
Presidential Address

THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM: A POSITIVE REAPPRAISAL

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The fact of reasonable pluralism limits what is practicably possible under the conditions of our social world, as opposed to conditions in other historical ages when people are often said to have been united (although perhaps they never have been) in affirming one comprehensive conception. Eventually we want to ask whether the fact of reasonable pluralism is a historical fate we should lament. To show that it is not, or that it has its very considerable benefits, would be to reconcile us in part to our condition.

John Rawls

Justice as Fairness: A Restatement

The liberal tradition in political thought has been vigorously criticized in educational philosophy over the course of the last 20 years. Communitarians, feminist theorists, queer theorists and multiculturalists have taken issue with liberal precepts and aspirations for reasons ranging from its normative philosophical assumptions about the nature of self and society to its alleged inability to attend to the political demands of people who do not share these assumptions and are thus reluctant to sign on to the liberal project. In the wake of these wide ranging critiques, it is interesting to see liberal political philosophy making its way back from the margins to the center of American educational philosophy. (In British educational philosophy circles, liberalism never lost its central position, although it has also been subject to this sort of criticism, and it too has had to modify some of its central claims). Liberalism's return to the philosophical limelight raises questions about the extent to which liberal theory has changed in response to this steady stream of criticism from various proponents of "the politics of difference." How seriously have liberal theorists taken this critique? To what extent and in what ways have contemporary liberal philosophers modified liberal precepts and aspirations in response to the concerns raised? And finally, how might a reconfigured liberal theory help educational policy makers and practitioners – not to mention ordinary citizens - to think differently about what it means to learn to live together in the midst of profoundly different and often incompatible cultural values, religious beliefs and philosophical commitments?

My goal in this paper is to persuade you that liberal theory deserves a second look. Not only because I think that this extensive and often heated philosophical exchange has led contemporary liberal theorists to rethink some of the claims liberalism has traditionally made, but also because I think that this

rethinking in turn suggests the need for proponents of the politics of difference to revise some key assumptions about what it means to teach in and for pluralistic liberal societies. So this rethinking is a two way street.

I am going to concentrate on a recent development within liberal political thought called “political liberalism,” as opposed to its more prevalent counterpart in educational philosophy, perfectionist liberalism. This focus is perhaps a bit strange given the fact that perfectionist strains of liberalism predominate the recent literature in educational philosophy, and given also the interesting ways in which liberal perfectionism has undergone a similar rethinking of its premises and aspirations in light of the challenges posed by advocates of the politics of difference.¹ While liberal perfectionists are increasingly attentive to the diversity of beliefs and perspectives of citizens in a liberal state, they nonetheless maintain that the liberal state ought to stand for a particular conception of the good, which schools, in turn, ought to foster. Because they offer an account of the good that they believe ought to hold for most people in almost all aspects of their lives, perfectionist liberals are also called comprehensive liberals.² Educational theorists who have taken this tack lately tend to focus on the development of autonomy as the paradigmatic good of liberal education. However, in keeping with the new attention to the politics of difference, the version of autonomy put forward has been substantially revised in order to take into account the ways in which the development of strong autonomy might be difficult or undesirable for members of some ethnic minorities and religious denominations. While cultural pluralists are pleased to see perfectionist liberals taking cultural membership seriously, they find it troubling that cultural identity garners the respect and support of liberals only to the extent that it fosters the autonomy of members of these groups.³ From the perspective of cultural pluralists, perfectionist liberalism is insufficiently accommodating of cultural difference, which places an unfair burden on those cultural groups who do not share the values of the perfectionist liberal state.

