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Editorial Essay

The Importance of Philosophy for Education in a Democratic Society

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This essay explores the importance of philosophy for the study and practice of education in a democratic society. It will be argued that at its core education is a *normative* enterprise, in that it is driven by fundamental social values as well as the imperatives of social justice. These values and imperatives powerfully shape every dimension of educational theory, policy, and practice. From this perspective, education requires a normative frame of reference. Democracy, understood as not only a political system but more fundamentally as a way of life grounded in specific values and principles, provides a powerful point of reference. At the heart of democracy is the value of liberty, understood as self-determination. Self-determination requires that there should be careful reflection upon and rational deliberation concerning social values and, in turn, the imperatives of justice that inform the purposes and practices of education. It will be argued that philosophy constitutes a mode of inquiry and a discipline that enriches the capacity for reflection and rational deliberation, and hence it is essential for both democracy *and* the study and practice of education in a democratic society.

Education as a Normative Enterprise

There are a number of ways in which education is normative. While what follows is not an exhaustive list, it is arguably sufficient to demonstrate the normative nature of education.

First, education is an intentional activity. The planning and implementation of education isn't arbitrary; it is purposeful and forward-looking. Being intentional and purposeful, education is value driven. Educational ends are driven by and express what we value as individuals and as a people. Human beings do not merely reproduce themselves biologically; we are cultural beings, and we therefore engage in cultural reproduction. We attempt to reproduce what we believe is most valuable about our way of life. Being intentional, purposeful, and value driven, education involves, for individuals, families, and the society, choices about a way of life. From a normative point of view, choice in turn requires both ethical and political justification.¹ Betty Reardon succinctly articulates this perspective: "Most . . . agree that there is no neutral education. Education is a social enterprise conducted for the realization of social values."² *What values and in turn purposes should drive education, and why? Who should decide what values and purposes should apply, and why? How should these values be prioritized, and why? How should value conflict be adjudicated, and why?*

Second, being driven by a social choice of a way of life, and being a foundation for membership and participation in society, education constitutes a basic public good. *As a public good, who should have authority over it? What should be the limits of that authority?*³

In turn, the distribution of education as a basic public good is a question of distributive justice. As the political philosopher John Rawls suggests: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust."⁴ The distribution of a basic public good should comport with the imperatives of justice.⁵ *What constitutes a just distribution of educational resources? What defines justice?*

¹ James M. and Harold G. Cannon Banner, *The Elements of Teaching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education, Text-Book Series in Education* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970); Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, revised edition ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

² Betty A. Reardon, *Comprehensive Peace Education: Educating for Global Responsibility* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988). p. 23

³ Gutmann, *Democratic Education*; Dale T. Snauwaert, *Democracy, Education, and Governance: A Developmental Conception* (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). P. 1

⁵ Marilyn Gittell, *Strategies for School Equity : Creating Productive Schools in a Just Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*; Joseph P. Viteritti, *Choosing Equality : School Choice, the Constitution, and Civil Society* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice : A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

Third, a democratic society founded upon a right to liberty is deontological, in the sense that it does not prescribe *per se* a particular conception of the good life. Individuals possess the right to define and pursue their own conceptions of the good life, consistent with the equal right of others. This basic freedom invites, generates, and fosters pluralism, a diversity of perspectives, values, cultural ways of life, etc. Given the legitimate existence of pluralism, and the fundamental importance of cultural, religious, and other forms of identity to personal well being, a society's response to diversity is a question of justice, and thus should comport with its imperatives.⁶ *What constitutes a just response to diversity? How should public institutions, such as schools and educational systems, respond to diversity? Do individuals have a right to cultural recognition? If so, what individual and state obligations are entailed in this right? Should a right to cultural recognition be balanced with the need for social unity and individual autonomy? What would constitute a proper balance between recognition, unity, and autonomy? Is it possible to articulate a conception of multiculturalism that fulfills the twin goals of national unity and cultural recognition?*

Fourth, the educational experience necessarily has content. The organization of this content in the form of the curriculum is comprised of what knowledge, skills, dispositions is held to be most valuable. The curriculum is also value-driven.⁷ *What knowledge, skills, and dispositions are most valuable? Should they reflect our most fundamental values?*

