

## Rawls' Notion of the Political Conception as Educator

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The connection between politics and education is both ancient and intimate. Aristotle famously wrote: 'The citizen should be molded to suit the form of government under which he lives.'<sup>1</sup> Forming the character of citizens to suit the polity, he thought, will then serve to sustain the polity – 'the character of democracy creates democracy.'<sup>2</sup> This idea has been central to the revival of interest in civic, citizen, and democratic education in recent decades. A few philosophers, though, put more emphasis on the converse: Democracy itself creates the character of democracy. In other words, they emphasize the educative effect of political institutions. It is, of course, reasonable to assume that the direction of fit goes both ways here and that there is a dialectical relation between character and institutions.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, these two ideas, call them education for democracy and education through democracy, can play very different and even opposing roles within a given political theory. As I shall now try to demonstrate, this is the case with John Rawls' political liberalism.

The topic of this paper is Rawls' strangely neglected notion, the political conception as educator, which is used in Political Liberalism (*PL*) to capture the idea of how the public political culture educates citizens.<sup>4</sup> In order to put this notion in the proper light and localize the role it has for Rawls, we shall start by considering a problem that political liberalism creates for liberal-democratic education.<sup>5</sup> This raises the question of which conception of political education is to be found in *PL*, what remains, as it were, in the wake of Rawls' argu-

ment against a more comprehensive liberal education. We are then led to the idea of the political conception as educator. After first surveying its main content and some historical parallels, the rest of the paper is devoted to exploring the role it plays in Rawls' political liberalism. More specifically, my approach will be to ask why Rawls places so much trust in the educative effect of political institutions and, apparently, so little in schools. Thus, the point of the paper is not to debate the pros and cons of Rawlsian liberalism in the sphere of education, but to show the significance of the notion of the political conception as educator by way of reconstructing an argument for why Rawls put such weight on informal and indirect political education rather than the direct and formal kind. To be sure, the idea and importance of indirect political education is not original with Rawls, but the reasons he may have had for emphasizing it can still tell us something important about his political liberalism.

### **1. Comprehensive and political liberal-democratic education**

Civic education, Harry Brighouse wrote in 1998, 'is relatively uncontroversial among contemporary liberal theorists.'<sup>6</sup> Civic, citizen, and democratic education had by then become huge topics in political philosophy and the philosophy of education.<sup>7</sup> Most scholars now seem to accept that even a liberal democracy needs an education designed to enable this kind of society to thrive and endure. This is not to be an education for a specific political view, e.g. that of a particular party, but an education for democracy itself, the framework that we suppose all parties share. Yet apart from that, 'its content is disputed.'<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the content of an education for democracy, one may put emphasis on either learning about democracy or on learning to be democratic. In the first case, education for democracy is seen primarily as a matter of acquiring knowledge about society—its political structure in particular, e.g. its constitution and levels of government, but also more generally. That this has become comparatively more important in our time is a view expressed in a famous EU white paper: ‘Democracy functions by majority decision on major issues which, because of their complexity, require an increasing amount of background knowledge.’<sup>9</sup>

In the second case, education for democracy is seen as learning to be a democratic citizen, that is, cultivating those skills, virtues, and values that define a democratic ‘character,’ as Aristotle put it. The generic skills most often mentioned are critical thinking and deliberative capacities, which are thought to underwrite the values of autonomy, rationality, and tolerance. As put in the same EU white paper: ‘The future of European culture depends on its capacity to equip young people to question constantly and seek new answers without prejudicing human values. This is the very foundation of citizenship.’<sup>10</sup>

As many have noticed, though, John Rawls’ Political Liberalism poses grave challenges for this latter conception of democratic education.<sup>11</sup> He distinguishes between comprehensive and political liberalism, and there are grounds for saying that ideas of liberal-democratic education often start from something like the former. Take autonomy, understood broadly as the value of thinking for oneself and not taking for granted anything given by tradition, religion, or other authorities. Such ideas have been important in the history of liberal democracy, and are often seen as the core ingredients of an education for democracy. Howev-

er, due to the fact of pluralism, they cannot be accorded this privileged political status. Rawls locates autonomy in this strong sense as part of a comprehensive liberalism, and insofar as schooling for a particular religion is illegitimate in a liberal democracy, then so too is schooling for comprehensive liberalism.<sup>12</sup> If reasonable parents consider autonomous thought to be subversive of their doctrines, it is prima facie a violation of their rights as free and equal citizens to force it on their children. It discriminates against reasonable non-liberals to preach the comprehensive liberal value of autonomy in schools in the same way in which it discriminates against reasonable non-Christians to preach Christianity in schools.<sup>13</sup>

This argument has led to significant debate, and some writers, like Amy Gutmann, Eamonn Callan, and Stephen Macedo, have considered its educational implications more extensively than Rawls himself did.<sup>14</sup> Outside that debate, however, most writers on democratic education still seem blissfully unaware of the seemingly grave consequences that the ideas of the most influential political philosopher of the 20th century have for their topic.<sup>15</sup>

Yet Rawls' argument does not imply that all civic education must go down the drain. There is still room within his theory for a liberal-democratic education, though a somewhat different one. To distinguish it from its comprehensive counterpart, we can call it a political liberal education.<sup>16</sup> It will include only what can be justified publicly, that is, by drawing on resources from the political conception that, ideally, the various comprehensive doctrines are in overlapping consensus on.<sup>17</sup>

