
RESPONSE TO “A SKETCH OF POLITICALLY LIBERAL PRINCIPLES
OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION” BY BARRY L. BULL

Bruce A. Kimball
The Ohio State University

I wish to thank Barry Bull for his excellent and stimulating paper, and I would like to pose five questions or points for his consideration in response.

In preface to my first question, I want to say that I find cogent and persuasive the discussion in the section “Issues for Political Liberalism in Higher Education” of reasons for a politically liberal society to take responsibility for higher education. So I am not going to address those reasons per se in my response, although I want to suggest that all of these *reasons* have to do with the “instrumental value,” as Professor Bull says at one point, of education for politically liberal society. In other words, all these “reasons” explain ways in which education fosters political liberalism and prepares citizens for political liberalism. The “reasons” are benefits or advantages or reinforcements for politically liberal society.

I make this point because the term “reasons” and other wording in these pages and in the opening paragraphs of the section on “Political Liberalism and Children’s Education” suggest that education, in its nature, is especially suited or important to politically liberal society. However, to make that argument would require a large discussion about the nature of education. Professor Bull may undertake this argument in *Social Justice in Education: An Introduction*.¹ But all that is necessary here, I suggest, is something like Aristotle’s argument at the beginning of Book VIII of the *Politics*. There, Aristotle maintains that any state has an interest in educating its citizens to suit its form of government. For example, Persia has the same interest in educating its citizens for totalitarianism as does Sparta for oligarchy and Athens for democracy.

Aristotle does not argue that Athens has a special interest in educating its citizens for democracy because of the particularly close fit between education and democracy. But that somewhat Deweyan thesis seems suggested in parts of Professor Bull’s essay. If my reading is correct, then that thesis entails claims about the nature and meaning of education that require elaboration. Alternatively, Aristotle’s modest, or weak, formulation, describes the relationship between polity and education in terms that resemble an overlapping consensus. Aristotle suggests that many different polities must

¹ Barry L. Bull, *Social Justice in Education: An Introduction* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

attend to education – totalitarianism, oligarchy, democracy, etc. – though they have different theories of education. Hence, that formulation may be more suitable for the essay.

My second question concerns the relationship between Rawls’s views of justice as fairness and the politically liberal society. Let me frame this question with a story. Although I took a couple introductory philosophy courses in college, I had never heard of John Rawls when I arrived at Harvard to begin my graduate work in 1973. But *A Theory of Justice*, which Rawls had published two years earlier, was already ubiquitous there. My suitemate, who had graduated from Oberlin in philosophy and practically memorized *A Theory of Justice*, was beside himself with joy when he was chosen as one of the legion of teaching assistants for the Introduction to Philosophy course that Rawls taught for Harvard undergraduates in spring 1974. I spent most of the next twelve years in graduate study at Harvard, and Rawls continued to be the rage. In fact, nearly every course that I took in the Divinity School, the Education School, and the Law School during the 1970s and 1980s seemed to include a reading from Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*.

Rawls’s argument about “justice as fairness” was the focus in those decades, and that is what Rawls always meant to me. Then, in the 1990s I began to see him discussed primarily in connection with political liberalism, and I never understood the relationship between the two Rawls’s—the justice-as-fairness Rawls and the political-liberalism Rawls. In his paper, Professor Bull has helpfully explained and reconciled their relationship in conceptual and historical terms over the past forty years. But I am left with a question as to whether a fundamental shift, rather than reconciliation, occurred in this relationship both for Rawls and in this essay.

Initially, according to Bull’s account, Rawls introduces political liberalism as the enabling polity of justice as fairness. Political liberalism is initially the vehicle for justice as fairness. But then it appears that the “political necessities” of political liberalism supersede justice as fairness in their analytical importance. Finally, this essay apparently sets aside justice as fairness and focuses on the broader category of political liberalism. Given this, I would like to ask Professor Bull whether, in his view, political liberalism has, in fact, eclipsed justice as fairness as a framework for analyzing the relationship between justice and education in America? Determining the overlapping consensus of political liberalism seems more salient than justice as fairness.

