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Social and Political Philosophy

THE PROBLEMS OF social and political philosophy are of particular interest to many educators and policymakers today. Since the days of Socrates, philosophers have been concerned with the concept of justice, and different views of justice give rise to different views on matters central to education such as equality and equity. For the past two centuries, liberalism—particularly individualistic liberalism—has dominated Western political philosophy. By “liberalism” here, I am referring to a philosophical tradition that includes both liberals and conservatives as we identify them today. Both are concerned with liberty and equality, but liberals tend to put greater emphasis on equality and conservatives more on liberty. In contrast to the liberal tradition’s focus on individuals (their liberties and equality), another tradition emphasizes the community, how individuals are developed within it, and what these individuals owe to their community. Although this philosophical tradition goes back at least as far as Aristotle, it has enjoyed a tremendous revival, as “communitarianism,” just since the late 1970s. The debate between liberalism and communitarianism is one of the liveliest in today’s philosophy. After a brief introduction to the current debate, we will look closely at problems of educational equality and equity.

The Current Debate

We saw in the last chapter that under the influence of Kant, ethics became highly individualistic; that is, ethics was liberated from the authority of the church, ruler, and even community and was thought in-

stead to rest on the individual’s “good will” and logic. Each moral agent was to decide what he should do according to the categorical imperative: So act that you can logically will that your act should become law; that is, act so that you can logically will that all others in similar situations will be bound to do what you have chosen. This led to the enormously influential universalizability criterion. Many philosophers came to use universalizability as the main test of the moral; moral decisions, as contrasted with other kinds of decisions, *had* to be universalizable. That notion has come under increasing challenge in recent years.

For present purposes, it is important to understand why Kant’s approach has been called “individualistic” and why the notion is somewhat paradoxical. Before Kant, Descartes had already put great emphasis on individual knowers who were described as working toward dependable knowledge through the procedure of systematic doubt. Knowledge was thus liberated from authority and placed firmly on a rational base. But notice that the “individual” thus described is a generalized rational agent—not a real, full-bodied individual with attachments, emotions, and community affiliations. Descartes, of course, recognized the real nature of human beings, but knowledge claims were to be tested against the model of generalized rationality. Method became king and replicability the law of the kingdom of knowledge. Thus, in one sense, the individual (as general rationality) became the very heart of knowledge production; in another sense, the individual disappeared.

Similarly, in Kant’s ethic, the individual—as the general mechanism of practical reasoning—became central, but the individual—as actual, embodied person—became irrelevant. The individual as a richly complex, social being was reduced to a reasoning machine. Thus we have a paradox: great emphasis on autonomy but a remarkable uniformity prescribed for the products of that autonomy.

Interestingly, even though the individual described by Kant seems hardly to be an individual at all, Kantianism and utilitarianism (which posits an impartial, individual calculator) together increased theoretical and practical interest in individual rights. Indeed, a main complaint against individualistic liberalism is that it has carried the doctrine of individual rights too far. Critics object that it has become difficult to talk about the rights or legitimate demands of a community today. All of our attention has been focused on the rights of individuals.

Of course, there are important differences between neo-Kantianism and utilitarianism, but both have contributed to the emphasis on individuals versus communities and on rationality defined in terms of well-defined procedures. John Rawls, who locates himself in the Kantian tradition and whose *Theory of Justice* has been enormously influential,

separates himself from both utilitarianism and communitarianism in an early passage:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by the many. Therefore in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests.¹

It is clear how this passage separates Rawls from utilitarians, but notice that it separates him from communitarians also in its insistence that certain "rights" are settled, that they are not subject to political bargaining. Most communitarians would insist, to the contrary, that the things we call rights are products of real negotiation or a consensus of beliefs in actual communities. Some rights, of course, we have held to for so long and tested so well that we have come to think of them as inviolable and even "natural."

Communitarian thinking about rights is both descriptive and prescriptive. It describes how certain ethical products—rules, customs, procedures—arise from the moral life of communities, and it prescribes how we should think and act in building and critiquing moral communities. "Rights," communitarians believe, do not precede community building. They are outcomes of a shared sense of what is good.

