
Response to Presidential Address

POLITICAL LIBERALISM FOR JUSTICE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY: PROMISE AND PREDICAMENT

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It is my privilege to have the opportunity to respond to Natasha Levinson's positive reappraisal of liberalism. As one of the discontent of liberalism, I always find it confounding that liberalism continues to shape the political discourse, process, and structure in most democratic states. My discontent with liberalism derives from the persistent injustice in most modern democratic states. In fact, I have been puzzled at John Rawls' eagerness to delineate a methodical yet surreal blueprint for building "a just and stable society of free and equal citizens"¹ when Martin Luther King, Jr. only dared to declare a sketchy dream of a society free of racial segregation. Seemingly, Rawls' undiminished faith in liberalism reflects a privileged social position that enables him to assume an architect's position of nation-building. In contrast, the powerful speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. reveals a vulnerable subaltern agency that charges "America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds'" and refuses "to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt."²

My registered antipathy toward liberalism might have prompted Levinson's invitation to respond to her presidential address. To honor Levinson's request, I shall re-cast doubts on liberalism even though Levinson's eloquent and elegant defense of political liberalism compels one to recognize the promising aspects of political liberalism in pursuing justice in the culturally pluralistic societies. Specifically, my response to Levinson's positive reappraisal of liberalism will focus on examining the juxtaposition of the promises and predicaments of political liberalism in addressing the dilemma educators have encountered in culturally pluralistic societies.

POLITICAL LIBERALISM FOR JUSTICE AND DIVERSITY

Liberalism is by no means a monolithic school of political philosophy. Levinson's reappraisal of liberalism focuses on John Rawls' delineation of political liberalism. To Levinson, Rawls' political liberalism, with emphasis on the political conception of justice, is promising in addressing the politics of difference. More specifically, an ideal Rawlsian state is based on the following principles:

First, the basic structure of society is regulated by a political conception of justice; second, this political conception is the focus of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrine; and third, public discussion, when constitutional essentials and

questions of basic justice are at stake, is conducted in terms of the political conception of justice.³

To Rawls, the political conception of justice is “a freestanding political conception having its own intrinsic (moral) political ideal expressed by the criteria of reciprocity.”⁴ As a “freestanding” political conception, the political conception of justice is not rooted in any particular comprehensive political, religious, and moral doctrines. It simply represents an ethical commitment to establishing a political procedure through which all reasonable citizens must regard one another as free and equal when they participate in social cooperation. Guided by the criterion of reciprocity, political liberalism is conducive for democratic citizens to explore, respect, or tolerate variegated conceptions of good deriving from divergent reasonable comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines.

Rawls’ advocacy of the political concasement of “justice” acknowledges the difficulties of attaining overlapping consensus on any particular conception of the good when “the diversity of reasonable comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines” is “a permanent feature of the public culture democracy.”⁵ At the same time, Rawls believes that pluralistic cultures do not necessarily endanger the stability of a liberal democratic society because the profound yet authentic culture differences are not supposed to be “rooted solely in ignorance and perversity, or else in the rivalries for power, status or economic gain.”⁶ Levinson points out that “the success of political liberalism hinges on the willingness of people to be reasonable.”⁷ Under the guidance of the political conception of justice, reasonable people recognize and support the flourishing of diverse yet “reasonable” religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines. Hence, the diverse comprehensive doctrines as the “background culture” of a civil society can “play a crucial educative role for the polity” to forge “a system of cooperation in the democratic societies.”⁸ In short, the existence of a just liberal state depends upon a cooperative and reasonable citizenry that strives for achieving an overlapping consensus on establishing a due political procedure for collective deliberation on public policies in the public domain.

To Levinson, political liberalism is helpful for learning to “live with others in the condition of plurality.” Learning to live with the cultural others who are our equals is an educational as well as political project. From Levinson’s vantage point of view, “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.”⁹ By narrowing the purview of political realm, political liberalism indeed could facilitate the flourishing of diverse cultures in the civil societies. In the mean time, political liberalism insists upon the indispensability of the political realm and the imperative to cultivate a cooperative and “reasonable” citizenry. More specifically, political liberalism, on the one hand, adopts a

minimal approach to ensure that citizens can exercise their rights to form or endorse their own conception of good in their private domain. On the other hand, political liberalism demands a higher degree of “tolerance” of diverse cultural values in the public domain.¹⁰ It follows that civic and citizenship education must foster prospective citizens’ understanding of the political conception of justice and cultivate their citizenship skills in participating in the public reasoning for settling the public affairs.

