

What is a Political Theory of Education?

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Abstract:

In the present essay, I attempt to develop a distinction between moral and political theories of education, inspired by the work of Amy Gutmann. The main idea is that whereas a moral theory of education gives an account of an ideal (or at least good) education, a political theory gives an account of how to structure education in a democracy where there is deep disagreement on what constitutes an ideal (or good) education. Unfortunately, we sometimes speak as though our moral theories can be unproblematically translated into the political realm, but in doing so, we are either being outright undemocratic or we underestimate the significance of the world-view pluralism in modern, liberal democracies. In order for a political theory of education to be democratically acceptable, it must fulfill the criterion of being capable of democratic translation into a society characterized by deep pluralism.

Key Words: *education; democracy; politics; pluralism; Amy Gutmann.*

What is a political theory of education?

Amy Gutmann has written extensively on both political philosophy and philosophy of education. Indeed, she has often written on both at the same time. These contributions are part of an extensive debate on the politics of education taking place above all in the USA. Of course, political and pedagogical philosophy have been intertwined throughout history, as witnessed by Locke, Rousseau, and Dewey, yet seldom more so than in modern America. One reason for that is a pluralism of world-views that so easily turns educational issues into political and even philosophical issues. That pluralism is also the starting point for the late work of John Rawls, the most important political philosopher of the 20th century, to whom much of the current debate on the politics of education is indebted (Rawls, 1993). As even the Scandinavian nations are becoming ever more pluralist, this debate should also be ours.

A focal feature of this debate is the idea that pluralism sets limits to any political theory that purports to be liberal and/or democratic, hence also to any liberal and/or democratic theory of education. This comes out, though not always clearly, in Gutmann's already classic work, *Democratic Education* (1987). What I find most compelling about that work is the conception of what a *political* theory of education is, as opposed to a *moral* theory of education.

Unfortunately, Gutmann seems sometimes to obscure her own best insights by mixing moral and political arguments, just the thing she wants to avoid or should have avoided. In this essay, I will try to reconstruct her argument so that the distinction between political and moral theories comes out more clearly than it does in the text itself. Consequently, it is not my aim to go into the *content* of Gutmann's theory but to see what *kind* of theory it is meant to be.

The rationale for this strategy is that the importance of the distinction between the moral and

the political reaches much wider than Gutmann's work. So this is not an exegetical essay; rather, Gutmann's thought is employed to illustrate a point of more general significance.

1. The Moral and the Political

The term "democratic education" may refer to two different things. It may refer to a system of education that is democratically organized. Or it may refer to an education designed to make children into future democratic citizens. The first is a question concerning the authority over education, whereas the second is a question concerning the content, in a wide sense, of education. Although these two are intimately related, and especially so in Gutmann's works, I will here emphasize the first aspect. Let us then approach the distinction between the moral and the political by looking at Gutmann's response to liberal and conservative views of education respectively.

Consider the case of sex education, controversial in the US at least (Gutmann, 1987, p. 3-19). Is it legitimate for public schools to teach children about sex?¹ May sex education be part of a compulsory curriculum? A conservative might hold that schools should avoid sex education, on the grounds that such issues properly belong to the private sphere. The state simply does not have the right to force knowledge about sex on children; it is up to parents to decide what to teach their offspring in this respect. Hence, it is a violation of parental rights to make sex education part of compulsory education. A liberal, on the other hand, might support such education on the grounds that it will give children the knowledge necessary for them to make their own choices. This kind of liberal would give the rights of children priority to the rights of parents, taking the advancement of individual autonomy as an aim overriding the values of

¹ I am using the term "public school" in the American sense, that is, schools financed and organized by public authorities.

parents. Children have the right to be educated in such a way as will maximise their future freedom, and it would be a violation of children's rights not to make such education part of compulsory education.²

In one sense, Gutmann does not have any problem with theories like these. Yet it all depends on how we take them. Understood as moral theories, they are controversial, but unavoidable. After all, we do need to have views on how children should be educated. Understood as *political* theories, though, they are deeply problematic. And what is even more problematic about educational debate, according to my interpretation, is that we are usually not drawing this crucial distinction between moral and political theories. As a consequence, we are using moral theories uncritically as political theories. What does that mean?