The liberal position, particularly as it is laid out by Rawls, puts great emphasis on procedures. Rawls builds his theory of justice on a strategy he calls "the original position." In the original position, all participants are fully rational persons, but they have no idea what their actual positions in society will be. They must create the rules by which they will live. Now what rules would you choose if you might turn out to be one of the least advantaged people in the society? Persons in the original position are behind a "veil of ignorance" with respect to their talents, affiliations, projects, loves, and weaknesses. They know nothing of their own character or personality. What rules will they choose?

Rawls gives a first formulation of the two principles that he says would result from deliberation in the original position and later adds "priority rules" to fill out his conception.

The first statement of the two principles reads as follows.

First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.

Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.²

Rawls then undertakes to describe what is meant by "basic liberty," "everyone's advantage," and "open to all," and we will consider the second and third expressions when we discuss equality and justice in schools. Rawls builds a comprehensive and fascinating theory of justice on this technique. The underlying assumption, in the tradition of Locke and Rousseau, is that individuals somehow exist before communities and that they enter a "social contract" when they form communities and societies. Notice, however, that one could reject this assumption at the descriptive level and still insist that, as a *technique*, it prescribes the best way to build a theory of justice. Of course, if we take that position, we then face the difficult task of showing how this theory, built entirely on abstract hypothetical conditions, can be applied to life in real societies.

This last observation is the crux of the communitarian argument against Kantian and Rawlsian liberalism. The persons deliberating behind the veil of ignorance are not real people, and what emerges can be no more than hypotheses for real people to try out.³ Rawls and Kant depend too exclusively on rationality and the procedures that grow out of purely logical processes. In contrast, real people are affected by all sorts of things that are not strictly logical. Thus, communitarians insist that a concept of the "good" precedes discussion of what is "right," and the debate between liberals and communitarians is often cast as one over the priority of the good and the right. From one perspective, a shared sense of the good must precede any discussion of procedures; from the other, procedural right must precede construction of the good.

In the hyperrationality of Rawls, we see the "individualist paradox" again. The individual is sacrosanct, his or her rights are "settled," and yet he or she is not recognizable as an individual. Rawls himself says that only one person is really needed in the "deliberation" behind the veil of ignorance because all thoroughly rational persons would have to agree!

Although utilitarian thinking differs from Kantianism in positing the priority of the good (usually happiness) over the right, it resembles Kantianism in the feature criticized by communitarians. It, too, strips persons of their identifiable social characteristics and reduces them to utilities. The only way to favor one individual or one group over another is to calculate the utilities. For example, it might be possible under utilitarian policies to favor the young over the old in distributing certain goods because the net ratio of happiness over pain would be thereby increased. Again, the thinking encouraged by utilitarianism is hyperrational; it is not the sort of thinking most of us do in moral situations. Remember this

now familiar caveat: Utilitarians could acknowledge that ordinary people do not think this way but could still insist that they *should*. They would defend this recommendation by pointing to the utilitarian principle and its grounding in reality; people really do, after all, prefer happiness to pain.

Dewey's position among social theorists is an interesting one. He was clearly not a utilitarian, although he was certainly a consequentialist; he rejected utilitarianism because he thought it was a mistake to posit one greatest good and because he objected to the sharp separation of means and ends. For Dewey, ends are always ends-in-view, not finalities, and because means involve accomplishing something, they are not easily separated from ends and must be subjected to a similar ethical analysis.

Some scholars label Dewey a "pragmatic liberal" and others (in more recent years) a "democratic communitarian." By the first, writers intend to convey Dewey's sympathies for just procedures as they are often described by liberals but, at the same time, his insistence that their efforts be tested in real communities. Justice, for Dewey, is located in consequences, not in procedures that predate deliberation and reflection. Dewey separated himself from the whole social contract tradition. Indeed, he thought (mistakenly) it was quite dead: "The fact that man acts from crudely intellectualized emotion and from habit rather than from rational consideration, is now so familiar that it is not easy to appreciate that the other idea was taken seriously as the basis of economic and political philosophy."⁴

By the second label, "democratic communitarian," contemporary writers intend to separate Dewey from forms of communitarianism that promote hierarchy, elitism, and exclusivity. Some communitarians make the mistake of assuming that communities are somehow fixed. They put great stress on acknowledged common values and on traditions. Dewey, in contrast, always insisted on a dynamic view of community. Community is always under construction in Dewey's view, and it must pass a democratic test: A *democratic* community cannot be assessed entirely from within. We must evaluate the number and quality of its connections with other communities. For Dewey, as we saw in an earlier discussion, community depends on the desire to communicate and the commitment to continue inquiry. For many other philosophers and educators who embrace a form of communitarianism or Aristotelianism, community precedes communication. In contrast to Dewey, these thinkers hold that people must be taught the values and mores of a community before they can communicate effectively. In education, this view is usually translated into a recommendation for transmission of values through a common curriculum.