Since “reasonableness” can mean different things to different people, Marilyn Friedman argues that “reasonableness” as a regulative ideal can be a convenient device to exclude the perceived “unreasonable” or “illiberal” people from determining public affairs¹¹. In response to the above critique of political liberals’ exclusionary practices, Levinson argues, “the partisanship of political liberalism is not partial to a particular way of life but to a plurality of reasonable ways of life.”¹² Implicitly, Levinson shares Rawls’ faith in the ordinary (common?) citizens’ capability of attaining overlapping consensus on “reasonableness.” In other words, “reasonableness,” like the political conception of justice, is a freestanding principle that reflects reasonable people’s commitment to recognize and pursue the common good for all people in the public domain.

In line with Rawls, Levinson is committed to promoting reasonable cultural pluralism through culturally inclusive education that aims at cultivating a “reasonable” citizenry. Levinson points out that this educational process is seldom smooth. Yet, in spite of tension and resistance, public education could entail the mutual transformation and mutual accommodation of diverse cultural groups with variegated conceptions of the good. Eventually, education as a transformative process can be the key to establishing and sustaining “a just and stable society of free and equal citizens who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines,”¹³ as envisioned by Rawls.

To sum up, Levinson’s positive reappraisal of liberalism focuses on the following four aspects of political liberalism. First, political liberalism recognizes and accepts cultural pluralism as “a permanent feature” of democratic societies. Second, the political conception of justice in the delineation of political liberalism indicates an overriding commitment to recognizing all people as free and equal citizens despite their cultural differences. Third, the narrowing of the purview of the political realm by the political liberals can simultaneously affirm the flourishing of diverse cultures in the civic domain and command a collective ethical commitment to attaining overlapping consensus on the political conception of justice for conducting public affairs. Fourth, the political nature of the political conception of justice enunciates that the consensus building process is political as well as educative. Guided by the criteria of reciprocity and reasonableness,

this political and educative process can entail cultural transformation for all citizens who embrace divergent political, religious, and moral doctrines.

THE PREDICAMENTS OF POLITICAL LIBERALISM

Reflecting Western cultural hegemony, liberalism appears to be an ineffective conceptual tool to deliver its promise—equality and justice for all. For that reason, one can easily concur with Audre Lorde’s warning that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, in light of Levinson’s positive reappraisal of political liberalism, it is critical to rethink multicultural educators’ tendency to marginalize liberalism in culturally pluralistic societies. After all, the subaltern groups’ appropriation of the master’s tool more or less commands a long-lasting pursuit of equality and justice for all when Marxism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism fails to provide alternative viable visions for building a just society. Hence, instead of totally discrediting liberalism, I, in what follows, shall only examine the problems associated with the promising aspects of political liberalism in addressing cultural pluralism, as recognized by Levinson.

Departing from comprehensive/perfectionist liberalism, political liberalism does not regard individual ethical autonomy as the paradigmatic good of liberal education. By attending to the existing pluralistic cultures, Rawls “affirms political autonomy for all, but leaves the weight of ethical autonomy to be decided by citizens severally in light of their comprehensive doctrines.”¹⁵ In other words, the assurance of political autonomy appears to be the key to safeguard citizens’ ethical autonomy within their own private domains. From Levinson’s standpoint, as ethical autonomy reflects a universal paradigm of moral reasoning, Rawls’ affirming political autonomy represents a critical effort to widen the range of “reasonable ways of life.”

However, the dichotomization of political autonomy and ethical autonomy is neither a universal cultural value nor a cross-cultural practice. Clifford Geertz notes that human beings are “incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish themselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it.”¹⁶ Geertz’s anthropological insights still holds true [that it is particular culture that shapes human development] even in the age of globalization that entails endless and ongoing interactive cultural hybridization. Hence, while Western cultural hegemony more or less generates a universal recognition of the divide between the public and the private, it is still common for some cultural groups to resist such a dualistic cultural practice. For instance, theocracy, as the integration of ethical and political autonomy, continues to assure its political and ethical legitimacy in many mid-eastern nations and states. In the U. S., the recent fundamental Christian movement also strives to eradicate the great divide between political autonomy for the secular and ethical autonomy for the sacred.

