

Education and the Identities of Liberalism

CHRISTOPHER MARTIN

The University of British Columbia

In “Political and Metaphysical: Reflections on Identity, Education, and Justice,” Lauren Bialystok makes a nuanced and timely case for a reassessment of the moral and political significance of identity within liberal societies in general, and for education in particular. She offers an impressive philosophical reconstruction of a form of political polarization driven, in part, by the attempt to adjudicate claims of justice and fairness on identity grounds. This attempt appears to put at odds two important intuitions: that we ought to treat citizens as free and equal in an *ideal* sense, and that we ought to recognize citizens in their particularity in the *non-ideal* circumstances against which some may struggle.

While Bialystok acknowledges that this conflict is a longstanding one for liberal political theory, her argument advances three important claims that show why we have reason to take this tension seriously in the educational domain. First, political liberalism does a poor job of recognizing problems of justice and fairness logically connected to identity. Second, the leading successor to a liberal political approach, which is to ground claims of justice *on* identity, falters because the criterion that one must necessarily appeal to in making good on identity claims, ‘*authenticity*’, is unstable and results in justice claims that exacerbate, or incentivize, in-group/out-group distinctions and undermine democratic and deliberative politics. Third, we need both a principled conception of justice (such as political liberalism) *and* a politics more attuned to actual injustices (such as identity-based politics) in the public conversation about justice and fairness. Key to this enterprise is an education that engages students on both the importance and salience of identity in a deliberative politics, as well as the limits of appeals to authenticity as a basis for such deliberations.

Bialystok’s argument represents a novel and significant contribution to the growing debate over social justice and education. I think it adds much needed intellectual, in fact dialectical, nuance to a discussion that has been increasingly monopolized by so-called “culture wars” and social media. Her educational project points a constructive way forward. Therefore, my response will focus less on the conclusion of her argument and more on her claim that these problems can be attributed to political liberalism. If she is correct, we have real reason to entertain a serious revision or perhaps even rejection of the liberal philosophical project. But as we will see, it is not so obvious that philosophical conceptions of liberalism are the problem.

Overview of the Argument

As Bialystok rightly points out, demands for justice have become more insistently tied to particular group identities. Yet, the principles that a liberal politics has at its disposal in order to adjudicate such claims ostensibly requires a diminution of those particular identities. “You claim you and your brethren have

been being treated unjustly,” says the political liberal. “But can you tell me how this treatment departs from what any citizens is owed? Don’t formulate your demands in terms of what *you* are owed. Make your case in terms of what *everyone and anyone* is owed.” As Bialystok puts it, citizens are therefore unfairly compelled to “bracket” their identities in order to make good on their claims.

It would seem that a turn to identity as a basis for (some) justice claims is warranted. We can craft social policies aimed at broadly defined groups, for example. The redistribution (of resources or valuable opportunities) can be an effective way of righting persistent inequalities between groups when those inequalities are due to historical wrongs. However, the problem arises when claims to justice are (i) logically connected to one’s specific identity and where (ii) failure to accurately discern that identity leads to further injustice. Bialystok provides a helpful and straightforward example: “If there were a bursary that only biracial students could apply for, someone would eventually have to take on the daunting and thankless task of defining “biracial” in a non-trivial way, or deciding between candidates whose bi-racial identities have very different political inflections. The bursary is intended to recognize a particular marginalized group, but the group has its own margins” (p. 158). And yet, if we do not define “biracial” in a manner that contains, and *only* contains, those persons who at risk of the specific misrecognitions and disrespect that can come with a biracial identity and that motivate the scholarship in the first place, we risk allocating resources to individuals who have no legitimate claim to them.

But what exactly makes an identity-claim “legitimate”? As Bialystok puts it, we tend to think of such claims in terms of authenticity:

The ideal of authenticity connotes a perfect correspondence between some aspects of myself and some truth about identity, or the world. Without a notional horizon of correspondence, identity claims falter. The truth of my self-identifications as member of a given religion, for example, must be measured by some degree of convergence between who I am and what the religion means. (p. 156)

That is to say, our instinct in such situations is to treat authenticity as a “verification criterion” for identity.