The ethic of care, which was discussed briefly in the last chapter and will be analyzed more deeply in the discussion of feminist theory, is in many ways compatible with Dewey's democratic communitarianism.

Dewey always believed that true democracy requires face-to-face relations at some level. Similarly, the ethic of care begins its theorizing with basic human relationships. As thinking moves into the social arena, it still remains tightly connected to the actual conditions and desires of real people. It may ask questions that carry it outward into the world of strangers without universalizing. For example, it may ask, What if this were one of my own children? Questions of this sort need not lead to uniform, impartial answers. To the contrary, they should suggest thought experiments in which family membership is expanded to include children with many different characteristics, aptitudes, and interests.⁵ In such thought experiments, we do not strip either our imaginary children or ourselves of our individual and social characteristics, and we recognize that our recommendations are products of our situation and standpoint. Thus, although we can surely create a set of social and educational recommendations that considers people outside our own narrow circle, we recognize that the set can always be expanded or revised as new voices join in the experiment.

Dewey suggested a similar question, although he did not follow it with a systematic thought experiment: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy."⁶ This passage raises questions about the "best and wisest" parent. What would such a parent want? Further, suppose the parent has many different children. Will he or she not want different things for different children? In all such thought experiments, we have to be careful not to abstract so completely that we lose all real human qualities; we should not generalize so far that we "totalize" or assimilate all others to our own scheme of things; and yet we do not want to collapse into a narrow and selfish scheme in which we tell only our own story, serve only our own interests, and recognize only our own values.

Although I have given just a thumbnail sketch of important positions in current political philosophy and of the one I intend to use in my analysis, perhaps these will be sufficient to launch a discussion of justice and equality in education. As we proceed in that discussion, we can add to the background as needed.

Justice and Equality in Education

I have organized this part of the chapter around problems of inequality. Are the observable inequalities in U.S. schools allowable under the views of justice and care that we have considered so far? First, we will consider inequalities in resources—in physical facilities, instruments, maps, books, and the other paraphernalia of education. Second, we will look at inequalities in relationships. Is there anything schools can or should do for children who have no academically competent, loving

adults in their lives? Third, we will ask what is meant by inequalities in the curriculum. Should all children have the same curriculum, or should they be allowed to make well-informed choices according to their own interests?

Inequalities in Physical Resources

In 1991, Jonathan Kozol once again drew to our attention this nation's disgraceful neglect of many of its urban children.⁷ When we read Kozol's description of urban schools—windows boarded up, faulty heating systems that leave some rooms in shivering cold and others in stifling heat, toilets that do not work, sewage backing up into kitchens and cafeterias, paint peeling from walls and ceilings, rooms so crowded that teachers have to count on high absenteeism to seat the children who do show up—we surely know that this is not what we would want for our own children. These conditions, which Kozol calls "savage inequalities" because they contrast so sharply with the conditions of richer schools, represent, for many of us, a clear case of injustice.

Could anyone argue otherwise? One could argue along the following lines. A certain amount of inequality in any society is necessary to promote the general welfare. After all, we would hardly seek equality if it meant misery for all of us; that is, if the only way to achieve equality were to accept a situation in which everyone is (equally) miserable, most of us would reject it. What we want is as much equality as we can achieve consistent with the greatest possible general welfare. Of course, people differ on the combinations that will move them from indifference to seeking a change in one direction or the other. Some of us will tolerate considerable hardship to achieve equality; others will shrug off rather dramatic inequalities in order to produce an increase in the general welfare. Indeed, when a substantial part of the population is content, social change is very hard to effect.⁸

Utilitarian thought can support a scenario in which some people live in comparative misery, but it would not allow huge numbers to suffer, and the best of it would not allow even a small number to suffer horribly for the mere hedonistic happiness of many. For example, it would put such a high value on life that the loss of even one life could not be outweighed by an accumulation of petty pleasures spread over a vast majority. Thus we find that there is often police protection (guards, locks, metal detectors, and the like) in schools where most of the horrible conditions described by Kozol exist. Similarly, there is at least one medical facility in even the poorest areas that must by law treat life-threatening emergency conditions in the indigent. Almost everyone is outraged when a child is killed in school or someone dies after being refused medical treatment.