In contrast to perfectionist liberals, political liberals maintain that the state should not endorse a particular conception of the good because doing so would deny citizens their right to formulate and follow their own particular comprehensive commitments, free of state coercion. In other words, political liberalism takes very seriously the depths of our moral, philosophical, cultural and religious differences. Rather than regarding these differences as a problem, it sees them as a desirable outcome of life in a free and open society. But political liberals also recognize the extent to which unbridled pluralism poses a fundamental challenge to political stability and social cohesiveness. Political liberalism is an attempt to maximize the rights of people in liberal societies to formulate their own conceptions of the good without minimizing the very real challenges that pluralism poses to collective civic life. As Rawls explains:

The problem of political liberalism is: How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? . . . How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime? What is the structure and content of a political conception that can gain support of such an overlapping consensus? These are among the questions that political liberalism tries to answer.⁴

Critics take issue with political liberalism on various grounds. Deliberative democrats think that political liberals like Rawls ask too much of citizens by expecting them to determine in advance of public discussion which issues are fit for public discussion and which are unlikely to gain the support of most reasonable people. Perfectionist liberals, by contrast, think that political liberalism asks too little of the state and its citizens. Cultural pluralists contend that political liberalism asks too much of some citizens and too little of others, so that an unfair burden is placed on those citizens who are unable to set aside their comprehensive commitments for the sake of establishing fair terms of social cooperation.⁵ Political liberalism, in other words, is seen to be neither neutral nor fair. At first blush, this is a serious charge against a theory that is centrally concerned with the problem of securing political legitimacy. But as I read Rawls, this criticism strikes me as unfounded, since Rawls is all too aware of the ways in which the fact of plurality limits the claims liberalism has traditionally made. As I understand it, political liberalism is largely an exploration of the limits of liberalism. My task in this paper is quite straightforward. I want to clear up some misconceptions about political liberalism by casting its oft commented upon limitations as a political theory in a positive light. I will make the case that political liberalism is ultimately a theory of restraint, which poses a challenge for education as a practice that tends to exceed boundaries, testing limits in the process. I shall say more about this. First, let me turn to the carefully constrained parameters of political liberalism.

PLURALITY AS A LIMITING CONDITION OF POLITICAL LIBERALISM

Rawls' magnum opus, *A Theory of Justice*, made the Kantian assumption that under the constraints of the twin devices of the original position and the veil of ignorance, rational people would come to similar conclusions about the proper distribution of resources in societies that aspire to be fair. His later work revises aspects of this theory in order to bring it in line with his growing recognition that "under conditions of pluralism, it cannot [be] assume[d] that liberal ideas [of liberty or equality, for example] are the non-controversial foundation of social and political life."⁶ In other words, political liberalism takes the fact of ethical

pluralism very seriously.⁷ It is significant that political liberalism regards the diversity of moral, philosophical and religious doctrines in democratic societies as a “permanent feature” of democratic societies. Political liberalism understands pluralism as an inevitable outcome of every individual’s capacity to formulate and revise their conception of the good, but it also recognizes the extent to which pluralism is the result of a concerted effort on the part of reasonable people to create and maintain political institutions that are designed to protect a diverse array of ways of life. Because the resulting range of comprehensive beliefs are what make it difficult to forge consensus about many of the things that matter most to people, this “fact of pluralism” is simultaneously a condition of possibility, a source of concern and a constraint upon the parameters of political liberalism.

When Rawls writes that the conception of justice proposed by political liberalism is “political, not metaphysical,” he is pointing to the feature of political liberalism that distinguishes it most from its perfectionist counterpart, namely that in order for a conception of justice to be shared by a plurality of reasonable citizens, it must be “as far as possible, independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious doctrines that citizens affirm.”⁸ This is in keeping with his contention that given the fact of plurality, it is no longer tenable for comprehensive doctrines that cannot be endorsed by “citizens generally” to serve as the foundation of civic life.⁹ The resulting view of politics is a “freestanding” view, which is to say that it is a view that is, as far as possible, not rooted in any “metaphysical or epistemological doctrine beyond what is implied by the political conception itself.”¹⁰ In other words, a political conception of justice ought not imply a wider commitment to any particular comprehensive doctrine, although this is not to say that it is not connected to some aspects of a host of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. I shall say more about this in section 3 when I talk about the overlapping consensus. But it is important to note that while the political conception of justice is not tied to or rooted in any singular comprehensive conception of the good, it is not devoid of the kind of substantive moral content that reflects the “public political culture of a democratic society.”¹¹ This public political culture is a product of the many forms of association that constitute “‘the background culture’ of civil society.”¹² Collectively, the public conversations that result from this activity give rise to the political tradition within which and in relation to which the political conception of justice is worked out.¹³ This is an important point because it suggests that the political in Rawls’ narrow conception of the term is inconceivable in the absence of a robust civil society. Without a flourishing civil society, Rawls’ reasonable citizens have no way of understanding the diversity of comprehensive doctrines, let alone the substance of particular comprehensive points of view that they are asked to take into account in coming to a political arrangement that can do justice to citizens whose comprehensive commitments vary widely. In this way, religious institutions, cultural associations, political advocacy groups and the many other forms of

