

Autonomy and liberalism in a multicultural society

Paul Jewell

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia paul.jewell@flinders.edu.au

That children should be educated to be ideal citizens, capable of making rational and informed decisions, has been proposed in cultures ranging from Ancient Greece to current societies. In particular, societies that favour liberalism preach the primacy of the individual autonomous citizen and a concomitant tolerance for others. In modern multicultural societies, ways must be found to maintain stability and tolerance of cultural differences. Some cultures do not favour the primacy of the autonomous individual, so educators face a dilemma. Should they promote autonomy in their students, even though that is counter to some cultures' values, or should they abandon promoting autonomy in favour of even-handed treatment of all cultural values? This paper argues for the former, maintaining that educators have a duty, as a matter of professional ethics, to equip their students with the ability to make their own decisions in a modern complex world.

Autonomy, liberalism, ethics, multicultural, citizens

THE AUTONOMOUS CITIZEN

The proposition that children should be trained to become ideal citizens has found favour with educators, historically and currently. In Ancient Greece, Aristotle (and before him, Socrates) discussed how this might best be done (Goodman and Lesnick, 2001). More recently, the 'Community of Inquiry' has been promoted as a valuable pedagogical tool (Lipman, 1991). In a Community of Inquiry, school students are taught to use logic and evidence to produce a rational position, to present their positions to their (presumed equal) peers, to exchange views fruitfully with them, and to come to a considered conclusion as a result of the evaluation of competing propositions. At the very least, a Community of Inquiry is expected to promote rationality, reasonableness and autonomy. Enthusiastic pragmatists have higher expectations, maintaining that the product of reasonable and well informed members of a Community of Inquiry can be defined as truth.

Whether or not 'truth' can be so defined, a strong case has been made for such a definition of 'justice'. In 'A Theory of Justice', Rawls (1971) famously proposed that a just society is one in which the social arrangements conform to the sorts of principles rational people would agree to if they were in a position to do so. Rawls' view, though criticised for its hypothetical and abstract nature, has been highly influential. The hypothetical people in his 'original position' are taken to be rational and well informed. They are, therefore, exhibiting the same qualities promoted by a Community of Inquiry.

Actual citizens (as apposed to hypothetical) find themselves confronted with a complex society, which demands decisions on matters technical, political, economic and social. Frequently, people need to seek advice from professionals, such as medical doctors and financial advisers. These professionals can only advise, though. Paternalism is not acceptable. Professionals and politicians alike must consult with clients and citizens who are taken to be sovereign. Derived from Aristotle,

Kant, Mill, and Rawls, the ideal is a person who is reasonable, rational, well-informed, self-determining, autonomous, and tolerant of others (Winch and Gingell, 1999; Blackburn, 1994).

Legal arrangements assume this. Political philosophers propose social arrangements that flow from the deliberations of reasonable, rational, autonomous people. Educators teach children to develop into such persons.

Of course we do not have uniform goals. Whether individuals are acting as clients or as citizens, we do not agree on what constitutes the good or how best to achieve it, and even if we did, we would not agree about how to prioritise competing outcomes (Chappell, 2003). But we do not disagree on how to deal with differences. We promote reasonable and rational deliberation, and accept in common the primacy of the principle of autonomy. We have consensus, do we not?

Alas, no. Not even Rawls is prepared to promote the primacy of autonomy in principle, and other ethicists do not believe it works in practice.

AUTONOMY CHALLENGED

Fagan (2004) points out that many societies are complex and multicultural, and that people's deliberations occur within the context of their cultural and religious beliefs. Some cultures, he maintains, do not value autonomy, which generates a problem for the provision of social and professional services. Fagan argues that "The autonomy principle may be presently invalidly applied in certain circumstances because the conditions for the exercise of autonomy have not been fully or even adequately satisfied" (p. 15).

As an exemplar, Fagan refers to a study of Saharso on the status of married women in Hindu communities in the Netherlands. Saharso argues that "married Hindustani women's potential for exercising autonomy is severely restricted..." because "...Hindustani women are typically brought up to believe that the wife must obey her husband unconditionally" (p. 22).

A Hindustani woman suffering physical abuse is entitled to seek legal protection and medical treatment. Clearly the principle of autonomy allows an individual to seek, accept, challenge or reject legal and medical advice in the light of their own beliefs and personal circumstances. However, her personal circumstances may be that her husband, supported by their shared cultural beliefs, has forbidden her to seek protection or accept treatment for her injuries. Her culture teaches obedience to husbands rather than personal autonomy, rather than the democratic ideal of a self-determining citizen.