But, as I said, utilitarianism can support a scheme in which most of the inequalities described by Kozol exist. Assuming there is just so much

money to spend on education, how should it be spent so as to achieve maximum effect? If the children in community A break the school's windows, scribble on its walls, stuff objects into its toilets, urinate on its stairways, and behave in a generally destructive way, why should money be spent on repair? That money can be more effectively used in purchasing science equipment and books for children in community B, who will not destroy what is bought for them. Using a strictly economic argument with achievement outcomes as the only value considered, one need not even question the values in community A; that is, one need not argue that A's people are somehow deficient or that they deserve the conditions I have described. One simply calculates the costs and likely benefits.

In contrast, Rawls's concept of justice as fairness would probably not defend such inequalities. Behind the veil of ignorance, citizens would legislate to protect themselves in case they turned out to be among the disadvantaged. This, of course, is a theoretical claim; real people behind a theoretical veil of ignorance—a mere strategy—might behave very differently. For example, one might argue fatalistically, "I sure hope I'm not one of those poor clods, but if I am, I shouldn't have the right to spoil things for others. I'll just have to work harder!" Such a possibility underscores the abstract nature of Rawls's scheme. His rational, autonomous thinker is an abstract entity.

But Rawls has an important provision in his theory of justice that might block the inequalities described by Kozol. "The intuitive idea," Rawls writes, "is that the social order is not to establish and secure the more attractive prospects of those better off unless doing so is to the advantage of those less fortunate."⁹ This idea, part of Rawls's second principle, is called the "difference principle." To support the inequalities we have been discussing, a Rawlsian would have to show that the extra funds invested in the education of well-off children somehow benefit the least advantaged.

Before applying the difference principle, however, a Rawlsian would have to be sure that the conditions of the first principle—"each person [has] an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others"¹⁰—have been met. If education is construed as a "fundamental right," then it would seem virtually impossible to claim that the first principle has been met under present conditions, because education would be included in the set of basic liberties.

However, opponents could argue, and indeed have argued, that financial resources do not determine the quality of education, that class size does not affect how teachers teach, and that the low number of students taking college preparatory courses in poor schools is a result of poor student attention and ability, not a sign of neglect or the curtailment of a basic liberty. What could we do to demonstrate convincingly that children living in the schools described by Kozol are deprived of a basic liberty?

Our problem here points up the difficulties in trying to apply a sophisticated, abstract theory to a real social problem. If people are not moved to care for these children simply upon hearing the story of their plight, it is doubtful that any argument will move them.

But let's persist for a bit with the argument. Suppose we could justify the contention that Rawls's first principle is somehow satisfied. Then we must ask whether the observable inequalities are allowable under the second principle.

Let A be the advantaged group and L the least advantaged group. If A and L now have equality with respect to basic liberties, anything further that benefits A must also benefit L. It may seem impossible to argue that increased benefits to A could also benefit L, but in fact many policymakers have argued this way. For example, they claim that large expenditures in so-called lighthouse districts help us to engage in responsible educational experiments, and what is learned there can benefit all schools. Or, for another example, higher investments in the education of A will produce the professional people, scientists, and policymakers needed to improve the condition of L. The assumption here is that well-educated members of A will contribute to the welfare of L.

All of this is debatable, but the most difficult part of the argument is the first. Under what conditions is the first principle met with respect to education? Is education even relevant to the first principle? And is it to be considered under the difference principle? Rawls said little about education in *A Theory of Justice*, but he did write:

Now the difference principle is not of course the principle of redress. It does not require society to try to even out handicaps as if all were expected to compete on a fair basis in the same race. But the difference principle would allocate resources in education, say, so as to improve the long-term expectation of the least favored. If this end is attained by giving more attention to the better endowed, it is permissible; otherwise not.¹¹

As we have already seen, it is possible to argue—and people have done so—that education of the better endowed is indeed likely to raise the long-term expectation of the least advantaged. Cynics might say that the term gets longer and longer. Critical theorists insist that such a scheme merely perpetuates the plight of the disadvantaged and that very plight ultimately becomes necessary for the employment and well-being of professionals drawn from the ranks of the “better endowed.”