Most writers on Rawls' criticism of comprehensive liberal education assume that his own conception of political liberal education is meant to be very modest, indeed, 'modest to the point of banality.'<sup>18</sup> What they then have in mind is Rawls' apparent restriction of democratic education to the acquisition of knowledge about democracy. After having argued that political liberalism cannot allow autonomy as a state-imposed aim of education, he maintains that children's education should include 'knowledge of their constitutional and civic rights.'<sup>19</sup> Yet even though many proponents of democratic education find this to be very modest, it is not to be sneered at. This is especially so when we add, as Rawls actually did, that pupils should also be brought to understand the political conception expressed in, among other things, the constitution.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, teaching children the facts about our political institutions, and making them understand the political conceptions implicit in them, may be more powerful than it seems at first. In the long run, mere knowledge is more than mere knowledge. As William Galston has pointed out, empirical studies show that civic knowledge tends to lead to civic virtues, support for democratic values, and political participation.<sup>21</sup>

Rawls himself considered this possibility. He noted that even though comprehensive liberal ideas of autonomy and individuality should not regulate public education, requiring children to understand the political liberal conception could in the long run 'educate them to a comprehensive liberal conception.'<sup>22</sup> That seems reasonable enough. After all, if you are repeatedly told that you have the right to choose your religion, it is a short step towards demanding or desiring the space to exercise that right, in the form of reflecting critically on the strictures of the authorities surrounding you, be they parents, priests, or what have

you. Rawls thought that we would all have to accept this, perhaps with regret, as the unavoidable consequence of a political liberal education, even though we cannot legitimately intend the fostering of autonomy and individuality in schools, at least not as part of public schools or compulsory curricula.

One might have qualms about this part of Rawls' political liberalism, but it does show that even if democratic education was only a matter of acquiring knowledge about democracy, it may not be as modest as it might seem at first. However, there is more to it, even for Rawls. He writes, unfortunately without much elaboration, that education should 'encourage the political virtues so that [children] want to honor the fair terms of social cooperation in their relations with the rest of society.'<sup>23</sup> And what are these political virtues? The political virtues 'characterize the ideal of a good citizen of a democratic state,' but they are not derived from any comprehensive doctrine.<sup>24</sup> They include a sense of fairness and mutual respect,<sup>25</sup> a spirit of compromise and readiness to meet others halfway,<sup>26</sup> civility and tolerance, reasonableness and fair-mindedness,<sup>27</sup> and a sense of justice.<sup>28</sup> The virtue of reasonableness furthermore includes a willingness to propose and abide by fair terms of cooperation and an acceptance of the burdens of judgment.<sup>29</sup>

As Callan has made clear, these virtues may have quite extensive educational implications. This is especially the case with the acknowledgment of the burdens of judgment, which, Callan argues, takes Rawls out of political liberalism and into comprehensive liberalism and at the same time collapses the distinction between them.<sup>30</sup> Be that as it may, the other political virtues also have significant educational implications. To give but one example, 'civility'

is a signal word for Rawls' theory of public reason. The ideal of citizenship imposes on us a duty of civility: Citizens should 'be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason.'<sup>31</sup> Citizens, that is, have a duty to justify their positions on fundamental political issues by reference to public political ideas, not by reference to the partisan values embedded in one's particular comprehensive doctrine. Including this virtue as an educational aim thus implies the following constituent idea of democratic education: Future citizens should learn how to justify their political views without referring to their own comprehensive doctrines but only on 'the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by the majority,' and why this is of moral and political importance.<sup>32</sup>

## **2. The idea of the political conception as educator**

A quite substantial conception of political liberal education is therefore to be found in *PL*. Now public schools seem to be the obvious arena for this education, but it is not the only arena, and perhaps not even the primary one. An intriguing but sadly often ignored topic in Rawls' later thought is the idea of how the public political culture is the educator of citizens. Democracy itself, one might say, is the main engine of democratic education.

The basic idea is expressed in Lecture II of *PL*.<sup>33</sup> In a well-ordered society, the political conception is to be public. The finer details of this account and the so-called 'full publicity condition' need not concern us here. The important thing is that the political conception is to be shared and open in view as part of our culture. Its principles are embodied in social and

political institutions, and not only implicitly: They are used in public. We interpret them, argue from them, appeal to them, and so on. Thereby, citizens are 'made aware of and educated to this conception.'<sup>34</sup> They learn, among other things, to conceive of themselves and others as free and equal. Rawls writes:

To realize the full publicity condition is to realize a social world within which the ideal of citizenship can be learned and may elicit an effective desire to be that kind of person. This political conception as educator characterizes the wide role [of a political conception]<sup>35</sup>