To a large extent, the dualistic distinction between the ethical and political autonomy is simply an arbitrary theoretic construct. In reality, just as the private domain and the public domain are indivisible, the ethical autonomy and political autonomy are interrelated. In the case of *Mozert v. Hawkins*, Levinson supports Judge Lively's ruling to authorize the school board of Hawkins to promote "civic tolerance" by exposing all students to a culturally inclusive reading program. The rationale lies in that a culturally inclusive program in public school settings is essential to foster prospective citizens' appreciation of diverse reasonable cultures. From this vantage point of view, the litigation by Christian fundamentalist families seems to suggest that these Christian fundamentalists attempt to exercise their ethical autonomy in the public sphere. However, one can also argue that these religious parents, like their school board, simply exercise their political autonomy in determining what ought to be included in the formal curriculum in the public schools.

Furthermore, in accordance with political liberalism, the judicial review is critical to resolve value conflicts resulting from reasonable citizens' exercising their political autonomy. Rawls claims that "public reason is the reason of its supreme court."¹⁷ But, it is noted that the selection of Supreme Court judges at both state and federal levels in the U.S. has been an ongoing ideological battle ground. While it seems to be "reasonable" to expect citizens to comply with the judges' legal ruling, it is still questionable that Judge Lively's elaborate legal reasoning could convert the Christian fundamentalists into zealous supporters for multicultural curriculum. In fact, the popularity of home schooling and the increase of "autonomous" charter schools clearly show that more and more citizens are inclined to exercise their political autonomy in "circumscribing" the public realm further so they can maximize their rights to duly exercise their ethical autonomy in their private domains.

Consequently, despite its commitment to promote reasonable cultural pluralism, political liberalism is indeed a double-edged sword for the multicultural education movement. More specifically, while political liberalism recognizes the profound cultural differences among divergent political, religious, and moral doctrines, one cannot overlook how the imbalanced power relationships among the divergent doctrines shape the presumably "authentic" cultural conflicts. Rawls argues; "The basic structure of society is arranged so that it maximizes the primary goods available to the least advantaged to make use of the equal basic liberties enjoyed by everyone. This defines one of the central aims of political and social justice."¹⁸ Implicitly, political liberalism suggests that the political conception of justice should lead to equal distribution of the primary goods and equal recognition of all reasonable cultures. In reality, the equal distribution of the primary goods remains as an unfulfilled promise by the liberals. Also, it is noted that all reasonable cultures do not necessarily receive equal recognition from all reasonable people. Some reasonable cultures rise to be the "dominant" cultural

forces whereas the other reasonable cultures have remained perpetually on the margin. Therefore, while political liberalism's endorsement of the "background culture" indicates its limitless support for the cultural minority's efforts to preserve and celebrate their marginalized or even disappearing cultures, it also sanctions dominant cultural groups' efforts to re-affirm or even promote their cultural values as the undeviating and ever lasting social norms. To illustrate, it is not surprising that the opponents of affirmative action can play the role of victims of "reverse discrimination" and strive to restore "meritocracy." Similarly, the anti-gay movement also portrays homosexuals as aggressors who are determined to set homosexuality as a social norm. In brief, the ongoing cultural wars between the dominant and marginalized cultural groups suggest a widespread endorsement of political liberalism. In the meantime, the flourishing of all background cultures appears to be an unattainable objective.

In addition, it should be noted that cultural differences often reflect interest conflicts. Yet, a genuine recognition of cultural pluralism does not necessarily lead to the resolution of interest conflicts.¹⁹ For instance, while Thomas Jefferson recognized that the concept of private property was absent from Native American culture, he did not therefore forgo his pursuit of his own interests—a willful possession of the cultural others' "private property."²⁰ As a loyal liberal for the minimal government, Jefferson certainly could not have supported governmental intervention so Native Americans' culture could flourish. Today, it is even more doubtful that the minimal approach of political liberalism can help with the resolution of interest conflicts. Granted, the civil rights movement in the U. S. more or less compelled the state to take a maximal approach to instigate and institute school desegregation, which inadvertently resulted in the seemingly more legitimate school re-segregation. Nevertheless, the minimal approach, exemplified by the ongoing privatization of the public schools, also fails to redress the persistent achievement gap between the have and have not despite.²¹ Clearly, neither the minimal nor the maximal scope of liberalism can guarantee the flourishing of all reasonable cultures and secure a fair distribution of the existing primary goods.