But Rawls goes on to say something that will interest us in the next two sections of this chapter. Referring to society's decision on how to allocate educational resources, he writes:

And in making this decision, the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not

more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own sense of worth.¹²

Two points in this paragraph need further discussion. First, we have no trouble agreeing with Rawls that the value of education must include matters beyond economic efficiency and social welfare, and more will be said on this later. But second, we need to ask what it means for a person to be able to enjoy “the culture of his society” and thereby “secure a sense of his own worth.” Does it make sense today to speak of “the” culture? And is there one society within which everyone can secure a sense of self-worth?

Setting aside these important questions momentarily, we have to assess Rawls's theory as highly abstract. Taken seriously, it would probably require a society to remove at least some of the inequalities Kozol has described. But it leaves much room for argument. Further, even though Rawls himself insists that self-worth is an important goal of education, many policymakers tie the allocation of resources strictly to learning outcomes. They want to be assured that more money spent will result in higher test scores, and so the most frequently used arguments for reducing inequalities center on economic efficiency and social welfare—graduates must be prepared to hold better jobs, help the nation compete, and contribute to the economy through greater consumption.

Kenneth Strike points out that Rawls's later work is not so abstract; it insists on the political practicality of justice as fairness.¹³ But a review of a very recent essay by Rawls raises the charge of abstractness anew:

Rawls, perhaps the most admired philosopher of all in the English-speaking world, turns in the longest essay and also the most abstract. Although his language is uncluttered, he piles one hypothesis upon another to make a brittle intellectual structure that, it seems, would not withstand the faintest tremors of political life on Earth.¹⁴

In contrast, Dewey's approach can be traced to face-to-face community life. If there is a major difficulty with his approach, it is the fact that important political decisions are no longer made in such communities. Dewey himself recognized this difficulty in the 1920s.¹⁵ When he wrote that the “community” must want for all its children what the best and wisest parents want for their own, he had in mind a social collectivity in which face-to-face communication is possible. In such a community, the conditions noted by Kozol would be visible and open to appeal. Today, minorities and the poor are increasingly isolated in their own geographic communities, and communication breaks down between these isolated units and those in which political decisions are made.

If Dewey had lived past the 1960s, he would almost certainly have been a strong advocate for the kind of campaign conducted by Martin Luther King. From Dewey's perspective, the civil rights movement was a powerful attempt to build community outward, to form the connections required by democratic methods, and to force face-to-face meetings. It would be difficult indeed to face the parents and children of East St. Louis, Camden, and the South Bronx and say in person, "This is all you deserve."

Building and rebuilding community is one method to be used in addressing inequalities. Dewey would say that we must act in direct communication with one another. But as important, we must use the method of intelligence in our interactions—not the methods of authority and tradition. We must ask what the consequences will be not only for the children now suffering deprivation but also for our own children and, as Dewey insisted, for our democracy itself.

Again, as in the applications of utilitarianism and Rawls's theory, we may find it possible to neglect the removal of inequalities if it can be shown that the consequences of such action are unclear. If property is still destroyed, if achievement does not increase, if teenage pregnancies are not reduced, how can we justify pouring in more money? It is perhaps not surprising that so many critics shout, "Money is not the answer!" A follower of Dewey would argue that it is reasonable to "give money a chance." We should provide adequate resources (those we would want for our own children) and watch carefully over a longer period of time to see if the predicted desirable outcomes are achieved. Of course, Dewey's followers would also argue that we should look for more than higher test scores when we assess consequences.

Care advocates approach the problem quite differently. First, the *conditions*, not the money spent, represent the real inequality. We ask the question, "If these were my children, would I permit such conditions to exist?" The obvious answer is no, and the "no" is unqualified. In an article written in response to *Savage Inequalities*, I said that all children must have adequate and attractive school facilities.

We demand this not because "children can't learn" in horrid conditions but because it really is savage to allow children to live in unsafe, unhygienic, and unattractive places. Well-to-do parents provide decent environments for all their children—bright and dull, ambitious and lazy, good and bad. Surely the community owes all its children a decent *living* environment for at least the school day.¹⁶

And I stressed the point that we "provide safe and attractive environments for our own children because we love and accept responsibility for them, not merely so that they can learn math and reading."¹⁷ This

approach invites no argument in defense of miserable conditions. They must be changed. But what else is required? After facilities have been repaired and adequate supplies distributed, what else must be done?