The idea is also treated in Justice as Fairness: A Restatement, though it is introduced differently.<sup>36</sup> While debating the advantages of constitutional democracy, Rawls takes up an apparent dilemma for constitutionalists: If people are democratic in spirit, a constitution is not necessary, but if people are not democratic in spirit, a constitution is not sufficient. In other words, a constitution seems superfluous. Yet the dilemma disregards the constitution's potential for shaping the political sociology of the institutions in which it is expressed. More specifically, it disregards the constitution's potential for playing an educational role. When our political conception is embodied in a constitution, it is not only implicit, but also at least in part explicit, and can thus be a part of our public political culture. This is also so, perhaps even more so, when its interpretation is disputed, be that by a Supreme Court decision in the USA or a conflict over the constitutional standing of referendums in Europe. If such cases 'call forth deliberative political discussion,' then 'even these disputed decisions, by drawing citizens into public debate, may serve a vital educational



role.<sup>37</sup> A similar argument is found in *PL*, in the section ‘The Supreme Court as Exemplar of Public Reason.’ Even in times of controversy, or especially in times of controversy, the Supreme Court can make political debate take a principled form, focus attention on shared political values, and thereby ‘educate citizens to the use of public reason.’<sup>38</sup>

The idea of the political conception as educator is clearly not an invention *ex nihilo* by Rawls. Murphy writes, though without reference to Rawls:

[Many] political theorists, from Aristotle to Tocqueville, believed that civic education, including, and perhaps especially, democratic civic education, was mainly the by-product of growing up and participating in a democratic polity. Perhaps democratic civic virtue is a matter not of deliberate instruction, but of ‘habits of the heart’ acquired indirectly, yet profoundly, from activities in churches, voluntary associations, and juries.<sup>39</sup>

It is hard to tell where Rawls himself got the idea. In his lectures on moral philosophy, he quotes Hegel, whose defense of political publicity resembles his own, although Rawls seems to have had more confidence in courts than parliaments: ‘If the Estates hold their assemblies in public, they afford a great public spectacle of outstanding educational value to the citizens’.<sup>40</sup> Rawls concludes this section by saying: ‘This is a strong statement of the educative role of political life in fashioning a lively and informed public opinion.’<sup>41</sup> He thus echoes his own idea of the public political culture as educator.

Another candidate is Tocqueville, who Rawls mentions as the foremost example of what he calls 'classical republicanism,' the view that democracy depends on widespread political participation by informed citizens. More pertinently, Murphy holds up Tocqueville as the prime modern advocate for 'the ancient view that schools foster academic knowledge just as politics fosters civic virtue.'<sup>42</sup> Or in the words of Tocqueville himself: 'The institutions of a township are to freedom what primary schools are to science.'<sup>43</sup> The idea is also salient in John Stuart Mill, who was greatly influenced by Tocqueville. As Garforth has shown, the notion of the self-educative society permeates all of Mill's thought.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the main merit of democracy is exactly its educative character. Democracy educates through free expression and vigorous debate, and in particular through participation. Even at the lowest local levels, government is a 'school of public spirit.'<sup>45</sup> Things like sitting on a jury, standing as a candidate and doing volunteer work are, Mill writes, 'the practical part of the political education of a free people, taking them out of the narrow circle of personal and family selfishness ... habituating them to act from public or semi-public motives.'<sup>46</sup> In line with his comprehensive doctrine, the purpose of society as a whole, for Mill, is the diffusion of democratic education. With his notion of the political conception as educator, Rawls suggests a similar view, though for him, it is restricted to the political area and not extendable to society as a whole.

### **3. Civic schooling and civic education**

There are many problems with Rawls' idea of the political conception as educator. One might, for instance, simply reject it by claiming that people are not, in fact, educated by the

political culture or the political institutions of their society. One might also argue that there will always be conflicting interpretations of which principles are embodied in institutions, and thus that the education these institutions provide will not produce consensus. However, I will not go into such arguments here. Let us, for the sake of argument, just assume that citizens are educated to the political conception by growing up in a society where that conception is embodied in basic institutions. Let us assume that citizens learn the ideal of citizenship through the public political culture, and thereby develop a desire to realize that ideal. We are still faced with a difficult question: Which role does the idea of the political conception as educator play in Rawls' later theory? Why is it there?

The question that *PL* sets out to answer is how a stable and just liberal democracy is possible. The idea of an overlapping consensus is the major part of Rawls' answer. Yet Rawls was not only after a purely theoretical solution. He was not happy just to show that the idea of a stable and just liberal democracy is coherent. Hence, he also needed an account of how overlapping consensus is not merely a theoretical possibility, but a realistic one. For this purpose, as Joshua Cohen makes clear, 'we need a mechanism – a social or political process that might produce convergence on political values but that does not similarly generate consensus on comprehensive moral values.'<sup>47</sup> Rawls finds that mechanism in the educative role of institutions. Agreement on fundamental political values emerges from 'the acquisition of ideas and principles embodied in shared institutions.'<sup>48</sup> It is by growing up and living our lives in and around public political institutions, more than by reasoning or instruction, that we form attachments to the ideas and values expressed in those institutions, Cohen argues in concert with Rawls. In this way, the public political culture itself provides the

necessary moral-political education, though this does not extend to more comprehensive ideas and values. Over generations, the educative effect of shared political institutions will accumulate, so that what was at first a mere compromise—an armistice, as it were—takes root in our minds and grows into our value set.