It can further be argued that such women have no effective right of exit from their culture. They do not themselves recognise that as an option, having internally accepted the beliefs of their culture and their cultural identity within it. They have no practical means of exit, either, being constrained financially and by the shame they would bring on their families if they abandoned the marriage.

So it seems that a citizen's life can be severely constrained by their cultural beliefs and an expectation that a citizen can or will act autonomously may be unwarranted. This in itself is problematic, but there are wider implications for society as a whole. It is not possible to respect various cultural beliefs and at the same time to promote the principle of autonomy. So which should be favoured and what should be the basis for political and social arrangements?

Rawls recognises this as a serious problem. "A modern democratic society is characterised not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Not one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally" (1993, p. xvi).

Rawls' assertion that no one doctrine is affirmed by citizens generally implies that the doctrine of autonomy is not asserted by citizens generally, not even by reasonable citizens. He goes on to ask, then, "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?" (1993, p. xviii).

His answer is political liberalism.

POLITICAL LIBERALISM

It needs to be made clear that political liberalism is not to be confused with comprehensive liberalism. Comprehensive liberalism favours autonomy. Political liberalism is neutral. It is political rather than comprehensive because it applies only to the basic structure of society, its social institutions. "For Rawls, given the inescapable condition of pluralism, the only adequate strategy for the justification of social arrangements is one that is restricted to public principles and ideals: one that avoids references to comprehensive doctrines that are not shared by all reasonable citizens" (Costa, 2004 p. 3).

It is important to distinguish between the terms 'reasonable' and 'rational', and to note that while we may associate autonomy with the latter, it is not necessary for the former. Rawls defines 'reasonable' this way. "Persons are reasonable in one basic aspect when, among equals say, they are ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of co-operation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so" (1993, p. 49).

This contrasts with his definition of 'rational' which "Applies to a single, unified agent (either an individual or corporate person) with the powers of judgment and deliberation in seeking ends and interests peculiarly its own" (1993, p. 50).

Rawls' political liberalism, then, emphasises reasonableness and tolerance of differences, rather than rationality and autonomy. Of course, he is not against autonomy, merely neutral concerning the wide variety of doctrines espoused in a modern democracy.

A number of criticisms of political liberalism can be (and have been) made. Is it possible to promote political liberalism in a democracy without promoting comprehensive liberalism? Is political liberalism superior to the promotion of autonomy anyway? And how does this debate help us to deal with the case of the abused and constrained wife who needs but cannot seek social services and professional advice?

A frustrated social service provider could be forgiven for exclaiming 'I wish she had not been brought up to obey her husband but had been taught to make her own decisions.' Such a sentiment raises the issue of the role of education in a multicultural society. Rawls mentions this issue only briefly (1993, p. 199), but others have taken up his case for political liberalism in education, and furthered his argument for it (de Wijze, 1999; Costa, 2004).

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Citizens in democratic societies spend their early, formative years at school. Schools, then, can be seen as the battleground whereon various cultural traditions, values and doctrines, struggle with each other for dominance and future viability (Gutek 2004). Most schools are government run and attempt to cope with this battle. Some schools are independent or religious, and aim at preserving and promoting the particular doctrines of the group that supports them.

There are three key models of private and public institutions in our society. The family represents institutionalised private values. The state represents institutionalised public values. And the school epitomises the fusion of the two. As an amalgam of private and public interests, the school is no less important than the distinctly private or the

distinctly public. In some ways it is the most important of all, because through it, past and present generations deliberately and consciously attempt to stamp a design upon the future. (Lipman, 1991, p. 7)

Schools cannot escape cultural and political conflicts (Ibrahim, 2003). The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child is dismayingly ambivalent on how they should be resolved (1989). On the one hand, there are cultural groups who would like to educate their children with their groups' beliefs and shield the children from all other beliefs. On the other extreme is Rawls' political liberalism which recommends educating children about all beliefs without favouring any particular group or doctrine. Between them are those who believe in developing in the child the autonomous ability to choose between the competing doctrines. De Wijze calls this last 'comprehensive liberal education' or 'CLE' and Rawls' position 'political liberal education' or 'PLE'.