Inequalities in Basic Relationships

When the problems of poor children are considered, their family relationships are only rarely mentioned. School reform efforts do mention the importance of family involvement, but little discussion centers on the quality of relationships needed for the healthy intellectual, moral, and emotional development of children. This neglect is the result of two main habits of mind: First, many theorists are reluctant to pronounce on the quality of relationships in cultures other than their own; there has been a healthy move away from the arrogance of earlier times when professional workers did not hesitate to describe environments different from their own as deprived. Second, traditional theories have concentrated on the public aspect of lives, not that domain usually considered "private." Feminist theorists have helped to collapse the distinction between public and private, and feminists often begin their moral theorizing with the basic parent-child dyad. However, aside from feminist thought, it is rare for philosophers of education to consider basic relationships at all.

At an intuitive level, we know these relationships are vital. All of us admire stories of successful people who endured great hardships but persevered with the encouragement of a parent or other adult to get an education. In every such story, there is some adult who cared enough to spend time with a child, express his or her belief in the child's capacities, and provide the emotional support necessary to maintain the child's growth and confidence.

The psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner put the case this way: "In order to develop, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child." I would describe such involvement as "nonrational" rather than "irrational," but Bronfenbrenner made his point when he explained, "Somebody has to be crazy about that kid."¹⁸ In the absence of such passionate love, some adult has to care at least that the child will survive and become a decent person.

Martin Buber made relationship the very heart of education. He wrote that every child longs for the world "to become present to" him or her through communion:

The child lying with half-closed eyes, waiting with tense soul for its mother to speak to it—the mystery of its will is not directed towards enjoying (or dominating) a person, or towards doing something of its own accord; but towards experiencing communion in the face of the lonely night, which spreads beyond the window and threatens to invade.¹⁹

Buber saw teaching, as well as parenting, as a matter of relationship, and "the relation in education," wrote Buber, "is one of pure dialogue."²⁰ Children need to know that someone will listen to them and care what happens to them. Recall what Buber said (Chapter 4):

Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists—that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness, however hard pressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth. Because this human being exists, in the darkness the light lies hidden, in fear salvation, and in the callousness of one's fellow-men the great Love.²¹

I have quoted from Buber at some length because we rarely hear such language in education texts today, and yet we know at some level that he is right. Although the language is missing from policy statements, it is often heard in teachers' accounts of their classroom experience.²² We know that teachers are not just conveyors of instructional treatments, managers of classroom activities, distributors of resources, lecturers, and disciplinarians.

The relationships in poor children's lives are not necessarily poorer than those of wealthy children in the senses we have been discussing. But realistically, we have to recognize that an impoverishment of spirit often accompanies financial poverty. People may work hard with little return; they may suffer the denigrations of "being helped"; they may feel helpless because they cannot provide for their children as they would like to do. And deep inside they may doubt that their children's efforts in school will ever pay off. Thus, even where love characterizes the relationship, poor parents may not be able to "present the world" as their wealthier counterparts do. In heroic cases, they have exactly the effect described by Buber—meaninglessness, darkness, fear, and callousness recede. In ordinary cases, however, poor parents may become for their children the living representation of meaninglessness and helplessness.

In a society like ours where so much depends on success in school, children not only need continuous love and warm companionship from adults; they also need adults who can present the world effectively. Because so many parents, despite their love, cannot provide models of what it means to be educated, teachers must serve this function in the lives of those children. They must represent whole persons, not just instructors, in their relations with students. Students need to see that the possibilities advertised as inherent in education are *real* possibilities for their own futures. This need suggests that teachers and students should stay together, by mutual consent, for several years. Time should be spent on the development of trust so that the advice, care, and instruction given

by the teacher will be received by students with understanding and appreciation.

In an earlier chapter, we contrasted analyses of teaching that concentrate on epistemological issues with other accounts that focus more on personal relationships and the skills required for everyday living. In Ntozake Shange's novel, Betsey learned far more from the servant girl, Carrie, than she did from her teachers, and the learning was aimed at skills and attitudes that matter in real life. But Carrie could not help Betsey with the kind of learning we are today so eager to provide for all children. Our analysis of relationships and their importance suggests that policymakers give far more attention to the ways in which teachers connect with students as individuals—to what teachers can mean to students and not simply to the academic material teachers are supposed to get students to learn. Any feasible form of compensatory education must address the problem of unequal relationships in the lives of poor children.