Think about the liberal and conservative views as policy proposals. As such, they suffer from a serious defect. They fail to face up to the fact that citizens disagree not only about the aims, methods, and content of education but also over the conceptions used to justify such views. The distinction between public and private and the value of autonomy are not uncontroversial facts but are themselves part of what the controversies are all about.³ Some conservative theories, for instance, speak as though the line between public and private, as well as its location, were a brute fact, immediately available to any sound mind, whereas to draw such a line is something we actually *do*, and something which it might be, indeed, *is* disagreement about. Liberal theories likewise presuppose that we have established knowledge on a controversial moral question. Yet autonomy is not a super-value giving free reign to those values that each may hold; it is, rather, a value existing alongside others and with which it

² There are, of course, other meanings of "conservative" and "liberal". In some senses of the words, they unite in a common insistence on a distinction between a (narrow) public sphere and a (wide) private sphere.

³ The liberal, for instance, will often hold that religious views belong to the private sphere, whereas some (extreme) conservatives will locate religion in the public sphere.

may be in conflict, such as the value of living safely within a fixed tradition. So by presenting these views in the public political sphere, as political theories, one ignores two key features of our liberal democracy: the necessity of agreement for democratic legitimacy and the historical fact of a pluralism of world-views. Any *political* theory must incorporate an acknowledgment of these two features.

How should children be educated? That is the central question in this region of educational philosophy. Yet the question may be taken in two different ways. First, it may be taken in a *moral* sense: I put forward a view on what I regard as the ideal way to educate children, disregarding, as it were, the views of others, speaking as one citizen *to* others. Second, it may be taken in a *political* sense: we attempt to find a solution to the problem of organizing education in a pluralist liberal democracy, given the manifold of moral ideas of education coexisting in that society. In that case, I take the views of others into consideration and attempt to speak *for* the community of citizens. Moral theories can guide individuals in a democracy as to what they will fight and vote for, but they cannot guide a community as to the resolving of moral conflict. That is what we need a political theory for.

Alas, we often ignore the distinction between the moral and the political, attempting to answer the political question with a moral theory. If we do, we fail to take into account that citizens disagree deeply, also over education, and that a moral theory therefore cannot provide a solution that respects citizens' democratic rights. In other words, including a political dimension in our thinking is necessary when we take an interest in the *implementation* of educational views. To treat a moral theory as self-sufficient is either to disregard implementation as such or to disregard the fact that implementation poses particular problems in a liberal democracy. The latter may be an expression of a failure on our part to realize that

theorists, philosophers, or professional educators are citizens among others and that these others have other views that must be taken into account. It is, therefore, nothing less than undemocratic to move exclusively within the moral sphere. Put differently, it is undemocratic in that it offers a theoretical solution to problems that must be solved by democratic deliberation.

... we cannot simply translate our own moral ideals of education, however objective they are, into public policy. Only in a society in which all other citizens agreed with me would my moral ideal simply translate into a political ideal. But such a society would have little need for politics as we now know it (Gutmann, 1987, p. 11-12).

Of course, we are free to hold liberal or conservative views of education. In a democratic society, we all have “moral” views on education, which we bring to bear on our actions, on voting, and on public debate. Yet such moral views cannot, notwithstanding how convinced we are of their truth, be directly transposed into the public political sphere. That would only be unproblematic if everyone agreed with me, but they don’t. In order for a political theory of education to be democratically acceptable, it must fulfill the criterion of being capable of democratic translation into a society characterized by deep pluralism. Thus it is one thing to have a view on what is a good or rightful education, quite another to have a view on how that question is to be handled politically in a society where there is disagreement on what constitutes a good or rightful education. It is the second question Gutmann addresses. A political theory of education or, more specifically, a democratic theory of education does not address the question of what is the best or the right education, but the question of how we can resolve that question democratically in the face of deep disagreement.⁴ John Dewey famously said, “what the best and wisest parents wants for his own child, that must the community want

⁴ Of course, a “moral” theory may be political in *content*. What makes it non-political in Gutmann’s special sense, is that it does not concern itself with, nor have flagrantly deficient views on, how it is to be translated into public policy in a pluralist society in a democratically acceptable way.

for all of its children” (Dewey, 1990, p. 7). From the moral point of view, that is hard to disagree with. When we attempt to translate it into policy, though, the problems mount. Politically, Dewey’s maxim is either unhelpful, because of the disagreement as to what is “best and wisest,” or authoritarian, in that one particular group, say, intellectual liberals like Dewey, is taken to have an exclusive insight into what is best and wisest (Gutmann, 1987, p. 13).