But this straightforward example becomes the harbinger of an even more serious problem. It is one thing to think that some claims to justice are logically connected to identity, quite another to adjudicate when an individual may rightly claim that identity. As Bialystok shows, through some compelling examples, that authenticity is always a contestable verification criterion. And one consequence of such contestability is that citizens from across the political spectrum have begun to appeal to identity as a basis for rights claims that rely on increasingly finer and more polarizing distinctions in order to make good on such claims. So, among citizens with some identity X there will be those that assert that they “really are” X and the rightful claimants. And within *that* group will be those who will claim that they are really *really* X. And so on. Further, successful identity-based claims for justice incentivize other citizens to formulate competing claims about the importance of *their* identity for justice. (Or to claim an identity that they have no business claiming.) And why not? “If identity is the political game we are now supposed to be playing,” these other citizens might ask, “why shouldn’t we play it, too?” The upshot is that identity, because its verification criterion is unstable, cannot do the democratic and deliberative work that we need it to. But nor can we go back to the earlier “justice-as-identity-blindness” model, either.

Finally, this sets the stage for the educational argument. Bialystok thinks that the way out the fog is an education system that can sustain thoughtful, charitable, and open-minded discussions about identity in a (hopefully liberal?) polity. It entails a move away from authenticity and closer to a politics that

recognizes the degree to which sorting through identity questions is a complex matter that cannot be easily reduced either to political norms of abstract impartiality or an ethics of authenticity.

Which liberalism are we talking about?

Much of Bialystok's argument is founded on the view that many citizen's frustrations with the liberal *status quo* can be attributed to the political liberalism of the Rawlsian variety, and in particular its commitment "identity-blind" impartiality.¹ But what specific features of "liberalism" are citizens in reality reacting to? We can formulate this question out in a few different ways, but they all converge on the same point: it is not obvious that the rise of identity essentialism in existing liberal societies is due to any of liberalism's philosophical shortcomings.

First, it is not obvious that *philosophical* liberalism has anything to do with the phenomenon that Bialystok has identified in the first place. I say "philosophical" liberalism in order to distinguish the ideals and principles of liberalism as defended by thinkers in both its comprehensive (Locke, Kant, Mill) and "political" varieties (Rawls) from the various Charters, Constitutions, policies, and practices in states that identify themselves as liberal and democratic.

But why should this distinction matter? It matters because Bialystok characterizes the problem as arising from a tension between liberal theory in its *ideal* form and non-ideal citizenship.² Yet, if the identity-based justice claims that Bialystok is concerned with are claims being made by *actual* citizens (as opposed to their theoretical counterparts as conceived within the various liberal philosophical frameworks I just listed) we need a more precise account of how philosophical liberalism fails in a manner that motivates these claims. When we say that the identity-blindness of Rawlsian political liberalism undermines the identity of citizens, for example, are we talking about the identities of the fictional citizens of a Rawlsian political framework (which in practice has never existed in any fully realized sense) or are we talking about the identities of real people in real societies? And if we are indeed talking about the latter, what reasons do we have for assuming that the forms of misrecognition in the theoretical world of Rawlsian political liberalism are the *same* kinds of misrecognition that actual liberal citizens experience?

It is not obvious that they are, especially if we accept the claim that Rawlsian political liberalism is "ideal" and therefore by definition removed from the imperfect world we live in. If it is so removed, how could it be the source of real misrecognition? This may all sound like metaphilosophical

¹ "The resulting thin conception of political identity affords us schematic solutions to a host of ethical and political problems. The liberal state, as theorized by Western philosophers, strives to maximize equality and freedom by establishing what is owed to each person as a matter of basic social justice... When something is owed absolutely, we call it a right. The rights are, supposedly, impervious to identity markers that can be used for unfair advantage or as grounds of discrimination – sex, race, religious belief, and sundry others. The noble aspiration of equality before the law is perhaps the quintessential statement of why identity does not matter – in fact, *must* not matter – to justice. When we treat each other as equal citizens, and not as people with particular commitments and identities, the injustice of domination, arbitrary inequality, and coercion are manifestly obvious." (p. 157)

² "Ideal theory imagines the contingencies of identity receding into normative insignificance. Reality reveals this to be impossible if not also undesirable. Indeed, Rawls has been criticized for having such misplaced faith in ideal theory, with its gender-blind and colour-blind premises, that he neglected to tackle any of the undeniable injustices in the real world." (p. 165)

gymnastics, but the stakes are serious: the attribution of identity-based rights-claims to a failure of philosophical political liberalism moves us closer to the conclusion that liberalism's basic normative commitments are rotten to the core. But the attribution of identity-based rights-claims to dissatisfaction with *actual* liberalism allows us to consider the possibility that, while its basic commitments are for the most part sound, liberal states have been too complacent and have yet to convincingly demonstrate through real policies, actions, and outcomes, that those commitments really are intended for the benefit of all citizens. A failure to live up to a promise, but not a failure of the promise, itself.

