

Avoiding the Rocks Between the Scylla of Normative Commitments and the Charybdis of Dubious Facts

Michael S. Katz
San Jose State University

How should one describe Francis Schrag's effort in this essay to give useful guidance to policy scholars? It seems to be sufficiently removed from direct policy analysis that one would call it a meta-level critique of policy scholarship, especially that undertaken by his colleagues in philosophy of education. The broad outlines of his essay are this. First, Schrag asks us to consider what kinds of mistakes a policy scholar can make in his policy analysis and then gives us several illustrations of these purported mistakes in the work of some policy scholars. He suggests that policy scholars can easily make two kinds of mistakes: (1) the mistake of not examining hidden and problematic normative commitments that underlie their work; (2) the mistake of not noticing how dubious facts underlie their arguments—facts, which, if proven wrong, would distort their recommendations and weaken their analysis. I would suggest that these two kinds of mistakes are analogous to the rocks of Scylla and Charybdis awaiting Ulysses on his return home—they might destroy the vessel of the policy scholar's argument. In the final third of his essay, Schrag asks us to consider other ways in which our normative commitments and theories can influence our policy analysis. Here he suggests that one's normative commitments may play additional roles: (1) they may influence what facts might be admitted in a particular case and (2) they may influence what "normative lens should be used to interpret these facts." Since I am in sympathy with much of the meta-level analysis Schrag makes, my goal here will be to extend his project through my own commentary and show its connection to some things he does not talk about—rather than quibble with every little thing in the essay I did not agree with. In general, Schrag's essay does us a service by illustrating how policy analysis is grounded in our beliefs about what is desirable, that is, our normative commitments, and our beliefs about how the world actually works. I have virtually no disagreement with him at this point.

As a matter of fact, a cursory look at present educational policy illustrates his major claims. Existing educational policy thrusts seems prophetic of what Thomas Green told us over twenty years ago in his book *Predicting the Behavior of the System*, namely that educational policy is not regulated by an informed ideal of what is desirable but by concern over what is not tolerable.¹ It is not tolerable, obviously, to graduate students who are mathematically and verbally illiterate. It may not even be desirable to keep passing these students from grade to grade without minimal demonstrations of mathematical and verbal literacy, although we seem to have become comfortable with a system of age-graded socialization rather than mastery of skills or content. Now, along come the policy makers—not the policy scholars—namely, the national and state legislators who are going to legislate us to achieve higher levels of literacy. How will they do that? Those of us in the United States now know the answer: with accountability testing, virtually every year, in virtually every

state, backed by the threat of taking over schools that do not improve unsatisfactory school-wide test scores. So what are the implicit normative commitments embedded in this policy and what is the underlying normative vision of education? First, we must say that educational policy is not conceived of, as it is in some European countries, as being broader than schooling. It is simply schooling policy. And schooling policy is conceived of in a reductionist way—it aims solely and exclusively for “cognitive achievement”—not the cultivation of educational dispositions such as curiosity, a love of learning, open-mindedness, a sensitivity to others, or even being reasonable. And how is cognitive achievement conceived? Ah, glad you asked. Of course, by scores on high stakes standardized tests, many of which bear minimal content validity with the curricula of the schools. As Schrag tells us with John Witte’s analysis of vouchers and Tom Loveless’s analysis of detracking, such policy proposals smuggle into themselves a particular view of what is desirable. So, while Schrag talked about scholarly policy analyses, I am suggesting a parallel with contemporary educational policy itself; it seems clear that these policies influence how the public thinks about the desirable ends of schooling. Whether we think the normative commitments underlying these policies are hidden or not, they seem painfully problematic. Unfortunately, few of us have entered the policy arena to criticize them forcefully.

