institutions... were not held in doubt or contempt; but to refrain from democratic character education until such doubt and contempt has disappeared is to wait forever, since such character education is among the necessary conditions of dissipation of the doubt and contempt.

We can expect Rorty to reject the first premise of this argument; he is adamant that democracy needs no metaphysical foundations of this kind.⁵ However, Fennell provides a fallback position when he proposes that Rorty should “support the

measures that make his world possible, *even if he does not agree that they are grounded in something foundational.*” Perhaps, then, Fennell can jettison the first premise of his argument without undermining its conclusion; perhaps it suffices simply to establish that democratic states will not survive without the kind of robust character education that Sandel and Fennell recommend. Does it not make perfect sense to argue with a pragmatist who celebrates instrumental rationality on grounds of expedience?

It is an open question whether and, if so, how it could be empirically established that democratic states require a particular form of civic character education to survive. As Rorty observes, “the collapse of the liberal democracies would not, in itself, provide much evidence for the claim that human societies cannot survive without widely shared opinions on matters of ultimate importance.”⁶ However, even if an empirical case could be made that compulsory civic character education is necessary to ensure the survival of the state, Rorty is not committed by his political liberalism to agree that the end justifies the means.

I think Fennell is closer to the mark when he questions the assumption that disputes on moral matters are not susceptible to satisfactory resolution. I am not certain that seeing democracy as *prior* to philosophy requires the belief that moral conflicts will not be resolved when they result from differences between comprehensive views of the good. Either way, however, Rorty is committed in the name of solidarity to creating “as much intersubjective agreement as possible.”⁷ Therefore, all things being equal, he should support forms of civic character education through which future citizens would acquire the intellectual and moral virtues that would enable them to resolve disputes on controversial ethical issues.

Rorty’s politics and ethics are closely linked to, and perhaps based upon, his antifoundationalist epistemology. I expect that, to win his support, a robust form of character education would have to show how the criteria of judgment internal to a particular tradition and community’s moral vocabulary and practices can be justified in a noncircular and nonfoundational way. Rorty aside, Fennell must show how conflicts between competing moral traditions admit of rational resolution because, without a convincing response to cultural moral relativism, we are left with civic indoctrination.

Fennell does not provide or cite a response to Rorty’s antifoundationalism. Nor does he explain *how* we could show those who do not share our vision of the good life that they are in error. Therefore, I do not think Rorty would be persuaded that “character education as outlined by Sandel and Dewey” is required to establish and nurture tolerance. On the contrary, I think Rorty would be alarmed by the simple assertion that we can “possess an authoritative conception of the good” based, perhaps, on “grasping the self-evidence of human equality.” If character education is not to rely upon coercion and indoctrination (of the kind that characterized, for example, some residential schools for the indigenous peoples of North America), we must know more about how understanding and agreement can be reached by people representing competing moral traditions in our pluralistic world.

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1. M. Victoria Costa, "Rawlsian Civic Education: Political not Minimal," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2004): 1–14. Costa makes a case that political liberalism is compatible with more robust forms of civic character education than the one defended by Rawls.
 2. *Ibid.*, 6.
 3. *Ibid.*, 2.
 4. *Ibid.*, 4.
 5. Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
 6. *Ibid.*, 95; see also 177.
 7. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 23.