Above all, Levinson like Rawls might have overstated our willingness and readiness to be reasonable people in managing public affairs. To Rawls, reasonable people are able to attain an overlapping consensus on justice as a guiding principle for political deliberation. In other words, reasonable people could embrace the following five values: "impartiality and equality, openness (no one and no relevant information is excluded) and lack of coercion, and unanimity—which in combination guide discussion to generalizable interests to the agreement of all participants."²² These virtuous reasonable people can also recognize that "'liberty' has a preeminent value and is the main if not the sole end of political and social justice."²³ Above all, reasonable people must embrace social cooperation that involves two elements—"the first is a shared notion of

fair terms of cooperation, which each participant may reasonably be expected to accept, provided that everyone else likewise accepts them. Fair terms of cooperation articulate an idea of reciprocity and mutuality.”²⁴ As discussed above, “reasonableness” appears to be a distinguished yet all-embracing human virtue. While individuals might be born with the moral capacity to be “reasonable,” it is palpable (understandable?) that the cultivation of reasonableness as an individual virtue is a long-term educative task. In the same vein, the cultivation of “public reason” is also an arduous undertaking. In Rawls’ own words; “This public knowledge, and the shared sense of justice which is its object, is the result of time and cultivation, easier to destroy than build up.”²⁵ But, who should be responsible for cultivating the virtue of “reasonableness?” How shall we cultivate the virtue of “reasonableness?” From the standpoint of political liberalism, “background culture” is not in conflict with the political conception of justice. Rather, “background culture” can be facilitative for the cultivation of “reasonableness” as a civic virtue that could lead to a full-fledged recognition of “justice,” “liberty,” and “social cooperation,” as suggested by Rawls. This is why the political liberals believe that a circumscribed public realm is conducive rather than detrimental to the cultivation of civic virtues. Yet, it is also noted that distinguished cultural groups are more inclined to focus on the transmission of their own cultural values than to exploring alternative cultural norms. Hence, it is also vital for political liberals to elate the circumscribed public realm. For instance, the liberally minded judge such as Lively in the *Mozert* case purposely insists upon the separation between state and church and support multicultural curriculum. Similarly, a federal judge Clarence Cooper very recently ruled that school officials in an Atlanta suburb must remove the stickers they had placed in biology textbooks stating that “evolution is a theory, not a fact” that should be “approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.” To judge Cooper, the aforementioned statement without religious reference still represents an endorsement of “Christian fundamentalist or creationist” beliefs.²⁶ But, is it indispensable or imperative to cultivate “public reason” in the circumscribed public realm such as the public schools?

To Macedo, the heart of civic education in a liberal polity lies in a fundamental query; “How can tolerance be taught without exposing children to diversity and asking them to forbear from asserting the truth of their own particular convictions, at least for political purposes?”²⁷ To political liberals, the mandatory multicultural curriculum embedded in compulsory schooling stands for a “reasonable effort to familiarize students with diversity and teach tolerance.”²⁸ Still, the political liberals’ efforts to celebrate the circumscribed public realm also keep a tight rein on the presumably reasonable people’s ethical autonomy. Consequently, it is not uncommon for reasonable people to pursue legal solutions to educational disputes. When the court as an embodied “public

reason” fails to support their ethical autonomy, it seems reasonable for them to exercise their political autonomy further to elect likely minded politicians who in turn would appoint likely minded judges. Consequently, one cannot but question the impact of the mandatory multicultural curriculum on promoting the appreciation of reasonable cultural pluralism.

All in all, political liberalists’ recognition of reasonable cultural pluralism is based on a strong liberal faith in human moral capacity to be reasonable moral agents and to be committed to the pursuit of justice and liberty. An ideal liberal polity comprised of reasonable people can withstand itself as “a social union of social unions”²⁹ in spite of divergent religious, philosophical, and moral traditions. However, while political liberalists, and liberalists in general, have provided us with a venerable moral vision of building a just society, their moral vision seems to be detached from social reality. In other words, an ideal liberal polity derives from “the state of nature” that never existed in any given human societies. The “otherworldliness” of “the state of nature” embedded in liberalism allows theorists such as Rawls to disregard political reality. Hence, although political liberalists are apprehensive of the cultural biases of comprehensive/perfectionist liberalism, they still fail to attend to how the existing imbalanced power relationships among varied cultural groups have created numberless barriers to the flourishing of all cultures. Instead of empowering marginalized cultural groups, the dualistic dichotomization of the ethical autonomy and political autonomy sanctions the dominant cultural groups’ efforts to set the cultural norms even in the circumscribed public realm in the presumably culturally pluralistic society.

CONCLUSION: IN SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

Despite my skepticism of political liberalism, I agree with Levinson that the reconfiguration of liberalism represent a momentous (timely?) effort to respond to criticisms from proponents of “the politics of difference.” Also, as “the politics of difference” appear to generate more resistance to the ongoing multicultural education movement, one cannot but support political liberalists’ efforts to carve out a carefully circumscribed public realm in which divergent cultural groups can learn to live with one another. Hence, I agree with Macedo and Levinson that “the liberal legitimation project” is a profoundly educative task. However, instead of maintaining the boundary of this circumscribed public realm, I believe that civic and citizenship education ought to strive to open up this public space by promoting more inclusive dialogues across divergent religious, ethical, and philosophical belief systems.