In that regard, I found it a little surprising that there was no call to arms here: no invocation that philosophers of education ought to turn their considerable analytic and intellectual talents to joining the political fray so that they might reveal the shallow and flawed assumptions underlying contemporary educational policy. What is the fundamental advice Schrag gives policy scholars? First, he tells them that they should “formulate broad principles with enough built-in flexibility to accommodate diverse factual conditions.” By way of conclusion he tells them that they should structure their persuasive arguments based on the audience; if it is a sympathetic audience that shares your convictions, you need not draw attention to the problematic empirical assumptions in the argument, and if it is an audience likely to disagree with your conclusions, then assume the facts your opponents assert and work with them. Neither of these advice-giving conclusions is argued for, and I find them unconvincing—and not a powerful way of ending the essay. It seems to me that the essay pushes policy scholars hard in the direction of a certain kind of intellectual integrity or honesty. This integrity must be based on not misleading people *directly or indirectly* by doing several things: (1) make the fundamental normative commitments of the essay and the underlying normative vision explicit; (2) identify factual assumptions that are simply that—assumptions—not proven empirical conclusions and admit that research might disprove them; and (3) accept that those starting with a different ideological and normative set of commitments are likely to disagree with both the underlying commitments and the lens these commitments provide for interpreting the facts. Policy scholars are often likely to be advocates for the kinds of policies that support their normative vision, but they should be honest scholars and good scholars at the same time. Schrag’s essay is testimony to this conclusion.

Now a few additional miscellaneous points: First, I am surprised that Schrag did not acknowledge that there is a well-established naturalistic tradition in ethics that does not accept the divorce between norms and facts, but believes that norms are

reducible to facts. He does not have to accept this tradition, one that includes Dewey and Perry and others but he should acknowledge it. Second, his discussion about “school choice,” in the south after desegregation seems a little misleading; the whites did not have “a choice.” They were not about to send their children to terrible all black schools. The blacks had a terrible and restrictive choice since they were putting their children’s lives and well-being at risk by sending them to all white schools; “this freedom of choice” plan was not at all that—but a way to maintain separate schools, with possibly a few black students in some of them. Third, his discussion about “parental satisfaction” seems right on the mark; satisfied about what? For what reasons? Several years ago in a TV special about schools they reported that there was a Harris survey in which people were asked if schools were better or worse than they were when you went to school? Thirty five percent of the respondents gave the intelligent answer. “They did not know.” Better or worse in what sense? According to what criteria? This was a stupid question; it did not ask for things to be compared in some respect according to some criteria. Parental satisfaction has the same disutility. Finally, in some policy debates, a disagreement about facts cannot be separated from a disagreement about norms. For example, in the abortion debate, one side claims as a fact that human life begins at conception. That metaphysical belief about the world leads to the view that a fertilized egg is a human being and to destroy it, even in its first trimester, is “murder.” The opposing side usually argues that human life does not begin until the fertile embryo has developed to the point that it can be sustained outside the womb. That often leads to the conclusion that the moral interests of an embryo in its first trimester are not equivalent to the interests of the mother to have control over her body. When does human life begin? Is this a matter of fact or normative conviction or both? Here is another issue: when do policy debates start with such competing normative points that there is really no debate at all—simply people talking past each other, or hurling weapons at each other. Consider the Israeli-Palestinian issue. One side claims “Israel is the legitimate homeland of the Jewish people.” Many on the other side do not, and cannot, accept this. On the other hand, the other side claims that Palestinians living in the areas now controlled by Israel have “a right to return to that land.” Those on the other side are unlikely to accept that. The rhetoric reveals dramatically different views of “reality”—historically and contemporarily—and dramatically different normative visions of what is desirable. Can these different views of reality and normative vision be reconciled? Some would argue that debates over Israel and Palestine are akin to debates over abortion—two sides usually talking or shouting past each other. I am not sure. What I am sure of is that Schrag did not want to take his views of “scholarly policy analysis” out to the extreme cases. But what I would ask him to consider is this—as he presses forward. Under what conditions does policy debate prove relatively useless? Or dangerous? Or destructive? And under what conditions does it prove most fruitful? I know that he is committed to doing his share to insure that policy conversation in education is a fruitful enterprise, and I thank him for that—and for his thoughtful essay.

1. See Thomas F. Green, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1980).