Let us assume that Cohen's account is correct as a reading of Rawls.<sup>49</sup> It still seems as though Rawls misses a far simpler and more obvious solution to the problem of how an overlapping consensus can come forth: schools. Why not use schools deliberately to foster agreement on a political conception of justice? Victoria Costa criticizes Rawls on just this point. She argues that Rawls neglects the role of schools in civic education and that he is too optimistic about the capacity of social and political institutions to educate citizens 'mechanically.' He naively assumes, Costa says, 'that life under just institutions in a well ordered society will, by itself, reproduce citizens' adherence to them.'<sup>50</sup> On that background, she takes Rawls to task for not addressing the role of educational institutions in providing a political liberal education: 'Rawls tends to underestimate the fundamental role of educational institutions in building and sustaining a just society through time, relying instead on some sort of invisible hand.'<sup>51</sup> This is especially important, she claims, when it is a matter of building a just society, making a consensus come forth where there is none. If we already have a well-ordered society with an overlapping consensus on fundamental political principles, we might trust institutions to form the citizens it needs, but not if that condition is still to arrive.

One might be tempted to answer Costa's criticism by arguing that Rawls might have counted the common school among those institutions that play a politically educative role, even if he himself did not explicitly say so. We might argue, for instance, that by attending a school with children of different classes and doctrines where all are treated as having equal standing, that school could be one of those institutions from which we indirectly acquire a conception of ourselves as equal citizens.<sup>52</sup> This, though, is not what Costa has in mind. Rather, she rather wants civic education to be part of the school's curriculum. That is, she wants deliberate, systematic efforts for teaching civic values and she cannot understand why Rawls should have any misgivings about that.

Costa does not address, however, the reasons Rawls might have had for not assigning the necessary civic education to schools, as though he simply underestimated the educational power of schools and overestimated that of (other) political institutions. But Rawls' reasons for counting out schooling were not of this sort. It is not that liberal political citizenship cannot, as a matter of empirical fact, be (well) learned in schools, even though that certainly may be the case. Murphy, for instance, has forcefully argued against civic schooling on just these grounds:

Contemporary political science ratifies the wisdom of political philosophers, ancient and modern: public virtue is acquired only by active participation in public affairs. Becoming a 'good citizen' is important, but schools turn out to be very inept instruments for teaching good citizenship.<sup>53</sup>

This, though, is not Rawls' reason for disregarding schools. But if educational efficiency is not Rawls' problem, what is? Why not let schools push consensus forward? Why restrict ourselves to hoping or trusting that it will emerge?

To answer this question, we must first have an idea of what societies without an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice might look like. Fortunately, or unfortunately as the case may be, we do not have to go far to get that idea. What distinguishes our kind of society? Where are we now on the road from modus vivendi to overlapping consensus? Cynics will say that the limited amount of consensus in our kind of society is a mere modus vivendi. Kurt Baier, who coined the term, thought that we (or at least the USA) exist in a state of constitutional consensus.<sup>54</sup> What Rawls himself thought, I do not know, though it appears that he did not consider America to have reached the promised land, that is, a society well-ordered by an overlapping consensus around a political conception of justice.<sup>55</sup> Yet, whatever Rawls may have thought, I think we are given too few alternatives to answer the where-are-we-now question. Reality is far more of a hodgepodge than what is allowed for in Rawls' tripartite, ideal-typical classification of consensus.<sup>56</sup>

Here is one possibility, more true, I think, to actual democracies. There is widespread consensus on most of the constitution, but many disagree with some parts of it and some disagree with many parts, without being unreasonable for that matter. The same applies to consensus on the political conception of justice, the various ideas and values that ground the constitution. Besides, agreement comes in degrees. We might agree on certain elements of the constitution or the conception, but still have very or slightly different interpretations

of those elements. Or we might disagree, but still feel the distance between us to be small or even negligible. Then again, we might disagree about the distance: I think it could be bridged through thorough conversation; you think we are on different planets. As the latter indicates, there is also second-order disagreement. We might disagree on where and how much we agree. For instance, some will agree with my description here, others will not. Some will say we have a *modus vivendi* at most, others will say we have a constitutional consensus, and still others might argue that we really have an overlapping consensus. In other words, it is a fragile and fragmentary consensus.<sup>57</sup>

One consequence is that, even when there is widespread agreement on the main parts of the political conception, there might be disagreement as to where the dividing line between political conception and comprehensive doctrine runs.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the debate following *PL*, even among those sympathetic to it, e.g., on whether the political conception is too thin or too thick, is evidence of this kind of second-order disagreement.<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, even though it is intended that it be limited to the political and not venture into the comprehensive, civic education could be seen as illegitimate by some reasonable citizens. To enforce it anyway can lead to strain and distrust, and may thus hinder rather than further the development of an overlapping consensus. This may happen by undermining trust in the very public schools that are to administer civic education, and thus weaken their power to provide civic education ‘indirectly by means of the environment,’ as Dewey put it.<sup>60</sup> It may also happen, more radically, by excluding certain groups that are otherwise prepared to be reasonable. Such exclusion from the realm of the reasonable is possible but risky, because if there are many ‘unreasonables,’ a stable and just liberal democracy will be hard to achieve. As

Rawls says, '[we] avoid excluding doctrines as unreasonable without strong grounds,' and to impose civic virtues through schooling is not strong enough ground, since it is not strictly necessary.<sup>61</sup>

Put differently, in real life, there will always be an area in between the political and the comprehensive. Elements of this grey area are characterized by the fact that some citizens will consider them part of our common stock, whereas others will consider them part of a particular comprehensive doctrine, without being unreasonable for that reason. In an ideal, well-ordered society with overlapping consensus on justice as fairness, there is perhaps a sharp separation between the political and the comprehensive, but that is surely not a realistic utopia. In even the best world that we may realistically hope for, there will sometimes be doubt or disagreement about what belongs to the political sphere and what belongs to particular comprehensive doctrines. And the problem is that Rawls' ideal of citizenship itself contains elements belonging to such a grey area.