Although educational policymaking has so far not been greatly influenced by philosophical analyses of relation and relatedness, some has been affected by the growing emphasis on community. Many educators are drawn to communitarian thought—sometimes only at a superficial level. The call for community is growing, and many educators are writing about community and how to develop it.²³ Philosophers and educators who write about caring and relatedness are often grouped with communitarians because of their attack on features of classical and contemporary liberalism.²⁴

Here we must be very careful. Communities, depending on how we define them, can be created for many different reasons and sustained by a wide variety of methods. They can be as self-serving, exclusive, and demanding as individuals. They can be coercive as well as cooperative, unforgiving and punitive as well as protective. Indeed, when we attack liberalism—from a communitarian perspective or any other—we should keep in mind the observations of Stephen Holmes that David Horowitz recently pointed out:

"Every anti-liberal argument influential today," as University of Chicago's Stephen Holmes observes, "was vigorously advanced in the writings of European fascists," like Giovanni Gentile and Carl Schmitt, including the critique of "its atomistic individualism, its myth of the presocial individual, its scanting of the organic, its indifference to community . . . its belief in the primacy of rights, its flight from 'the political,' its decision to give abstract procedures and rules priority over substantive values and commitments, and its hypocritical reliance on the sham of judicial neutrality."²⁵

Because fascists have advanced such critiques, the critiques are not necessarily wrong. Even fascists can be right on some things. But the

interest of fascists in community should lead educators and philosophers to consider the foundations of community carefully. Built only on the foundation of common beliefs and aims, a community can be either good or bad, wise or foolish. Built on an underlying concept of relatedness and guided by continuous reflection, it may be safe from the perversions of fascism. This latter possibility, however, suggests the need for serious study of relations and relatedness.

Some of the most difficult and abstruse philosophy has been written, paradoxically, to elucidate the concept of relation.²⁶ Without lengthy analysis, it may be enough for present purposes to say that the caring relation as a mode of being underlying community should prevent two of the most common evils associated with community: It should prevent our failing to respond to people outside a given community, and it should stop us from committing cruel acts against those within the community who cease to believe or threaten secession. Notice that I have not proved—or even argued in any depth—that communities built on caring relations will be free of such evils. I have merely stated the possibility and leave it for you to consider further.²⁷

Curricular Inequalities

In Chapter 4 I mentioned Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal* and its recommendation that all students should have the same curriculum at least through grade twelve. On the face of it, such a proposal seems aimed at equality, and indeed Adler argues that the same education for all is a requirement of democracy. But is it?

Suppose that we were parents of a large heterogeneous family. Some of our children have genuinely academic interests; they find the usual subjects quite fascinating. Others of our children have mechanical talents; some have artistic talents; some have athletic talents; still others have "people" talents.²⁸ Should they all have the same education? I quoted John Dewey earlier, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy."²⁹ What would the best and wisest parents want for their very different children?

It is highly unlikely that Dewey would endorse Adler's proposal, even though Adler suggests by juxtaposing quotations from Hutchins and Dewey that Dewey might do so. In all of his educational writings, Dewey insisted that the content of study is not nearly so important as the method of inquiry and the level of thought invoked in its pursuit. There is nothing in any subject itself that is inherently "good for the mind." Mind is entirely a dynamic affair, and "intelligence" should be applied to *doings*, not

to some unseen and stable capacity. Therefore, to a large extent, children can be allowed to pursue subjects and topics that genuinely interest them. These interests, employed wisely, will lead to knowledge and attitudes that are adequate for personal fulfillment and for citizenship.

Freedom to pursue individual interests under the careful guidance of competent teachers does not imply the absence of common learnings. Dewey believed that common problems arising in the associated living he recommended for schools would necessarily induce common learnings. Indeed, he even argued specifically for geography in the curriculum, but he saw geography as the study of the earth as "man's home," not as the memorization of place names and figures. This perspective on geography opens it up to a wide range of approaches and concentrations, and it makes the memorization of facts and figures both unnecessary and unproductive. Instead children learn what facts and figures they need as they pursue their inquiries and try to solve problems.