association that comprise civil society play a crucial educative role for the polity at large. This is, of course, in addition to the many other ways in which they fulfill the lives of their members. But while civil society is crucial to the flourishing of plurality, political liberalism recognizes the need to bring the polity together on matters of shared concern. This limited but essential purpose confines the political to the specific and distinctive task of creating the basis of social cohesion by forging a fair system of cooperation in the midst of the plurality of comprehensive beliefs that are an inevitable outcome of life in democratic societies.

THE CIRCUMSCRIPTION OF THE POLITICAL

For political liberals, the political sphere is circumscribed by the fact of plurality, which gives urgency to the need to develop a view of justice that is acceptable to people whose comprehensive commitments are not shared. Establishing a reasonable consensus on matters of shared concern necessarily narrows the purview of political discussion, not to mention the scope of the eventual decision. This means that what matters most to people – especially those with passionate convictions about issues that lie beyond the conciliatory realm of the civic – is more likely than not to lie beyond the purview of the political realm. The political realm will be a narrow slice of the larger comprehensive commitments that give shape and meaning to their lives as a whole.

For political liberals, the political realm is crucial for the stability and coherence of society, but it is not the whole of life. As Stephen Macedo puts it, “the political good is not the whole of the human good.”¹⁴ This is what distinguishes political liberalism – and indeed, liberalism in general – from the tradition of civic republicanism or civic humanism. For civic humanists like Hannah Arendt, politics endows human life with meaning. It is the pinnacle of human being-in-the-world. Indeed, political action and deliberation is what gives rise to the common world. For all the frustrations of political life – and Arendt more than anyone in this tradition has articulated what these are – a life confined to the world of the private and the social is a life of deprivation. For political liberals, by contrast, the political is a pragmatic rather than an existential undertaking. Politics is essential to the stability of society, but it is not essential to every person. Most people live perfectly well without engaging in political life. Indeed, in the condition of plurality, even those who do enjoy politics must learn to locate the moral center of their lives elsewhere. For political liberals, conflating politics with particular moralities, be they civic republican or religiously fundamentalist, is likely to create the conditions for the very kinds of political tyranny or moral coercion that political liberalism wants to guard against. The danger here is that political liberalism will become devoid of moral content, which would do little to draw people into what would then devolve into a series

of purely procedural discussions. Stephen Macedo is right to suggest that what is needed is “a political stance that is robustly ethical and does not shirk from attending the need to construct and maintain a shared civic space, but that does not lay comprehensive claim to the whole truth of the human condition.” He explains:

National ideals of liberty and equality indeed should be supreme, and the civic ideals that inform the Constitution are certainly very great values: we should not only hope that they will regulate and inform all of our lives; we should plan to make it likely that they will do so. But it goes too far to think that the civic lives of modern states, important as they may be, should seek to encompass the moral life as a whole. What we should want is a civic liberalism that is robust but less than fully comprehensive from a moral standpoint, one that can accept the fact that citizens will invest our shared political project with something less than their entire moral energies.¹⁵

One of the misconceptions of political liberalism is that it asks people to separate fully their moral commitments from the political conception of justice. While it is true that the political realm is not synonymous with any one particular comprehensive conception of the good, it is not the case that political liberalism asks people to set aside their moral commitments. The idea of an overlapping consensus is Rawls’ attempt to correct this misconception.