Let us look at an example. One element of the ideal of citizenship is that citizens acknowledge political values as 'very great values,' so that they override comprehensive values in cases of conflict.<sup>62</sup> The stability of a liberal democracy depends on it, according to Rawls. Yet, we can see that it could easily foster suspicion and resistance, even in (otherwise) reasonable citizens, if it was made into an aim of compulsory education, that is, if all children were to be explicitly taught that political values outweigh comprehensive values. Nonetheless, most citizens have to learn that political values do indeed outweigh compre-



hensive values, in order for society to be stable. How do we solve that problem? The only possible solution seems to be the one Rawls employs: the educative effect of institutions.<sup>63</sup>

#### **4. The wide role**

We can elaborate by considering a comment Rawls makes each time he mentions the educator-idea. He says that it belongs to 'the wide role' of a political conception.<sup>64</sup> As Rawls acknowledges, the distinction between a narrow and a wide role of a political conception is suggested by a similar distinction made by John Mackie.<sup>65</sup> Although Mackie writes in a different context, his way of making the distinction can clarify what is going on here in Rawls as well.

For Mackie, morality in the wide or broad sense is 'whatever body of principles [a man] allowed ultimately to guide or determine his choices of action.'<sup>66</sup> We might think of this as a religious view or a philosophy of life. Morality in the narrow sense, on the other hand, is 'a system of constraints on conduct,' rules that check our natural inclinations and make it possible for us to live together, e.g. 'Do not break promises.'<sup>67</sup> We might think of it as law or Kantian morality. Now it is tempting to correlate broad morality with comprehensive doctrines and narrow morality with a political conception of justice. That is exactly what Haydon does, in addition to seeing narrow morality as a matter of right and wide morality as a matter of good.<sup>68</sup> It is therefore surprising that Rawls couples the political conception, which we easily associate with a narrow sphere of core constraints on doctrines of the good life, with wide morality.<sup>69</sup> To put it paradoxically, Rawls here comes close to making

the political conception into a comprehensive doctrine, in the rough sense that political values are to be central to life as a whole. This move puts him not only into the field of what he calls classical republicanism, but also in the vicinity of a stronger form of that view, that is, civic humanism.<sup>70</sup>

Rawls' distinction between classical republicanism and civic humanism is similar to Paul Weithman's distinction between political and perfectionist republicanism.<sup>71</sup> Classical republicanism says that it is necessary for liberal democracy that its citizens have the political virtues and actively take part in public life. Unlike Weithman, though, Rawls casts this more as a sociological claim than a normative philosophical one. Civic humanism goes further and adds that human nature is only realized in political participation and that the political life is the good life. Rawls takes this to be a comprehensive doctrine, a normative view of human nature and its good. In Mackie's terms, civic humanism is not only a case of narrow morality, that participation is necessary to protect basic liberties (which Rawls seems to accept), but a case of broad or wide morality, that participation is a central good in life as a whole (which Rawls seems to reject, in the sense that it amounts to a comprehensive doctrine).

Exegetically, it is difficult to tell whether Rawls actually accepted classical republicanism. He does not regard it as part of a comprehensive doctrine, and says that it is fully compatible with justice as fairness and political liberalism, whereas he does say that there is a 'fundamental opposition' between civic humanism and his own theory.<sup>72</sup> The textual context seems to suggest that Rawls concur with the tenets of classical republicanism. Since we

must assume that civic humanism is not an unreasonable comprehensive doctrine, 'incompatible with' cannot mean 'unreasonable,' but simply 'not part of justice as fairness.' Accordingly, when Rawls says that classical republicanism is 'fully compatible with' justice as fairness, he is not merely saying that it is 'reasonable.' It is therefore natural to suppose, with a distinguished writer like Richardson, that Rawls is actually sympathetic to classical republicanism.<sup>73</sup> Dagger goes a step further.<sup>74</sup> He not only argues that Rawls includes and draws on classical republicanism in his political liberalism, but also that the distinction between classical republicanism and civic humanism is unwarranted, both historically and philosophically, thus concluding that Rawls' political liberalism implies a form of civic humanism.

As will be clear, it is not crucial to my argument whether Rawls outright accepts or is only sympathetic to classical republicanism. Neither is it crucial whether his theory implies a form of civic humanism. Like Larmore, 'my aim is not to suggest that in his heart of hearts Rawls adhered to the republican conception.'<sup>75</sup> It is, I shall argue, sufficient that he comes close to such views. And if we collect various bits and pieces scattered around in his political liberalism, it is clear that he does come close:

- (1) Citizens must have the political virtues.
- (2) Citizens must desire to realize the ideal of citizenship in themselves.
- (3) Citizens must see political values as 'very great values,' so that they override other (comprehensive) values and concerns.<sup>76</sup>
- (4) There must be widespread participation in democratic life ('classical republicanism').