Fifth, how we teach is as significant as what we teach. In one sense pedagogy follows from the logical structure of the curriculum, and is thus by implication value driven. In another sense, the method of teaching constitutes a relationship between teacher and student. This relationship constitutes a power relation; the teacher exercises power and authority over the student. It, therefore, has a moral and political dimension.⁸ *Should a democratic pedagogy follow from the core democratic values? Should the value of self-reflection and rational deliberation, central to democracy, be actualized in*

⁶ Walter Feinberg, *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities: National Unity and Cultural Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Gutmann, *Democratic Education*; Kevin and Walter Feinberg (Editors) McDonough, *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁷ George Sylvester Counts, *The Social Foundations of Education* (New York, Chicago etc.: C. Scribner's sons, 1934); Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*; John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum/the School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1900/1902] 1956); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage, Critical Perspectives Series* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998); Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.

⁸ Banner, *The Elements of Teaching*; Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2001); Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

the form of a democratic pedagogy? What would constitute such a pedagogy? What constitutes a morally and political right relationship between teacher and students?

The answers to these questions are consequential. They profoundly influence educational purposes and goals, curriculum, pedagogy, organization, and governance. They are normative questions, and thus they illustrate the normative nature of education.

Democracy as a Normative Frame of Reference

How should we engage these normative social and educational questions? One way is to approach them unreflectively. We can easily adopt particular values and imperatives unconsciously, based upon our socialization. We choose randomly. We can adopt them consciously out of fear of those who hold power over us, or we can engage in a process of conscious, rational reflection and deliberation. As John Dewey suggests: “. . . schools *do* follow and reflect the social ‘order’ that exists . . . accordingly, the problem is not whether the schools *should* participate in the production of future society (since they do so anyway) but whether they should do it blindly and irresponsibly or with the maximum possible courageous intelligence and responsibility.”⁹

Educational reflection and deliberation, however, require a normative frame of reference. Human beings interpret and understand experience, including values and moral and political principles, through frames of reference. We think, choose and value within context of frameworks of discourse and understanding.¹⁰

It has long been recognized that education is contingent upon the specific social and political organization of the society within which it is situated. For example, Aristotle maintains that citizenship and civic education are logical expressions of the constitution (*politeia*) of the society. The *politeia* is not merely the formal juridical structure of the legal system; it comprises the basic structure of values that define the society’s view of the world.¹¹

Democracy, understood as not only a political system but more fundamentally as a way of life grounded in specific values and principles, historically constitutes the *politeia* of the United States. The United States possesses a democratic self-identity, and in fact, claims to be a beacon of democracy for the world. Normatively, democracy

⁹Dewey cited in Steven Tozer, et al., *School and Society: Educational Practice as Social Expression* (New York: MacGraw Hill, 1993). p. 121.

¹⁰George Lakoff, *Moral Politics : How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹¹Aristotle and Stephen Everson, *The Politics, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943); Clarence J. Karier, *The Individual, Society, and Education* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1986); Henri Ir  n  e Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity, Wisconsin Studies in Classics* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

should be adopted as a frame of reference, for it is the ideal most consistent with human well being and flourishing.¹² The alternative would entail the adoption of *intrinsic superiority/inferiority*, from which follow the principle of *unequal consideration* of the goods and interests of persons *as well as* the Platonic ideal of *unequal qualifications* to participate based upon superior expertise/knowledge –leading to unequal voting, hegemony, and exclusion – would apply.¹³

Democracy is an appealing and powerful normative frame of reference. As Dewey suggests: “. . . unless education has some of frame of reference it is bound to be aimless, lacking a unified objective. The necessity for a frame of reference must be admitted. There exists in our country such a frame of reference. It is called democracy.”¹⁴ At the heart of democracy are the values of moral equality and liberty, understood as an equal right to self-determination. Self-determination requires that there should be careful reflection upon and rational deliberation concerning social values and, in turn, the imperatives of justice. As Amy Gutmann puts it, democracy as a frame of reference requires “conscious social reproduction.”¹⁵ John Dewey suggests: “Democracy also means voluntary choice, based on an intelligence that is the outcome of free association and communication with others. It means a way of living together in which mutual and free consultation rule instead of force . . .”¹⁶

From the perspective of education as a normative enterprise and democracy as a normative frame of reference, all those concerned with education, parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers, should possess the capacity to engage in critical self-reflection and rational deliberation concerning fundamental social values *and* the imperatives of justice as they inform the purposes, content, methods, evaluation, organization, and governance of education.