The sole purpose of a PLE is to teach children the requisite values, civic skills and basic knowledge necessary for a successful and enduring political liberal society. A CLE in contrast, seeks to teach a conception of the good based, for example, on the values of individuality and autonomy. (De Wijze, 1999, p. 2)

According to whichever view, then, the **sole** purpose of education is to provide for an enduring society. In contrast, many philosophers of education consider that the professional responsibilities of teachers range well beyond such a narrow focus. Indeed, such a narrow focus implies that political liberals do not consider that teachers are even professionals, but merely instruments of the state.

Are teachers employees undertaking routine tasks of passing on information, or are they skilled professionals who make judgements that affect clients' welfare? If they are professionals, who are their clients – their employer, the state or their students?

A profession has a number of characteristics (Kalaitzidis, 2002). It is recognised by society as having the responsibility of meeting particular needs of people. Typically, these needs are seen as vital, for example, health or legal representation. Education is clearly a vital need. Professionals have specialist knowledge attained through university training (Phenix, 1958). Accordingly, teachers have qualifications attained by some years of university study. Professionals are subject to the standards of a professional registration board, as are teachers.

If then, education has the hallmarks of a profession, what are a teacher's professional obligations and ethical responsibilities? It is surely absurd to propose that teachers have no ethical responsibilities to their students. This, in turn, implies that their students are their clients, whatever obligations teachers may have to society as a whole. This is common to the idea of a profession, that is, that professionals provide expert assistance to their needy and vulnerable clients within a context recognised and respected by the wider society. The needs of the client are a primary ethical consideration, and indeed philosophers of education such as Peters and Rousseau are 'against treating children as little mannikins, as material to be poured into an adult mould' (Peters, 1972, p. 41).

Nonetheless, students are social beings, and potential citizens, so attempting to isolate teachers' ethical responsibilities to the child from the demands of a complex society is illogical. Similarly, there is little point in arguing about whether society is merely the sum of individuals or whether individuals are the sum of their social relationships. If we consider the needs of students as future citizens and compare these needs with the demands of a democratic society, we are not confronted with an intractable dilemma.

It is obviously in people's interests to live in an enduring, stable and successful society. In theory, stability might be achieved through Plato's autocratic paternalism. A more attractive alternative

might be Hume's traditions and agreements or Rousseau's general will (Lindsay, 1954; Trigg, 1988; Rousseau, 1968). In practice, modern democratic societies are multicultural, so methods are needed for navigation through differing traditions and competing concepts of the good. Citizens need navigation equipment and a modern democracy needs citizens who are so equipped. Educators, then, have an obligation to provide the equipment. Mere knowledge of the cultural landscape is insufficient. The navigation of it requires the skills and dispositions to make decisions, in short, autonomy.

Let us return to our particular problem, the constrained wife, and our general problem, the multicultural society, and consider what form of education should be promoted.

Admittedly, when confronted with Rawls' question of how to achieve a stable pluralist society, some people would reply 'Do away with pluralism'. Some fundamentalist religious families have sought to prevent their children coming into contact with ideas that compete with their religious views (de Wijze, 1999). Some people are anti-immigration because they fear the conflict arising from the competition of cultures. (It is interesting to note that Rawls' 'Political Liberalism' assumes no immigration. His supporters, de Wijze and Costa, appear not to have noticed this. In actuality, the cultural complexity of modern societies is largely due to immigration. Rawls dismissed this as a 'distracting detail' (1993, p. 12), but one might reasonably question why it is not a fatal flaw in his analysis, rather than a detail.)

People who recommend abandoning pluralism in favour of a single doctrine, that is, their own, should be viewed with suspicion (Woolcock, 1998, p. 37). It is likely that the doctrine they promote advantages themselves over others' interests. Even where there is no apparent unfair advantage of one group over another, one must ask why their particular doctrine should have any precedence over any other? To date, we do not enjoy the result of an Enlightenment Project, that is, a widely accepted doctrine which is philosophical, reasonable and comprehensive (Rawls, 1993, p. xviii). Rawls and nationalists notwithstanding, immigration and multiculturalism are a fact of life. Indeed, it can be argued that the great virtue of multiculturalism is that a citizen can compare ways of life and concepts of the good, thus enabling a productive and efficacious choice. Such an argument, however, presupposes the existence of autonomy. It does not, though, presuppose the moral primacy of autonomy, only its instrumental value.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN EDUCATION

Because the multicultural society exists, educators have a professional obligation to equip their students to deal with it. Certainly they may respond to Rawls' question of how to achieve stability, and their response may include providing for tolerance of different views and understanding. But, as argued above, an educator's professional obligation does not end there. It would be a dereliction of duty to abandon the child's future to chance, to the power plays of conflicting cultures.