Gutmann’s core belief is that the enforcement of any moral conception of education, whether liberal or conservative, is unacceptable without democratic consent. Taking into account the fact of pluralism, that behooves us to articulate a shared political conception of what to do in the case of disagreement about what constitutes the best or right education: how to adjudicate conflict, balance different claims, fix limits to majority decisions, determine relevant levels of government, and so on. However, we also need to see whether there might be some deeper agreement beneath all the disagreement. If there is, we might perhaps succeed in extracting some educational principles from that deeper agreement. This is, on my reading, Gutmann’s undertaking in her theory of democratic education.

2. State, family, and child

To probe deeper into the idea of a political theory of education, I will now go on to highlight certain features of Gutmann’s response to three traditional pictures of the relation between state, family, and children. Once again, my intention is not to depict her argumentation accurately, but rather to extricate the purely political arguments implicit in it, so that the idea of the political may come out as sharply as possible.⁵

⁵ These pictures are presented as ideal types and are not intended as interpretations of specific writers. It is based on Gutmann’s presentation (1987, p. 19-48).

The first picture, found in Plato's *Republic*, Gutmann calls *the family state*. It is a state founded on a rational, philosophical idea of the good and the just. That idea, and that idea alone, is to structure society. Education is exclusively directed towards the preservation of this ideal state: it is to form children's minds so that they do not see any opposition between their own good and the good of the state. Only when citizens have thus absorbed social values may a harmonious state be realized, which will then have the cohesion of the ideal family: we want for ourselves what is also best for others. Even though the state in this case will have absolute authority over education, individuals will not feel that the state is opposed to them, inasmuch as the state has made sure that it is seen as the expression of their own will.

This is, of course, unfeasible. But is it desirable? Many of us will associate such a state with a fascist or communist one, which tends to cloud our judgement of the underlying principle. It will therefore be easier to discern the purely political case against it if we imagine it to be perfectly *good*, even by our standards: everyone is happy, no-one is exploited, crime is non-existent, and so on.⁶ Now this must surely be a desirable state? From a moral point of view, perhaps, but Gutmann's main argument is not moral: the problem with the family state is not that its regulative moral idea is untrue. Neither is her main argument epistemological: the problem is not that knowledge about the good and just is unattainable. Nor is her argument empirical: the problem is not that people would, as a matter of fact, be unhappy in such a state. Rather, even if such a state was attainable on earth, and even if we, philosophers and educators, *knew* that the underlying idea of the good was true and *knew* that everyone would be happy in it, it would be still be deeply problematic. Why? Because it cannot be realized without some form of violence.

⁶ The fascist associations are perhaps best dispelled by substituting "community" for "state".

To feel the full force and attraction of the family state we must imagine a perfect, harmonious society living the way it does not just because they are unacquainted with alternatives, say, because they have taken over their form of life from the former generation, but a culture actually informed by the *true* idea of the good and just, whether that idea is taken have been discovered through philosophical reflection or religious revelation. The crucial political question, though, is how such an idea, no matter how true, may be translated into practise in a democratically acceptable way. In order to realize it, its underlying claims as to what is good and just would have to be entered in a context where disagreement is nonexistent about these matters and to people who are, by the family state's own lights, imperfectly educated. Even if it were possible to get all *future* citizens to agree by means of a proper education, we do not share any conception of the good and the just *now*, nor, indeed, about what is a proper education. As history proves, not everyone will accept the arguments of a Socrates or a Dewey, even though they themselves may have thought that every reasonable person should. So the only way to realize the perfect state would be to infringe on the rights of those already living in an imperfect state: on their right to a voice in how society should be structured and on their right to a voice in how their children should be educated. Arguments may convince some of them, but we have to acknowledge that no arguments will convince everyone. To implement the ideal state, the dissidents would have to be brainwashed or silenced – the only other way in which such a perfect state could be born would be by a miracle.