The Importance of Philosophy

The central thesis of this paper is that philosophy constitutes a mode of inquiry and a discipline that enriches the capacity for reflection and rational deliberation, and hence it is essential for both democracy *and* the study and practice of education in a democratic society. Philosophy makes this contribution by providing frameworks for understanding and generative ideas, methods of reflection and analysis, and disciplines (exercises) for the cultivation of the capacity of reflection and rational deliberation.

Western philosophy originates with the basic question: how should we live? What is the good life? Philosophy was thus originally conceived as the pursuit of

¹² C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973); Snauwaert, *Democracy, Education, and Governance: A Developmental Conception*.

¹³ Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Dewey cited in Tozer, *School and Society: Educational Practice as Social Expression*. p. 125.

¹⁵ Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.

¹⁶ Dewey cited in Tozer, *School and Society: Educational Practice as Social Expression*. p. 125.

wisdom, the pursuit of the knowledge of how to live a good life, of how to achieve enduring happiness. As Pierre Hadot has demonstrated, ancient philosophy did not primarily concern the construction of abstract theoretical systems; philosophy was conceived as vision and existential choice of a way of life, a discourse and justification for a way chosen way of life, and the articulation of the path or curriculum leading to the realization of the ideals of the way of life. This choice was understood to be based upon the Socratic assertion that the “unexamined life is not worth living.” The focus of philosophy was the transformation of one’s way of life, one’s mode of being in the world through self-reflection and rational deliberation.¹⁷

As a way of existential choice, philosophy included sets of discursive frameworks of understanding, methods of rational deliberation, and reflective exercises necessary for the transformation of one’s being in accordance with the vision of the existential choice. Schools were formed out of the chosen way of life of the philosophy and those attracted to the philosophy. In these schools the way of life defined by the philosophy and the understandings and exercises necessary to live that life were developed, taught, and experienced. Differing opinions of what this knowledge consisted of gave rise to different schools of philosophy and in turn different conceptions of education, all though based upon the common thread: enduring happiness occurs through conscious, rational self-reflection and deliberation.

This vision of philosophy has much in common with the understanding of democracy as a way of life, as an ethical and political mode of being.

Frameworks of understanding and generative ideas:

Philosophy is based upon the presupposition, now confirmed by cognitive science, that human beings interpret and understand experience, including ideas, through frames of reference. We think within context of frameworks of discourse and understanding. Philosophy as a discipline offers the articulation of competing frames of reference in order to enhance and enrich rational deliberation. The discourse that surrounds the normative questions posed earlier takes place within and is enriched by a number of ethical and political philosophical frameworks, which frame and give meaning to the debate about them.

As discussed above, democracy itself is a philosophical frame of reference that, while deontological and based upon liberty as self-determination, stipulates a set of values and principles necessary for its sustainability. In summary, democracy can be understood as a system of rights premised upon the *logic of equality*.¹⁸ At its core is a fundamental belief in moral equality, a belief that *all* human beings possess an equal inherent dignity or worth. The ideal of human dignity upon which democracy is based is reflected in the principle of moral equality common to all modern political and ethical

¹⁷ Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Pierre Hadot and Arnold Ira Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (New York: Blackwell, 1995).

¹⁸ Dahl, *On Democracy*.

theories.¹⁹ Moral equality maintains that every human being by virtue of their humanity possesses equal intrinsic value and dignity. Moral equality is not earned or bestowed; it is inherent in our humanity. The logic of moral equality runs as follows: if we are morally equal, then our “rights,” our inviolable claims to the actual enjoyment of particular social goods, should be guaranteed by the society. The two basic rights that should follow from the egalitarian logic of democracy are: liberty and self-determination. If all human beings are equal, then they should have the right to define and pursue their own conception of the good life (consistent with the equal rights of others). They should have a right to decide their own interests, for there exists no higher moral authority. In addition, security of person should also be considered a basic right, for dignity and freedom cannot be fulfilled under the conditions of threat to the integrity of one’s person. A right to self-determination follows. It entails the basic notion of government by consent, which involves political equality and concomitant rights such as rights to freedom of expression, association, due process, etc. As moral equals, all citizens of a democracy have an inviolable claim to determine their own interests and to have those interests represented (directly or indirectly) in the political process.²⁰