COHERENCE AND CONSTRAINT: THE IDEA OF AN OVERLAPPING CONSENSUS

The test of a political conception of justice is that it is capable of winning the assent of a diverse array of people who can endorse a particular principle, framework or institution without expecting it to cohere completely with the full range of their beliefs and commitments. Winning their assent requires us to set aside those aspects of our comprehensive beliefs that are likely to be most contentious and divisive. But as I will explain, this does not mean that political liberals are expected to set aside their comprehensive beliefs entirely. Rawls recognizes that people rely on these beliefs to help them formulate their sense of the justice of a particular aspect of the political order, and rightly so, since the point of political liberalism is to generate and sustain a shared political order. One would not opt to share in a political order that thoroughly undermined one’s comprehensive beliefs. Indeed, Rawls takes this into account in his theory through the notion of the overlapping consensus. The overlapping consensus refers to many ways in which people with different beliefs might endorse a particular political decision from within the purview of their own particular set of moral commitments. Political decisions will be just when they appeal to a wide variety of people with differing comprehensive beliefs.

Political liberalism understands that there are a host of perfectly reasonable motivations for signing on to the liberal project. The overlapping consensus refers to the fact that there are many different reasons why people might endorse the liberal project from within the purview of their particular belief system. Indeed, in order for a particular conception of justice to win the consent of the majority of citizens, they must be persuaded that the view put forward accords with some aspect of their beliefs, even though it is unlikely that it will do justice to the whole of each person's beliefs, not to mention the specific ranking of their reasons for endorsing a particular view. It is not that individuals ought to expect every political decision or principle or institution to accord with their whole system of values, but they do expect some coherence, or at the very least, not too much conflict with their deeply held beliefs.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it will occasionally be necessary to step back from some, but not all, of one's deeply held beliefs. This temporary suspension of comprehensive beliefs is limited to those aspects of these beliefs that are unlikely to win the assent of people whose beliefs differ fundamentally from their own in some regard. This is a subtle but significant distinction: it is not that one sets aside one's comprehensive beliefs in their entirety, but rather, that one recognizes those aspects of one's beliefs that are unlikely to garner the assent of those who do not share them, and one does what one can to set these aside in order to come to a judgment that can accommodate a plurality of reasonable moral commitments.

While Rawls' discussion of this is characteristically abstract, Stephen Macedo offers a helpful account of what this might concretely mean through his analysis of the *Mozert* case. *Mozert v. Hawkins* grew out of a complaint leveled by a group of Christian fundamentalist families against a local school board in Tennessee. The Hawkins County school board implemented a reading program using a series of basic readers that conflicted with the families' religious beliefs. The families asked that their children be allowed to opt out of reading the Holt series, which the school allowed for a brief time before the district as a whole decided to make the particular reading program mandatory. Children who refused to participate in the Holt reading lessons were either suspended from school or removed from school by their parents. In the final decision, the case was decided in favor of the school board. The case hinged on the question of whether "mere exposure" to diverse beliefs interferes with the right to the free exercise of one's beliefs, but for Macedo, there are larger issues at stake having to do with the integrity of shared civic life.

The *Mozert* families wanted their children excused from participating in the reading classes because they could not fathom exposing their children to ideas and ways of life that did not accord with what one of the plaintiffs described as "the totality of my beliefs."¹⁷ While the court dismissed this claim, Macedo asks us to take it seriously, not because he thinks that restricting children from exposure to beliefs that are antithetical to their own is a legitimate basis for