This criticism of the family state may seem rather remote from our debates on education. My contention, though, is that there are traces of Platonist thinking in all moral theories of education when these are treated as of political import in themselves. Yet in a pluralist democracy we must distinguish between moral and political theories; we cannot

unproblematically employ the former in the function of the latter. Any view that wants to ground society and education on a conception possessed only by some, be it priests or philosophers or professional educators, is undemocratic as long as it does not have a political idea on how such a conception could be democratically translated into policy in a society where there is no agreement on such a conception. If we take democracy seriously, we should not want even our most cherished beliefs about life and education to be implemented in a way that violates basic liberal and democratic principles. Given the fact of pluralism, we cannot, at least not any longer, make theories which depend for their implementation that everyone will agree to them. Or if we do, we should acknowledge that we speak as individual citizens, and not from a position over and above citizenry.

The second picture is *the state of families*, associated with the liberalism of Locke but also with modern conservatism (Fried, 1978, p. 152). It is radically opposed to the family state in making parental rights nearly sovereign: authority over education is exclusively placed in the hands of parents, not the state. The underlying view of society is that it consists neither of a unified community nor of separate individuals, but of separate *families*. The importance attached to parental rights is only intelligible against a background of an imperfect state, in which the interests of the state, say, the king or the majority, are likely to be in conflict with those of particular families. It is to protect families against such interference that educational authority is placed in their hands.⁷

There are several arguments to be levelled against this position. One might argue from a utilitarian basis, saying that parents are not always good for their children, pointing, for

⁷ Gutmann is not completely clear on this point, but the family state did not imply that parents were not to decide. Rather, *in* the ideal state parents would automatically choose what was best for their children, for themselves, and for the community as a whole. Yet it is also true that the rights of parents had to be violated in order to *create* that perfect state.

instance, to the fact of child abuse. Or one might argue from an ethical basis, saying that there is no good reason for ascribing exclusive rights to anyone purely on the basis of genetics. Be that as it may, Gutmann's theory does not depend on any such arguments. Her purely political argument goes rather like this: even if parents had such a natural right to govern their children and even if they could always be counted on to do what is best for them, these children would still have to live together with other children from other families with other views and values. Hence, there are political reasons why parents cannot be granted exclusive and complete authority over the education of their own children.

In the state of families, the moral education of children is to be the family's own business. Yet children are future citizens, members of a wider society. So to teach your own children racist views is *not* only your "own business," and the same goes for teaching them intolerance towards other religions or, for that matter, towards all religions. To insulate the family from the wider polis could only be politically legitimate if the polis were protected from the family, and to insure such isolation is well nigh impossible, though the Old Order Amish comes close. Therefore, the state of families suffer from a serious defect: it lacks a theory about the limits to parental authority, such as how this authority is to be integrated into a wider society where other families have other ideas. It lacks, that is to say, a conception of how their view might be implemented in a deeply pluralist society in a democratically acceptable way. And that is to say that it lacks a genuinely political dimension.

The third picture, *the state of individuals*, traces of which are found in Mill, sees individuals rather than families as the fundamental moral units of society (Mill, 1998, chapter. V). Moreover, it interprets children as individuals and thus cuts children loose from parents by awarding them separate or independent rights. Whereas the state of families grows out of a

context where families feel the need for protection against the state, the state of individuals views the child as in need of protection against its family: the family and the traditions it represents are seen as potential threats to children's freedom of thought. So even as parents we have no right to decide for our children; indeed, we have the obligation not to impede their present or at least their future freedom. Consequently, educational authority can only be justified if it enhances children's future opportunity for choice. In particular, the child must be able and allowed to choose among the widest possible range of life-styles and moral and religious outlooks. This is further thought to imply the necessity of neutrality in education: any educational authority must as far as possible be neutral among conceptions of the good life. Schools and parents must be wary not to bias children towards traditional beliefs and values, as that would be equal to an infringement of their freedom.

From a political point of view, though, the hitch is that opportunity for choice is not neutral. Indeed, neutrality itself is not neutral: one man's neutrality is another man's partiality. Some conservatives, for instance, argue that the idea of neutrality is just a mask for secularity, and whether they are right or wrong it does prove that neutrality is contested. Maximising opportunity for choice through educational neutrality is not equal to the absence of any positive doctrine but is itself a doctrine partly in conflict with other doctrines. Freedom to choose among a wide range of possible lives and outlooks is not a value that all members of our pluralist society accept, and the dissenters cannot simply be swept aside as unreasonable. It may be wrong but it is not outright unreasonable to rebut the values of choice and freedom, on the grounds, for instance, that people gets unhappy when they are not safely embedded in a fixed frame of reference. So even to insist on neutrality is to make choices on behalf of children: it takes away their opportunity for letting some parts of their life be *not* a matter of choice; it takes away their opportunity for, say, accepting the words of God unquestioningly.