While these values and principles provide the deep normative framework of democracy, there is much debate about their further specification. This debate gives rise to a number of democratic moral and political frameworks that debate the interpretation and implications of the basic deep values and principles of democracy. Thus, there exists a range or a continuum of democratic theories in general and in particular framing each of the specific normative questions inherent in the deep frame.²¹ Democratic philosophy therefore includes a number of theoretical frameworks including: value theory, political theory of authority, distributive justice theory, etc. In turn, these frameworks inform development of philosophies of democratic education. All of these frameworks inform and enrich rational deliberation.

In addition, philosophical frameworks allow for development and articulation of “generative ideas.”²² “Ideas,” distinct from facts and information, are creative acts of meaning; they are acts of *making sense* of individual experience. Ideas therefore cannot be transmitted; they emerge from each individual’s reflection on their own unique experience. In addition, ideas have generative power; they move and transform us. From this perspective, philosophy is not the production of theory *per se*, rather it is the pursuit of *ideas*— philosophy therefore speaks to how we *live*. This conception of philosophy illuminates the task of the democratic educator and citizen. From this perspective there exists a plurality of educational ideas. It is therefore fundamentally important for

¹⁹ Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*.

²⁰ Dahl, *On Democracy*; Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Dale T. Snauwaert, "Reclaiming the Lost Treasure: Deliberation and Strong Democratic Education," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 3 (1992).

²¹ David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*; C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

²² David Hansen, *Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

educators to enter into conversation with a variety of philosophies as a stimulus for the generation of their own ideas; the dynamism of their own pedagogical practice is contingent upon the generation of these ideas.

Tools of rational deliberation:

The discipline of philosophy has developed a sophisticated range of methods of analysis. These methods include methods of and for argument, conceptual distinctions, assessment and critique.²³ Many of these methods are grounded in the rules of logic and logical analysis. They include, for example, the following:

Methods of Argument

- Deduction
- Induction
- Validity and Soundness
- Consistency (logical coherence)
- Refutation
- Dialectic
- Etc.

Methods for Assessment and Critique

- Question begging
- Reductio ad absurdum
- Self-defeating arguments
- Regressions
- Redundancy
- Sufficient reason
- Alternative explanations
- Ambiguity
- Excluded middle
- Bivalence
- Category errors
- Circularity
- Conceptual incoherence
- Counter examples
- False dichotomy
- Etc.

²³ Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Philosopher's Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003).

Methods for Conceptual Distinctions

- A priori/a posteriori
- Absolute/relative
- Analytic/synthetic
- Necessary/contingent
- Essence/accident
- Necessary/Sufficient
- Objective/subjective
- Thick/thin concepts
- Etc.

The knowledge and application of these methods enable critical thinking, analysis, reflection and rational deliberation, and thus significantly enhance the capacities of democratic citizens and educators.

Exercises:

From the perspective of ancient philosophy, the search for such wisdom is interrelated with the internal preparation of the subject to receive it. Michel Foucault's analysis of the history of philosophy from the perspective of the hermeneutics of the subject reveals an "event in thought" in philosophy; this event conceives the search for truth and the preparation of the subject to receive it as intimately interrelated.²⁴ That is, throughout the history of philosophy, philosophy and internal development are linked in such a way that the discovery of wisdom is contingent upon the transformation of the wisdom seeker's being. Philosophy is thus devoted to the search for wisdom *and* the transformation of the subjectivity of the seeker.²⁵ In what Foucault refers to as the "Cartesian" moment modern epistemology the subject is divorced from the pursuit of knowledge, resulting in the separation of knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge becomes merely the technical discovery of truth divorced from the subjectivity of the knower; education in turn becomes the transmission of technical knowledge with little or no concern for the internal subjectivity of the student. In this separation modern knowledge, philosophy, and education lose their transformative power. It can argued, therefore, that interior perspective of philosophy be reclaimed and that philosophy include internal exercises of self-development.

Conclusion

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College De France, 1981-82*, ed. Frederic Gros, trans. Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Picador, 2005).

²⁵ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*; Hadot and Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*; Pierre Hadot and Aurelius Marcus, *The Inner Citadel : The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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