opting out of the civic project, but because it captures the anxieties induced by the civic project. The civic project requires us to be willing to set aside some of our most deeply held commitments in order to create the basis for a shared civic life. In the case of *Mozert*, the judge decided that what is at issue is not the question of religious truth or even religious toleration (which would have us believe that all religious perspectives are equally valid – a view that is anathema to many religious people). Ruling against the plaintiffs, Judge Lively noted that what is at issue in *Mozert* is the question of civic tolerance which, in a diverse society, must supercede the religious considerations of the *Mozert* families.¹⁸ In so ruling, Macedo writes, “Judge Lively’s notion of civil toleration bids us, in effect, to extend political liberalism to the defense of public schooling. We focus on shared public principles and leave the religious dimensions of the question aside.”¹⁹ The Judge’s decision actually goes further than many public schools currently allow, for he concluded that this setting aside of questions of religious truth works both ways: “There should be no ‘compulsion to affirm or deny a religious belief,’ or presumably, any other comprehensive moral view. By simply leaving aside the religious question as such, Lively rightly leaves the school door open to reasonable fundamentalists – that is, to those willing to acknowledge *for civic purposes* the authority of public reasonableness.”²⁰

It takes a particular kind of person to do this. Rawls calls such people “reasonable people,” and it is this qualifier that concerns many critics of political liberalism, although I will suggest that it oughtn’t. Being reasonable as Rawls understands it simply means being willing to learn to live with others in the condition of plurality. It is a virtue that extends across a range of moral, religious and philosophical doctrines, and it is what binds members of culturally pluralist societies to the shared commitments needed to sustain such a society. Reasonable people are those who are willing to “propose and honor fair terms of cooperation” and to abide by the same terms that others “might reasonably be expected to endorse.” Most importantly, they are able “to recognize the burdens of judgment and to accept their consequences.”²¹ This last, rather odd formulation is very important. The “burdens of judgment” are what we undertake whenever we attempt to understand the source or cause of disagreement between persons. The burdens of judgment help us to distinguish between the kinds of disagreements that can be attributed to faulty logic or insufficient evidence – problems that can conceivably be remedied - and the more intractable disagreements that are a reflection of our diverse moral, philosophical, or religious commitments, not to mention the cumulative weight of quite different experiences in the world. As Rawls explains:

Different conceptions of the world can reasonably be elaborated from different standpoints and diversity arises in part from our distinct perspectives. It is unrealistic – or worse, it arouses mutual suspicion and hostility – to suppose that all our differences are

rooted solely in ignorance and perversity, or else in the rivalries for power, status or economic gain.²²

Accepting the burdens of judgment means recognizing to the extent that we can the source of our disagreements (since these are often opaque to all parties in the exchange), and setting aside those that are unlikely “to serve as the basis of lasting and reasoned political agreement.”²³ In other words, it requires us to recognize that we will not manage to arrive at consensus on many important matters, no matter how conscientious we are in our approach to these discussions. Assuming the burdens of judgment then is the first stage of learning to live within the limits of political liberalism. Those who are able to assume the burdens of judgment are reasonable people.

THE LIMITS OF THE LEGITIMATION PROJECT: ‘PLURALISM AS SUCH’ VERSUS ‘REASONABLE PLURALISM’

It is evident by now that the success of political liberalism hinges on the willingness of people to be reasonable. Reasonable people, you will recall, are those who are willing to seek fair terms of social cooperation in the midst of disagreements on matters of moral concern. Similarly, Rawls distinguishes between the fact of pluralism “as such” and a more restrained approach to moral disagreement that he calls “reasonable pluralism.”²⁴ This reining in of people and perspectives to those that can be brought into accord with the liberal project concerns critics like Marilyn Friedman who wonders whether the “principled exclusion [of the unreasonable] is inconsistent with any of the aims or values of the system that Rawls seeks thereby to defend.”²⁵ Friedman finds it “viciously circular to try to justify a liberal doctrine in terms of the hypothetical consent of a citizenry if the condition grounding that hypothesis is that citizens do not hold the illiberal commitments they do in fact hold.” She adds that this is “like saying that all citizens *would* consent to political liberalism if only they were not the illiberals they actually are.”²⁶ On this view, political liberalism fails the test of liberal legitimacy “[b]y excluding from the legitimation pool exactly those persons who do not accept the political values and basic tenets on which Rawls grounds political liberalism.” In other words, “Rawls rigs the election in advance.”²⁷ Friedman reaches the melancholy conclusion that political liberalism must take its place amongst a number of other political doctrines, none of which has any greater claim to political allegiance than the other. To Friedman, the claim of being “political” rather than comprehensive will not save Rawlsian liberalism from the criticism that it is partisan toward a particular way of life.