Turning more directly to Bull’s argument, my third question concerns the relationship between empirical and normative claims in the essay, as well as the relationship between American society and political liberalism. In the second section of the paper, “Political Liberalism and Children’s Education,” announces the task of “formulating the moral principles that should govern

such a society's educational institutions." This is clearly a normative and philosophical project. But shortly thereafter, on the same page, the essay identifies the four "most frequent considerations that Americans think relevant to their schools." I take this to be a fundamental empirical claim, and I would be interested to know the evidence for this claim. But I am more concerned to ask about the relationship between these two propositions, which, in my judgment, create a persistent ambiguity in the essay, if I understand it correctly.

On the one hand, it seems that the essay intends to formulate politically liberal principles that American society ought to adopt. Thus, at the beginning of the section "Issues for Political Liberalism in Higher Education," the essay is "attempting an initial version of principles of an overlapping consensus that might apply to higher education in a politically liberal society." On the other hand, the starting point for these principles seems to be the empirical claim about the four American "considerations" for education. By this approach, the task would be to demonstrate that these considerations fit political liberalism, as defined by Rawls. In other words, my question is whether the essay is presenting philosophically formulated politically liberal principles that should be applied to American society? Or is the essay presenting empirical American considerations that it is measuring against, or reconciling with, political liberalism?

Perhaps this dilemma can be resolved by pointing to the proposition that American society is politically liberal, as intimated at various points in the essay. But if this is the case, then it seems that the principles do not need "justification," as the essay suggests. That is to say, if we know that American society is politically liberal, and we know that these four principles present an overlapping consensus for Americans, then we know that the principles are politically liberal. In that case, the principles seem to require not justification, but explanation and elaboration.

Hence, I would like to ask Professor Bull to clarify the relationship between empirical and normative claims in the paper, and the relation between American society and political liberalism. Is this essay formulating and justifying politically liberal principles or is the essay explaining and elaborating principles that are known to be politically liberal?

My fourth question concerns what might be called the conceptual status of the four points that are presented in the essay and the accompanying table. The four items of liberty, democracy, equal opportunity, and economic growth are introduced as "considerations." I am not sure what that means beyond important but general "categories." I conceive them to be something like "topics" in classical rhetoric. The idea is that these "topics" are expected to be addressed in orations on this subject. When Americans discuss educational policy, they are expected to address these topics – to say something about "democracy," for example – even though their substantive views might be quite opposite to prevailing norms or others' views.

In Bull's account, each of these four considerations then yields a brief paragraph that is called "a principle" for the conduct of education. But I suggest that each of these paragraphs reads more like a "policy," and I cannot clearly identify what I would call a "principle." Corresponding to the category of "Personal Liberty," for example, we find the statement: "Conduct higher education in a way that expands social and individual knowledge about new conceptions of the good," and so forth. But we do not have a proposition that people should have liberty to do such-and-such, which is what I would call a principle. In particular, I would point to the fourth category of "economic growth." The principle associated with this category and its paragraph seem particularly obscure to me. In fact, "economic growth" seems a somewhat narrow and presentist policy derived from a more general principle that might be stated as: "Everyone should be able to pursue happiness, subject to certain limitations, etc."

The principles may be laid out in Professor Bull's book, and I am not trying to quibble about semantics here. But if we are to identify precisely an overlapping consensus, then it seems critical to specify the conceptual principles and distinguish them from their applications. Instead, the essay appears to identify four broad topics, and then certain policies for education within those categories. So I would like to ask Professor Bull whether he would agree on the need to specify the principles that bridge the considerations and the policies?

My fifth and final question concerns the balance between personal and social considerations in formulating principles and policies that are politically liberal. In Rawls's analysis, the determination of reflective equilibrium between people's two moral powers seemed primarily an individual and personal undertaking that was subject to modification in light of others' views. Social considerations, at most, balance personal considerations, as Professor Bull states: "specific formulation of one's conception of the good and one's sense of justice is simultaneously a social and individual enterprise in a politically liberal society."

However, the consideration of "economic growth" – and, to a lesser extent, the other considerations – seems to undervalue the personal dimension, at least as Rawls introduced it. Would a student or her parents identify "economic growth" or even "democracy" as a norm for the student's education? I suspect not. Consequently, my fifth and final question is whether Professor Bull believes that these four "principles" derive from "simultaneously a social and individual enterprise" or that these four are more socially determined.

In closing, I would like to thank Professor Bull again for his important and stimulating essay and project.