To be sure, it is possible that, if there is a philosophical "cause" of citizen's dissatisfaction with identity-based issues of justice and fairness, it could likely be a Rawlsian, identity-blind political liberalism. But this does not mean that the problem *is* philosophical. Without a careful assessment of all the possible reasons for civic dissatisfaction with liberalism we risk affirming the consequent.

One could counter that what we are really talking about is the *spirit* of Rawlsian ideas about equal citizenship. Such ideas are very much a part of our background political culture, such as equality before the law. Rawls simply reconstructed these ideas. But this opens up another variation on my objection. Bialystok claims that the problem of identity is motivated by the Rawlsian idea of "political not metaphysical". But even if these Rawlsian ideas are part of the background political culture, so are *other* philosophical conceptions of liberalism. In the Canadian context in particular we can see certain affinities with Joseph Raz's liberal perfectionism, to give but one example.³ If there are other conceptions of liberalism in our political culture it stands to reason that the problem does not have to be framed in terms of "identity-blind liberalism" versus "identitarianism." It's possible that there are philosophical conceptions of liberalism that are better suited to pluralism than the Rawlsian reconstruction. I mention Raz because his liberalism is committed to the idea that the liberal state should help citizen's lives go better. And it is empowered to do this, in part, by rejecting the liberal neutrality of its anti-perfectionist, Rawlsian counterparts.

One could go further and say that both Bialystok and myself miss the point: no form of liberalism can succeed. All claims to justice and fairness depend on identity for their legitimacy. Liberal states uphold procedural principles, such as impartiality and neutrality, which allow dominant groups to assert that *their* rights-claims are not identity-based while those outside the dominant group *are*. And this in turn allows liberal regimes to delegitimize the claims of the latter.

This objection trades on the presupposition that no philosophical or *political* conception of justice, actual or theoretical, can ever admit of impartial judgements that genuinely reflect interests shared among all citizens. There is no solidarity; no common humanity. But if we accept *this* presupposition the argument goes full circle: if all claims to justice depend on identity then no claims to justice can depend on identity. And this is because we no longer have a standard by which we can decide when some justice claims have purchase and others not. Consider: formulating and defending such a standard would require an appeal to premises that are *not* grounded in identity. This is one reason why Bialystok's argument makes such an important contribution to our understanding of the problem: the one candidate criterion that might plausibly allow identity-based arguments to stick the landing, 'authenticity,' falls apart on closer scrutiny.

This all puts us back to where we first started: claims about justice and fairness require something more than the mere assertion of an authentic identity. A conception of justice that fails to do so

³ Leslie Green (1988) calls *The Morality of Freedom* "Un-American Liberalism."

requires citizens to issue increasingly stronger, increasingly purifying, identity boundaries in order to distinguish themselves from other citizens who will now *also* make competing identity-based demands.

This leads to another possibility: that identity-claims have nothing directly to do with liberalism *per se*. And while I'm in no position to offer a robust empirical explanation for why, there is a fairly mundane one at our disposal. It is very easy to structure online environments that allow people to acquire new identities and bring together identities that would normally be at a distance. Further, these environments incentivize users to embrace strong in-group/out-group preferences based on such identities. A good example is the United States. According to political scientists, it is a recent phenomenon that US citizens identify, tribally, as Republican or Democrat. Tribalism involves caring less about your own group's success, and more about seeing the other side fail (Mason, 2018). And we have all seen the dehumanization that comes with this. All Trump voters are racist. All Democrats are crypto-authoritarians cloaked in the garb of justice and equity. And so on. It's hard to build a deliberative politics in such a climate. My far from novel hunch—it's almost part of our shared social script, by now—is that the internet in general, and social media in particular, has had a strong hand to play in the attack on liberal norms and liberal institutions.⁴ Maybe the problem is less John Rawls, and more Mark Zuckerberg. Although this does raise the practical problem of how a liberal regime can address this issue, if this is indeed (part) of the problem.