Interestingly, Rawls attempts to stave off this sort of criticism in his ruminations on the question of whether justice as fairness is indeed fair to those who are reluctant to concede any measure of their conceptions of the good for the sake of political stability and political coherence in the midst of diversity. He acknowledges that not all ways of life can be sustained within the bounds of

political liberalism, and offers an equally melancholy rejoinder to Friedman’s conclusion by agreeing with Isaiah Berlin’s tragic assertion that “there is no social world without loss: that is, no social world that does not exclude some ways of life [...]”²⁸ More to the point of the particular project of political liberalism, however, Rawls might willingly assume the mantle of partisanship, although, to invoke an Arendtian phrase, the partisanship of political liberalism is not partial to a particular way of life but to “the shared world.” Put simply, political liberalism is biased in favor of those who agree that sharing the world means acknowledging the plurality of reasonable ways of life. Unless one is a hopeless utopian, one is left with little choice but to concur with Rawls’ expressions of regret and to admit that there is probably very little that can be done to placate those who object to the condition of pluralism and who reject the demands that this condition places on people to accept the burdens of judgment in an effort to learn to live amidst plurality. The undertone of political liberalism is that “there are no guarantees.” All there can be is the hope that the collective will of reasonable people, i.e. people who are willing to forge fair terms of cooperation on terms all might reasonably accept, will prevail.

This said, while political liberals accept that not everyone will endorse their project, they have to make sure that the majority of people do. The coherence of culturally pluralist societies depends on this. Education is thus crucial to the legitimation project, and I turn now to this topic.

EDUCATION AND THE PROBLEM OF EXCESS

Rawls maintains that the question of children’s education can be answered “entirely within the political conception.” He explains:

Society’s concern with their education lies in their role as future citizens, and so in such essential things as their acquiring the capacity to understand the public culture and to participate in its institutions, in their being economically independent and self-supporting members of society over a complete life, and in their developing the political virtues, all this from within a political point of view.²⁹

One problem with subsuming education entirely under the “political point of view” as Rawls understands it is that it neglects what used to be called “the personal dimension” of education. I’m going to bracket this troubling conflation of all education with civic education in order to focus on a paradox within education for political liberalism that I call the problem of excess. The problem of excess refers to the likelihood – and perhaps even the inevitability – that the effort to keep the liberal project within the circumscribed bounds of the political will fail, and that participants will be changed in the process

I have made the case that the virtue of political liberalism lies in its efforts to remain a fairly circumscribed approach to the challenges of learning to live together in a shared world. Political liberalism restricts the focus of its attention to the political domain in the narrow sense of the term. To this end, it asks citizens to be willing to set aside aspects of their deeply held beliefs for the sake of generating the fair terms of social cooperation needed to create cohesion in the midst of plurality. The minimal scope of political liberalism is part of its appeal in the condition of plurality because it suggests “that it does not tell us what to believe or choose within the lives we lead beyond politics.”³⁰ But, as Eamonn Callan notes, this separation of spheres is not easily sustained. The transactions that occur in the political realm are bound to “constrain the development of ethical identity outside politics.”³¹ What most concerns Callan is the possibility that in the quest to draw a sharp distinction between the shared political commitments of public life and those values that are not shared, we will essentially be asking people to engage in “a spectacular feat of self-deception that cannot be squared with personal integrity.”³² For some people, the compartmentalization of political and non-political commitments (in the Rawlsian sense of these two terms) will be too much of a moral sacrifice, although others will be able to maneuver between the different demands of the public and the social/private with ease. Because political liberalism favors those who can successfully navigate the potential schism between personal and public morality, Callan charges political liberalism with being “a kind of closet comprehensive liberalism.”³³ As Callan sees it, the virtues required to sustain political liberalism will foster the development of the kind of critical questioning that is closely associated with autonomy facilitating education, albeit that this version of autonomy is “less expansive than its major precursors within the liberal tradition.” Political liberalism’s inability to rein in its inevitable excesses leads Callan to conclude that it is simply another kind of comprehensive liberalism: “the Rawlsian doctrine must shape our lives beyond politics in ways that Rawls does not explicitly acknowledge.”³⁴ In the two pages of *Political Liberalism* that Rawls explicitly allots to educational considerations, he very briefly acknowledges the possibility that an education in the principles and virtues of political liberalism may well turn some children into comprehensive liberals. He explains, “Doing the one may lead to the other, if only because once we know the one, we may of our own accord go on to the other.”³⁵ But he goes on to say that a transformation of this sort would have to be an unintended outcome rather than a deliberate goal, an “unavoidable consequence” that “may have to be accepted, often with regret.”³⁶