Political stability, while desirable, is not enough. Reasonableness, while virtuous, is not enough. As numerous educators argue, a core purpose of education should be the promotion of rationality (Moshman, 1999). Neutrality is not enough. Mere information is insufficient. Students about to take their place as full citizens in a complex democratic society need the skills and dispositions to make judgements between competing values, cultures and doctrines. They need autonomy both in the practical sense of self-determination, and in principle. They need it to secure their own welfare, to negotiate social arrangements such as the professional/client relationship, and to direct the operations of their democratic society.

This view of the role of education in producing ideal citizens is not, it must be acknowledged, immune to criticism. Perhaps it is optimistic, even utopian. The abused Hindustani wife could be described as suffering from false consciousness. She has internalised a set of values which

actually exploit her, and so has no effective autonomy. But perhaps this is true of all of us. We all internalise values we have picked up from whatever culture in which we have matured. Even the strongest sense of self-determination may be a delusion. Members of minority cultural groups sometimes accuse members of the dominant culture of being insensitive and ignorant of others' experiences and cultures. But this is true of everyone, minority and dominant alike. Nobody is neutral, nobody is without cultural influences and nobody is universally cognisant of all cultural influences. The suggestion made above that the benefit of a multicultural society was that one could choose from a smorgasbord of values is one that cannot be realised. Nobody has that much autonomy (Anderson, 2003; Larraine, 1983; Winch, 1964).

Nonetheless, autonomy remains the best candidate for the determination of social arrangements, as a political principle, and in the philosophy of education. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a multicultural society could operate without it. Citizens would be stuck with a set of cultural values and beliefs they were born with, or paralysed with indecision. Neither relativism nor chance are adequate moral justifications for the adoption of any particular cultural belief. Fagan raises the problem of how a professional should deal with a culture-constrained non-autonomous adult, but provides no solution. The neutrality of Rawls' political liberalism is simply inadequate for the task.

Autonomy can be seen as intrinsically valuable, that is, an indispensable characteristic of a flourishing person. Alternatively, it can be viewed as merely instrumental, as a means of navigation in a complex society. Either way, it is the professional obligation of educators to promote it in their students.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, H. (2003). On Multiculturalism's Biases. *Inquiry - Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* XXII (2), 15-19
- Blackburn, S. (1994). *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* Oxford: OUP
- Chappell, T. (2003). Practical rationality for pluralists about the good. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6, 161-177.
- Costa, M. V. (2004). Rawlsian civic education: Political not minimal. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21 (1), 1-8
- de Witze, S. (1999). Rawls and civic education. *Cogito* 13, 87 - 93.
- Fagan, A. (2004). Challenging the bioethical application of the autonomy principle within multicultural societies. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21, 15-31.
- Goodman, J.F. and Lesnick, H. (2001). *The Moral Stake in Education: Contested Premises and Practices*. New York: Longman
- Gutok, G.L. (2004). *Philosophical and Ideological Voices in Education*. New York: Pearson
- Ibrahim, A.M. (2003). Thinking Critically, Choosing Politically: Anti-racism and/or multiculturalism education (?): Prologue. *Inquiry - Thinking Critically Across the Disciplines* XXII, (2), 4.
- Kalaitzidis, E. (2002). Nursing ethics as maximising a patient's practical self-determination.' *Restructuring the Public Interest in a Globalising World: Business, the Professions and the Public Sector*. Brisbane: IPE.
- Larraine, J. (1983). *Marxism and Ideology*. London: Macmillan.
- Lindsay, A. (1954). *Plato. The Republic*. UK: Dent.
- Lipman, M. (1991). *Thinking in Education*. USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Moshman, D. (1999). *Adolescent Psychological Development: Rationality, Morality and Identity*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Peters, R.S. (1972). Must an educator have an aim?, In J. M. Rich (Ed.). *Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, New York: Wadsworth.

- Phenix, P.H. (1958). *Philosophy of Education*. New York: Holt Rinehart Winston.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. USA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1993). *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Rousseau, J. (1968 first published 1762). *The Social Contract*. UK: Penguin.
- Trigg, R. (1988). *Ideas of Human Nature: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. [Online]. <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm> [Accessed April 5, 2004]
- Winch, C. and Gingell, J. (1999). *Key Concepts in the Philosophy of Education* UK: Routledge.
- Winch, P. (1964). Understanding a Primitive Society. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1.
- Woolcock, P. G. (1998). *Power, Impartiality and Justice*. London: Ashgate