Taken together, how far are numbers 1-4 from the civic humanist view of political life as a comprehensive good, or even of the political as 'the privileged locus of the good life'? Imagine how numbers 1-4 look from the point of view of a group preaching withdrawal from social and political life, but which (otherwise) satisfies Rawls' criteria for being reasonable. It is then hard to see a 'fundamental opposition' here between Rawls and republicanism.<sup>77</sup> It seems more like a matter of degree, where the distance depends on subtle interpretations of words and doctrines. To be sure, Rawls does not say that political participation is an individual duty, but at most that democracy needs a sufficient number of people to participate. Yet how do we measure the distance between 'participation is necessary to sustain democracy' and 'participation is a duty of democratic citizens'? How do we measure the distance between 'very great value' and 'central value in life'? These differences might be crucial to philosophers, but they need not be so in the moral psychology of actual citizens. And it is actual citizens and not only political philosophers that have to negotiate the dividing line between political conception and comprehensive doctrine.

What matters is not merely whether we decide here, in the space of philosophy, where the ideal of political liberal citizenship belongs. What (also) matters is that if the virtues defining that ideal were to be introduced as aims of compulsory education, then they could easily be seen to cross the line by some or many citizens. That is why it is sufficient that Rawls comes close to civic humanism. For that means that reasonable people may reasonably take his idea of political liberal citizenship to be part of a particular comprehensive doctrine.

That is, in itself, problematic for a project like Rawls'.

In real life, there is likely to be a disputed territory in between the political and the comprehensive. I have argued that Rawls' conception of political liberal citizenship is in this territory. Some citizens will probably think that it is illegitimate to impose it through compulsory education, and they cannot be swept aside as simply unreasonable. To force it through regardless of their opposition risks creating tension and suspicion and can thus hinder rather than further the development of overlapping consensus on a political conception. For the sake of trust, it should therefore not be made part of compulsory education. However, it is still necessary for stability that citizens are educated to political liberal citizenship. It is to solve this problem, I think, that Rawls sees the public political culture as the proper space for this kind of civic education.<sup>78</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Rawls acknowledges that political liberalism is not neutral in its effects. It will have consequences for which comprehensive doctrines thrive and survive and for which personal properties and characters are encouraged. He calls this a fact of commonsense political sociology, and notes that 'it is futile to try to counteract these effects.'<sup>79</sup> Yet, with his idea of the political conception as educator, he goes much further. Not seeing these effects as merely unavoidable, as something that 'may have to be accepted, often with regret,' he positively rests on them for convincing us of the realism of a stable and just liberal democracy.<sup>80</sup> So if there is something 'dishonest' in Rawls' remarks on education, as some of his commentators seem to suggest, it is that he sometimes gives the false impression that these 'effects' are merely something to be accepted, with regret, as it were, while

at other times, he considers them necessary in order for a stable liberal democracy to emerge and endure, hence not to be regretted at all.

The view that I have now reconstructed from Rawls' later writings tallies well with the conclusions of Murphy's provocative article, 'Against Civic Schooling.'<sup>81</sup> First, 'most civic education has always taken place outside of school,' a fact that has been acknowledged by many political theorists throughout history.<sup>82</sup> Second, as there is deep disagreement among theorists, educators, and pundits about which civic virtues to include in civic education, 'the attempt to impose these partisan conceptions of civic virtue on America's students violates the civic trust that underpins vibrant public schools.'<sup>83</sup> And third, the empirical evidence definitely declares that schools are weak instruments of civic education, and of civic virtues in particular.<sup>84</sup>

If Murphy is right that contemporary writers on civic education have focused exclusively on civic schooling, he could have enlisted Rawls in support of the necessity of informal civic learning.<sup>85</sup> Yet Rawls' underlying argument is still very different from Murphy's. It is a moral argument, not a pragmatic one. It is about what is liberally legitimate, not what is pedagogically efficient. Indeed, as the political conception itself is a moral conception, the education we have been concerned with here is an aspect of moral education, a topic Rawls took great interest in from his earliest writings.<sup>86</sup> The part of A Theory of Justice that treated moral psychology and moral development was also the part he himself liked best.<sup>87</sup> The aim of this paper has been to show that this interest is still very much alive in *PL*, though it might not be as obvious.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle (1963) *Politics*, Book VIII. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Book VIII.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth A. Strike (1991) 'The Moral Role of Schooling in a Liberal Democratic Society', *Review of Research in Education*, 17: 417.

<sup>4</sup> John Rawls (1996) *Political Liberalism*, p. 71. New York: Columbia University Press. Throughout, I will refer to *Political Liberalism* with the abbreviation 'PL.' Unfortunately, due to constraints of space, I will not be able to extend attention to *A Theory of Justice*. There are, though, important and interesting points of connection between the notion of the political conception as educator in *PL* and the account of the development of the sense of justice in part III of *A Theory of Justice*.

<sup>5</sup> *PL*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Brighouse (1998) 'Civic Education and Liberal Legitimacy', *Ethics*, 108: 719.

<sup>7</sup> The terms 'civic,' 'citizen,' 'liberal,' and 'democratic' education are sometimes used interchangeably in these debates, though with somewhat different emphasis, depending on context. I will not distinguish between them, but my focus throughout will be on liberal-democratic education.

<sup>8</sup> Brighouse (n. 6), p. 719. However, some may dispute this apparent fact of disagreement (David C. Paris and Bruce A. Kimball (2000) 'Liberal Education: An Overlapping Pragmatic Consensus', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32: 143-158).