Macedo offers a different way of understanding the unavoidable excesses of political liberalism. Macedo embraces the very phenomenon that Callan finds untenable about political liberalism, namely its tendency to spill over into aspects of life that lie beyond the circumscribed domain of the political. Unlike

Rawls, Macedo does not regret the possibility that participants in the political process will be transformed as a result of their engagement with one another, even within the tightly circumscribed boundaries of the political. Rather than shying away from the transformative aspects of political liberalism, Macedo makes them the centerpiece of the educational project of civic liberalism in his recent book, *Diversity and Distrust*. Whereas Rawlsian political liberalism restricts its focus to a “concern with basic constitutional principles,” Macedo coins the phrase ‘civic liberalism’ in order to offer an account of political liberalism that does justice to the “political institutions and social structures that help promote a publicly reasonable liberal community.”³⁷ This account puts public schools at the center of civic liberalism, but it also reminds us of the broader “educative ambitions” of liberalism as a way of life. Pace Friedman, political liberalism is not put forward as one among an array of possible ways of life, but rather, as the best possible way of life for pluralistic societies. Because reasonable pluralism has a moderating influence on pluralism as such, the paradox of political liberalism is that the more liberal we become in the political realm, the less diverse we are likely to become in other spheres of life. Over time, the very plurality that political liberalism claims to protect will dissolve, and with the possible exception of those pockets of folks who opt out of the liberal project, we will become much more alike than different, although this gradual enculturation will constantly be offset by the arrival of newcomers (immigrants and refugees) who have yet to be incorporated into the liberal project. Macedo shows how, in the course of the emergence of what he calls “the common school settlement,” the demands of newcomers changed the nature of public schools.³⁸ At the same time, the public school experience altered the cultural identities of many of these newcomers. In the course of the often agonistic process of public deliberations about the scope and reach of public schools in relation to religious diversity in the U.S. for example, Macedo notes that quite often, both the school and the social identity in question were transformed. This is what happened in the case of the Catholic encounter with public schools. Kicking and screaming, to be sure, public schools altered their approach to religious provision in response to the legitimate claims of religious discrimination on the part of Catholic communities. But the transformation went both ways. In fact, Macedo makes the case that the reason that schools were able to accommodate the claims of Catholic families to the degree that they did so, is in itself a reflection of the changes the Church itself had undergone, “at least partly on account of the Catholic encounter with America”.³⁹

Although it is seldom a smooth process – it is quite often tumultuous and almost always fraught with tension - the process of mutual accommodation is frequently mutually transformative. Indeed, part of what makes civic liberalism both an extension of Rawlsian political liberalism and a corrective to it, is this recognition that the process of the liberal legitimation project is not merely a

political process. It is also profoundly educative. Done well, the process of coming to a civic liberal settlement is a transformative experience in the best sense of the term. Those who participate in it are likely to change as a result of it. This is the curious paradox of civic liberalism. It makes it possible for some cultural groups to refuse to change at the same time as it increases the likelihood that they will undergo some sort of liberalizing transformation. Perhaps the capacity for minimalist autonomy develops as much by way of these more or less informal civic engagements as they do through the formal channels of public schooling. However, what distinguishes civic liberalism from comprehensive liberalism is the civic liberal conviction that desirable though this transformation is from a civic perspective, it is not an inevitable outcome of the process, nor can it be the rationale for it. To make such claims on citizens is to refuse them the option of wanting to remain as they are, even though it is more likely than not that they will be changed as a result of the public encounter with difference.