We might contest and argue that what is called neutrality really *is* neutral after all, but we still have to find a way of translating that view into practise in a democratically acceptable manner. Accordingly, freedom and neutrality do not release us from the political burden of having to find a democratic way of reconciling conflicting views on education. Even if freedom *is* the core value, we will still have to find a political solution to the fact that not everyone thinks it is. That is what democracy demands, and that is what we need a political theory of education for.

3. Democratic Education

But is a political theory of education at all possible? Such a theory is to set forth an account of education that may be democratically implementable in a society of deep and lasting pluralism. Inasmuch as democratic implementation demands some kind of agreement, an agreement apparently absent, one might be forgiven for feeling that this sounds like squaring the circle. That impression, though, is perhaps only apparent. Perhaps there is some deeper kind of agreement that might yield an adequate political theory of education. Towards the end now, I will sketch what seems to me to be the nucleus of Gutmann's theory and how it might solve the dilemma that the idea of a political theory poses.

Amy Gutmann supports a variant of *deliberative democracy*: political decisions are to be the outcome of careful public deliberation.⁸ This is opposed to a conception of democracy as consisting essentially of institutional procedures, prime among which is voting, where voters express preferences already formed more or less privately. Supporters of deliberative democracy acknowledge that voting is necessary, yet they hold that what makes a society democratic is not the voting itself but that the voting is the culmination of a preceding public

⁸ This part is based primarily on *Democracy and Disagreement* (Gutmann & Thompson, 1998, p. 11-95).

deliberation where matters are treated fairly and reasonably. Moreover, our values, beliefs, and interests, which determine how we vote, are and should be formed *through* taking part in deliberation with other citizens, not privately and in advance of deliberation. Deliberative democracy is also opposed to a democracy where an elite, say, scientific experts or professional politicians, does the deliberation necessary to make good decisions. Ideally, all citizens should take part in deliberation. Participating in deliberation will make citizens public-spirited, clarify moral conflicts, reconcile diverse positions, increase mutual respect, lead to better decisions, and bring previously unheard voices into the open. Although political debate is now mostly characterized by “sound bite,” deliberation is already carried out to some extent, but we need to do it more consistently and to create new public forums for it.

The failure of the idea of neutrality brought the central problem out sharply: we need principles by which to organize education, but at the same time no principle seems to solve the problem of justification in the face of disagreement about such principles. Gutmann’s response is to search for some deeper agreement underlying the disagreement over particular principles. She finds this deeper agreement in a common political commitment to, not any particular idea of education, but to the idea of *arriving* at agreement. We are committed to democracy itself, and from this shared commitment Gutmann extracts a principle of education. The main aim of education is to develop the capacity for democratic deliberation: to help children become democratic citizens committed to arriving at agreement on controversial moral and political questions by way of deliberation.⁹

⁹ This capacity, of course, is not a single skill or virtue to be taught in any simplistic way. It includes several skills, several virtues, and several kinds of knowledge, for instance literacy, critical thinking, honesty, knowledge of history, understanding the perspectives of others, and so on

What makes Gutmann think that this idea is any less controversial than the ones already encountered? The answer is: because all citizens presuppose it, even in the very act of questioning it. Imagine someone who claims that democratic deliberation, with its emphasis on reason and argument, conflicts with their unquestioning acceptance of certain religious ideas and that the state therefore have no right to incorporate deliberation as an educational aim of compulsory education. We could answer them by showing that their own argument in fact *presupposes* a democratic society where they have a say in political questions and where these questions can be rationally debated. In other words, we might answer those who think they are opposed to democratic deliberation as an educational aim like this:

The virtues and moral character we are cultivating ... are necessary to give children the chance to collectively shape their society. The kind of character you are asking us to cultivate would deprive children of that chance, the very chance that legitimates your own claim to educational authority (Gutmann, 1987, p. 39).

To argue against democratic deliberation as an educational aim is, therefore, to undermine the foundation of that very argument. That is another reason for believing that the development of capacities for democratic deliberation is a cornerstone of any adequate political theory of education.¹⁰

¹⁰ Perhaps Gutmann is here approaching a Habermasian rather than a Rawlsian view (Habermas, 1995).

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