<sup>9</sup> European Commission (1996) *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society – White Paper on Education and Training* (928275698X), p. 10. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Prominent contributions include Stephen Macedo (1995) 'Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls?' *Ethics*, 105: 468-496; Amy Gutmann (1995) 'Civic Education and So-

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cial Diversity', *Ethics*, 105: 557-79; Eamonn Callan (1997) *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>12</sup> *PL*, pp. 199-200. In the following, I will use 'schools' and 'schooling,' to mean compulsory schooling, either in public/state schools or private schools that follow a state-mandated curriculum.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, there may be other reasons to teach critical thinking and promote autonomy. Brighouse notes: 'Without autonomy-related skills we are easily lost in the moral (and economic) complexity of modernity' (Brighouse (n. 6), p. 729). If this is true, autonomy is not exclusive to comprehensive liberalism, but can be seen as a purely political value, required as an educational aim by Rawls' claim that '[children's] education should also prepare them to be fully cooperating members of society and enable them to be self-supporting' (*PL*, p. 199). Another strategy would be to distinguish between moral and political autonomy, and allow for teaching critical thinking within the political sphere, though without demanding that it be extended to moral views in general (Macedo (n. 11), p. 447). My primary problem with Rawls' argument is its lack of recognition of children's rights. Such recognition alone cannot solve the problem, but it does transform it (see, for instance, Meira Levinson (1999) 'Liberalism, Pluralism, and Political Education: Paradox or Paradigm?', *Oxford Review of Education*, 25(1/2): 39-58). There are many ways to respond to Rawls' argument, but since my aim is not to assess that argument, I do not pursue them here.

<sup>14</sup> For a survey and analysis of the debate, see Christan Fernández and Mikael Sundström (2011) 'Citizenship Education and Liberalism: A State of the Debate Analysis 1990–2010', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 30: 363-384. Most of this debate has taken place *within* the liberal tradition. For more radical critiques of Rawls' political liberalism in the context of education, see Claudia W. Ruitenberg (2009) 'Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 28: 269-281; John Halliday (1999) 'Political Liberalism and Citizenship Education: Towards Curriculum Reform', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 47: 43-55.

<sup>15</sup> This is far from a purely theoretical matter. Comprehensive liberal values are, for instance, quite prominent in the official ideology of the Norwegian school. Section 1 of the Education Act now declares, '[Pupils] shall



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learn to think critically.’ The Core Curriculum specifies: ‘Critical judgment is required in all areas of life’ (The Royal Ministry of Education (1997) *Core Curriculum for Primary, Secondary and Adult Education in Norway*, p. 13. Oslo: Norwegian Board of Education). And it continues: Education shall ‘foster the ability to plot one’s own course’ (p. 39), ‘inspire strength to stand alone, to stand up, to dissent’ (p. 39), ‘develop independent and autonomous personalities’ (p. 39), ‘nurture the individual’s uniqueness’ (p. 40), ‘train critical abilities to attack prevailing attitudes, contend with conventional wisdom, and challenge existing arrangements’ (p. 40), and provide students with ‘the nerve to think anew and the imagination to break with established ways’ (p. 40).

<sup>16</sup> There is a debate, though, about whether political and comprehensive liberalism really have divergent educational implications. I think they do. For an excellent discussion, see Tim Fowler (2011) ‘The Limits of Civic Education: The Divergent Implications of Political and Comprehensive Liberalism’, *Theory and Research in Education*, 9: 87-100.

<sup>17</sup> When Rawls writes about ‘the political conception’ simpliciter, that is, without specifying what it is a conception of, he is usually thinking of a conception of justice, but often also a conception of the person (or citizen) (e.g. *PL*, I, §5). I will mostly follow Rawls in talking about the political conception simpliciter, instead of cumbersome phrases like ‘political conceptions of justice and the person’.

<sup>18</sup> Callan (n. 11), p. 50. This is so even when they argue that it is not as modest as Rawls ‘pretends’ (Victoria Costa (2004) ‘Rawlsian Civic Education: Political not Minimal’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 21: 9).

<sup>19</sup> *PL*, p. 199.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> William Galston (2004) ‘Civic Education and Political Participation’, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 37: 264.

<sup>22</sup> *PL*, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>24</sup> *PL*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>25</sup> *PL*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> *PL*, p. 163.

<sup>27</sup> *PL*, p. 194.

<sup>28</sup> *PL*, p. 402.

<sup>29</sup> *PL*, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> Callan (n. 11), pp. 12-42.

<sup>31</sup> *PL*, p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> As the Nobel Committee put it when awarding the peace prize to Barack Obama (The Norwegian Nobel Committee (2009) *Announcement: The Nobel Peace Prize for 2009*. Retrieved 20 August, 2010 from [http://nobelpeaceprize.org/en\\_GB/laureates/laureates-2009/announce-2009/](http://nobelpeaceprize.org/en_GB/laureates/laureates-2009/announce-2009/)).

<sup>33</sup> See also John Rawls (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, p. 56, p. 122. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>34</sup> *PL*, p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* We will return to the expression 'the wide role.'

<sup>36</sup> Rawls (n. 33), pp. 146-147.

<sup>37</sup> *PL*, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> *PL*, pp. 239-240.

<sup>39</sup> James B. Murphy (2004) 'Against Civic Schooling', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 21: 232-3.

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<sup>40</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel (1952) *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, §315A. London: Oxford University Press. As quoted in John Rawls (2000) *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, p. 358. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 358.