One final objection: to attribute identity-based claims to the Internet's polarizing tendencies, or to some other contingent cause, unfairly delegitimizes these claims. But my point is not that all such claims are due to polarization. Maybe none of them are. But this again brings us back to where we started: we need some identity-transcendent criteria by which a society can make distinctions between legitimate claims to justice that are logically connected to identity and claims to justice that are merely primed by political polarization and the media.

2. What Should Identity in Education Look Like?

I now turn away from these broader philosophical issues in order to briefly focus on the picture of education that is the upshot of Bialystok's argument. This picture—where thoughtful and open-minded discussions of identity and injustice are key—is the right one, I think. My sense is that it is not one where children are taught to pretend that their evolving identity is irrelevant to who they are and how they are treated (rightly or wrongly) by others. But nor is it one where they are taught that their identity marks them off from and puts them fundamentally at odds with others, either.

All the same, while Bialystok suggests that this picture is warranted by her analysis I am not sure that this picture requires (as yet) any such a warrant. Until we hear more about what this educational approach looks like we may not need to appeal to anything in political liberalism or identity politics in order to justify it.⁵ My take is that such an approach is warranted by the pre-political, moral principle of Equal Respect for Persons. We ought to encourage students to talk through identity questions because such discussions can make salient those respects in which diverse citizens should be treated as ends in

⁴ For an interesting analysis see Gurri (2018)

⁵ My view is that political liberalism a framework for classroom deliberation is counterproductive to such discussions. See Martin (2019)

themselves and never as a *mere* means to a social justice-oriented, conservative, liberal, libertarian, or any other political outcome. And such talk can help ensure that respect for persons does not become an abstract slogan but something anchored in real circumstances. Moral respect, on this view, obligates us to take seriously how a person's experiences have shaped who they are and what they aspire to be. And it can perhaps empower future citizens to resist the dehumanizing forces that have led to our current era political polarization, whatever the impetus of that polarization may be: philosophical failure, political failure, economic failure, cultural failure...or Twitter. An education founded on Equal Respect for Persons may sound as "trite" as Bialystok's claim that education "is the only way forward." But, like her, I also make no apologies for this view. This may all indeed be trite, but only in the sense that some of our beliefs about education require renewal and reaffirmation.

Conclusion

In addition to its many substantive merits, Bialystok's paper models the *kind* of argumentation we need in times like these: open-minded, empathetic, dialectal, and charitable to the positions of all those with a stake in the debate. "Political and Metaphysical: Reflections on Identity, Education, and Justice" is an important step forward in a much-needed discussion in the philosophy of education about the educational implicational of a rapidly moving, incessantly polarizing, and increasingly divided political culture. And while her analysis targets a problem germane to all liberal societies, I believe that it is especially needed in the Canadian context where the historical dynamics and cultural tensions are relevantly different from the American ancestral home of both political liberalism and "wokeism."⁶ And so perhaps this last consideration puts the lie to much of my own response: as Bialystok puts it, we are free and equal persons, and we are much else besides.

References

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⁶ Since we're on the topic of identity: writing this response made me think a lot about George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* and his pessimism about the inevitable "homogenization" of Canadian cultures and identities in the face of US cultural and economic domination. How much of contemporary Canadian public discourse about identity and justice is shaped by, dare I say, an authentic response to the Canadian situation and what its diverse constituents think, believe, and feel? And how much of it is conditioned by a Canadian elite (in politics, in the media, and in universities) that takes its cues from elites in the United States?

About the Author

Christopher Martin is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education and Associate Member of the Department of Economics, Philosophy and Political Science at The University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Education in a Post-Metaphysical World* (Bloomsbury Press, 2012), *R.S. Peters* (Bloomsbury Press, 2014; with Stefaan Cuypers), and *Questioning the Classroom* (Oxford University Press, 2016; with Dianne Gereluk, Bruce Maxwell, and Trevor Norris). His research areas include political philosophy and the philosophy of education.