More specifically, civic and citizenship education tends to focus on the political and public dimension of citizenship. It is not surprising that civic and citizenship education has been referred to as political education and the core of civic and citizenship education appears to lie in the structure and process of

governance in the public rather than private domain. To a large extent, the instigation of multicultural curriculum derives from a need to safeguard the democratic state by cultivating a reasonable and cooperative citizenry. Nevertheless, the scope of multicultural curriculum often fails to include what liberal educators consider as “exclusive” religious belief systems, such as Evangelical fundamental Christianity. Consequently, multicultural educators more or less limit freedom of speech in this circumscribed public realm. In line with political liberalism, multicultural educators’ paradoxical commitment to liberty and justice mirrors the political stand of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). In defending everyone’s equal constitutional rights, the ACLU is compelled to prevent any excessive or even nominal entanglements between the state and any particular religious, political, and ethical doctrines in the public realm. The ACLU’s recent effort to exclude sticker supporting creationism from biology textbook especially exemplifies such an exclusive approach to promote multicultural dialogues. As mentioned before, the public and the private are interrelated. An artificial dualistic demarcation not only demands reasonable people to refrain from exercising their private ethical autonomy in the public domain but also cast doubt on the legitimacy of their own presumably “private” belief system. The resurgent debate over evolution vs. creation especially indicates fundamentalist Christians’ desire to “legitimize” their own belief system in the circumscribed public realm.

In view of widespread resistance to multicultural education movement, it is critical to rethink the exclusive approach to exclude “exclusive” religious, moral, and philosophical doctrines. After all, exclusive doctrines are not necessarily unreasonable doctrines. Undoubtedly, including the exclusive yet reasonable doctrines into the circumscribed public realm such as public school settings certainly can ignite heated debates. But, as Macedo and Levinson point out that multicultural education is to be contentious, it is unrealistic to expect that a “conflict-free” multicultural curriculum can resolve cultural conflicts outside the circumscribed public realm. After all, the process of attaining overlapping consensus on the political conception of justice indeed demands unlimited dialogical interactions. Public schools as a circumscribed public realm thus ought to open to more inter-culture and inter-faith dialogues. After all, “the democratic constitutional state does not represent a finished structure but is a delicate and above all a fallible and revisable undertaking,” as noted by Habermas.³⁰ The fallibility of the liberal democratic system reflects “reasonable” people’s vulnerability to sanction unjust and illiberal cultural practices. Yet, the liberal faith in reasonable people’s moral capacity can also command the moral courage to amend the democratic constitutional state. Political liberals’ vision of a just and equal society hence can be re-inscribed as a corrective device to redress the contradictions between political reality and ethical ideal.

NOTES

1. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), xxxix.
 2. Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream,” speech delivered on the steps at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on 28 August 1963. http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/address_at_march_on_washington.pdf [cited 30 June 2005].
 3. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 44.
 4. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xlvii.
 5. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxviii, 36.
 6. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 58.
 7. Natasha Levinson, “The Limits of Liberalism: A Positive Reappraisal,” in this journal.
 8. Levinson, “The Limits of Liberalism: A Positive Reappraisal.”
 9. Levinson, “The Limits of Liberalism: A Positive Reappraisal.”
 10. Kok-Chor Tan, *Toleration, Diversity, and Global Justice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000).
 11. 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, CO: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 17.
 12. Levinson, “The Limits of Liberalism: A Positive Reappraisal.”
 13. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxxix.
 14. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden (New York: Routledge, 2000), 53-55.
 15. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 78.
 16. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 49.
 17. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 231.
 18. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 326.
 19. Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to Current Debate*, ed. Cynthia Willett (Malden: Blackwell, 1998).
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20. Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 19-49.
 21. H. M Levin, *Privatizing Education: Can the Marketplace Deliver Choice, Efficiency, Equity, and Social Cohesion?* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).
 22. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 425.
 23. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 291-2
 24. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 300.
 25. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 316.
 26. Ellen Barry, "Judge Nixes Stickers Challenging Evolution," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 January, 2005, headlines-nation section, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-evolution14jan14,1,260211.story?coll=la-headlines-nation> [cited 17 January 2005].
 27. Stephen Macedo, "Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls?" *Ethics*, 105 (1995): 471.
 28. Macedo, "Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism": 485.
 29. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 320.
 30. Quoted in Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 377.
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