<sup>42</sup> Murphy (n. 39), p. 243.

<sup>43</sup> As quoted in Murphy (n. 39), p. 243.

<sup>44</sup> Francis Garforth (1980) *Educative Democracy: John Stuart Mill on Education in Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>45</sup> John Stuart Mill (1998) *On Liberty and other Essays*, p. 255. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-122.

<sup>47</sup> Joshua Cohen (1994) 'Review: A More Democratic Liberalism', *Michigan Law Review*, 92: 1530.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 1531.

<sup>49</sup> I should mention that Cohen's interpretation is, of course, not unproblematic. For instance, whereas Cohen (and I) take the idea of the political conception as educator to be part of a story of how an overlapping consensus might emerge from non-ideal conditions, Rawls sometimes seems to imply that a political conception has this wide role only under idealized conditions, when 'the full publicity condition' is realized (*PL*, p. 71). Yet, as the textual evidence is not clear here, I stick with Cohen's interpretation, not least because of its inherent plausibility.

<sup>50</sup> Costa (n. 18), p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> Cp. John Dewey (1999) *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, p. 21-22. New York: Free Press.

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<sup>53</sup> James B. Murphy (2002) 'Good Students and Good Citizens', *New York Times*. Retrieved 20 August 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/15/opinion/good-students-and-good-citizens.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Kurt Baier (1989) 'Justice and the Aims of Political Philosophy', *Ethics*, 99: 771-790.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, in 'Reply to Habermas,' Rawls notes that American society contains 'grave injustices' (*PL*, p. 398).

<sup>56</sup> I do not mean to imply that Rawls was not aware of its ideal-typical character.

<sup>57</sup> Noting disagreement is not, of course, equivalent to advocating skepticism or relativism.

<sup>58</sup> It is true that the political-comprehensive distinction is not *defined* through agreement or disagreement. It is defined primarily as a matter of difference in scope (*PL*, p. 13, p. 175). Thus we could imagine a society where there was agreement on comprehensive doctrine and disagreement on political conceptions: Everyone was united on a specific brand of religion, but disagreed about its political implications. Yet, the distinction is nevertheless motivated by the fact that there is and always will be disagreement about 'the whole truth' in liberal societies and that agreement on a political conception is more likely. Moreover, the idea of the political is implicitly defined through what there is agreement on. One of the defining features of a political conception is that its content is derived from certain ideas implicit in 'the public political culture of a democratic society,' which is supposed to be shared (*PL*, pp. 13-14).

<sup>59</sup> Leif Wenar (1995) 'Political Liberalism: An Internal Critique', *Ethics*, 106: 32-62; Charles Larmore (1999) 'The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96: 599-625.

<sup>60</sup> Dewey (n. 52), p. 19.

<sup>61</sup> *PL*, p. 59.

<sup>62</sup> *PL*, p. 139.

<sup>63</sup> A similar argument could be made regarding other of Rawls' political virtues, e.g. acceptance of the burdens of judgment and a spirit of compromise.

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<sup>64</sup> Not to be confused with 'the wide view of public reason,' a central topic in John Rawls (1997) 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited', *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 64: 765-807.

<sup>65</sup> *PL*, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> John Mackie (1977) *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 106. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106.

<sup>68</sup> Graham Haydon (2002) '4. Morality in the Narrow Sense', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 33: 35.

<sup>69</sup> *PL*, pp. 174-176.

<sup>70</sup> *PL*, pp. 205-206. The topic is more extensively covered in Rawls (n. 33), pp. 142-145.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Weithman (2004) 'Political Republicanism and Perfectionist Republicanism', *The Review of Politics*, 66: 285-312.

<sup>72</sup> *PL*, p. 206.

<sup>73</sup> Henry S. Richardson (2006) 'Republicanism and Democratic Injustice', *Politics*, 5: 180.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Dagger (1997) *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism*, pp. 186-190. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Larmore (2003) 'Liberal and Republican Conceptions of Freedom', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 6: 112.

<sup>76</sup> *PL*, p. 139.

<sup>77</sup> *PL*, p. 206.

<sup>78</sup> As mentioned, though, it has not been part of this paper to argue that the public culture actually does educate in this way. That is surely a matter for empirical investigation. It has only been my intention to

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investigate why it is crucial that it does, and why this 'job' is not assigned to schools. If empirical studies show that it does not, that would make Rawls' theory less realistic, though not automatically invalid.

<sup>79</sup> *PL*, p. 193.

<sup>80</sup> *PL*, p. 200.

<sup>81</sup> Murphy (n. 39).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p. 225.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 221.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p. 225.

<sup>85</sup> The plea for research on informal civic learning is echoed in Daniel Schugurensky and John P. Myers 'Informal Civic Learning Through Engagement in Local Democracy: The Case of the Seniors' Task Force of Healthy City Toronto' in K. Church, N. Bascia and E. Shragge (eds) (2008) *Learning through Community: Exploring Participatory Practices*, pp73-95. Dordrecht: Springer. Whether they are right that the informal has been ignored, I cannot answer. For interesting discussions concerning whether and how international institutions can be agents of political socialization, see Jeffrey T. Checkel (ed.) (2007) *International Institutions and Socialization in Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>86</sup> John Rawls (1963) 'The Sense of Justice', *The Philosophical Review*. 72: 281-305.

<sup>87</sup> Interview, *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Spring 1991.