NOTES

1. Examples of recent works in education by liberal perfectionists include Harry Brighouse's *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), Eamonn Callan's *Creating citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), Meira Levinson's *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), and Rob Reich's *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002). Reich, Levinson, and Callan put primacy on the development of the capacity for autonomy; Brighouse is an egalitarian liberal in the tradition of the early John Rawls. Rawls himself refers to this approach as a variant of comprehensive rather than political liberalism. Although Rawls has been taken to task for his claim that political liberalism is an anti-perfectionist political philosophy, I take Rawls at his word for reasons I explain in this paper.
 2. Rawls explains the contrast between a political conception of justice and a comprehensive conception of justice as "a matter of scope: that is, the range of subjects to which a conception applies and the content a wider range requires. A moral conception is ... comprehensive when it includes conceptions of what it of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole. A conception is fully comprehensive if it covers all recognized values and virtues within one rather precisely articulated system; whereas a conception is only partially comprehensive when it comprises a number of, but by no means all, nonpolitical values and virtues and is rather loosely articulated." *Political Liberalism*, 13.
 3. Monique Deveaux, *Cultural Pluralism and Dilemmas of Justice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2000), 135.
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4. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (N.Y.: Columbia UP, 1996), xx.
 5. Monique Deveaux (*Cultural Pluralism*) articulates all of these criticisms, as does Andrea T. Baumeister, in *Liberalism and the 'Politics of Difference'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000).
 6. Peter Lassman, "Disenchantment and the Liberalism of Fear," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Mark Evans (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 143. I should make it clear that Lassman is not persuaded by Rawls' notion of political liberalism, finding it partisan toward pluralism to such an extent that it is really a comprehensive doctrine in disguise. Lassman essentially turns Rawls on his head by arguing that this makes political liberalism a metaphysical doctrine, rather than the strictly political doctrine Rawls claims it to be. I disagree with Lassman's interpretation of the distinction Rawls is making between a metaphysical and a political doctrine. Whereas the former does not lend itself to establishing common ground, the latter might, albeit an attenuated ground, to be sure.
 7. There a great deal of discussion amongst Rawlsians about the extent to which Rawls has been able to make good on this alleged shift in his thinking. There is much dispute about whether Rawls's earlier theory of justice as fairness fits best under the rubric of comprehensive liberalism as he claimed when he first set about explaining how political liberalism differed from his earlier work, or whether he managed to make good on his later efforts to bring justice as fairness into the realm of political liberalism. These arguments are not important to my purposes in this paper, except insofar as they connect with similar disputes about the extent to which political liberalism is indeed a new iteration of liberal theory or whether it is simply another form of comprehensive liberalism in disguise.
 8. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 9.
 9. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 10.
 0. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 10.
 11. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 13-14.
 12. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 14.
 13. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 14.
 14. Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), 138.
 15. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 144-145.
 16. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 11.
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17. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 158.
 18. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 168.
 19. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 174.
 20. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 175.
 21. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 54.
 22. Rawls *Political Liberalism*, 58.
 23. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 58.
 24. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 63-64.
 25. Marilyn Friedman, "John Rawls and the Political Coercion of Unreasonable People," in *The Idea of a Political Liberalism*, ed. Victoria Davion and Clark Wolf (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000), 17.
 26. Friedman, "John Rawls," 21.
 27. Friedman, "John Rawls," 22.
 28. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 197.
 29. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 200.
 30. Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 19.
 31. Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 19.
 32. Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 31.
 33. Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 40.
 34. Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 42.
 35. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 199.
 36. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 200.
 37. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 169.
 38. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 67.
 39. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 87.
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