Although he disagreed strongly with Rousseau on the separation of "natural" man from man as citizen (on this Dewey agreed with current critics of liberalism), he affirmed Rousseau's stand on the education of children with different interests. In the following passage, we hear both Dewey and Rousseau:

The general aim translates into the aim of regard for individual differences among children. Nobody can take the principle of consideration of native powers into account without being struck by the fact that these powers differ in different individuals. The difference applies not merely to their intensity, but even more to their quality and arrangement. As Rousseau said: "Each individual is born with a *distinctive* temperament. . . . We indiscriminately employ children of different bents on the same exercises; their education destroys the special bent and leaves a dull uniformity. Therefore after we have wasted our efforts in stunting the true gifts of nature we see the short-lived and illusory brilliance we have substituted die away, while the natural abilities we have crushed do not revive."³⁰

Thus, plans such as Adler's cannot find support in Dewey's work. The best and wisest parents do not define equal education as identical education. But if children do not receive identical educations, will not one form of education be better than another? Will not some children be better prepared than others to claim the goods of society?

This is a major dilemma for critical theorists. If society and education were so designed that each individual could pursue his or her own interests without penalty, critical theorists would have no quarrel with Dewey. But society has organized the schools and their curriculum by class interests, not by individual interests. As Michael Apple comments: "The decision to

define some groups' knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups' knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has the power in society."³¹

The knowledge that Adler wants all children to have has long been identified with the privileged classes. Is it a generous gesture, then, to insist that all children should acquire such knowledge? Or will such insistence merely allow those in power to say that equal opportunity was provided but many people were not bright enough or ambitious enough to profit from it? A plan under which all children must study exactly the same subjects regardless of interest seems unquestionably to favor those who are either interested intrinsically or whose families make extrinsic interests so important that they override the natural interests of children. (Recall our earlier discussion of how inequalities arise in basic relationships.)

In commenting on recommendations for a national curriculum and national standards, Apple expresses the same concern: "I want to argue that behind the educational justification for a national curriculum and national testing is an ideological attack that is very dangerous. Its effects will be truly damaging to those who already have the most to lose in this society."³²

One could argue, of course, that the people about whom Apple is concerned, having so little to begin with, really have the *least* to lose. A system that insists on including them cannot possibly make their situation worse. This is the heart of the dilemma for critical theorists. The critical response has to be that enacting a system purporting to improve social conditions is worse than doing nothing if it both fails to change those conditions and, in its failed attempts, justifies the status quo. This is what Apple fears—that in the interests of national competitiveness and the privileged classes, children of the poor will be more rigidly ranked and more firmly stuck in their lower places than ever before:

The "same treatment" by sex, race and ethnicity, or class is not the same at all. A democratic curriculum and pedagogy must begin with a recognition of "the different social positionings and cultural repertoire in the classrooms, and the power relations between them." Thus, if we are concerned with "really equal treatment," as I think we must be, we must base a curriculum on a recognition of those differences that empower and depower our students in identifiable ways.³³

I would go further and insist that the starting point has to be provision for individual interests as Rousseau and Dewey saw them. Education organized around a finite number of broad talents and interests, augmented and filled out by serious inquiry into common human problems, stands the best chance of achieving a meaningful equality.³⁴

However, the school's role is limited. Today the school can only help some to escape poverty at the expense of those who do not. *Some* people must do the work that is done now by the "working poor." Why should these people live in poverty? If everyone were well educated as defined by Adler or by the proposed national standards, this work would still have to be done. If the work is valuable, it should be decently paid. This problem is beyond the control of schools, but as we study it, we see the great error of supposing that inequality can be removed by forcing everyone to study the same curriculum.

The best the school today can do (and society seems unwilling to support even this) is to provide adequate facilities for all children, long-term caring relationships that support intellectual development, and differentiated curricula nonhierarchically designed. Given the preceding analysis, we can find many reasons to predict that these measures are unlikely to be adopted.

Summary Questions

1. Why are the Cartesian and Kantian notions of the individual paradoxical?
2. Are there such things as rights? What is their source?
3. Is "the original position" best thought of as a real description or as a strategy?
4. What is meant by the complaint that liberals give higher priority to "right" than "good"?
5. Dewey admired utilitarians for their emphasis on consequences. Why was he not a utilitarian?
6. Why is Rawls accused of neglecting the political?
7. Is there just one good—happiness—that humans seek? Can it be measured?
8. On what matters do fascists and communitarians agree?
9. Why is Dewey sometimes called a "democratic communitarian"?
10. How might Dewey describe the "best and wisest parent" to whom he referred in *The School and Society*?
11. How should we define *equality* in schools?
12. Should we spend more on the education of the disadvantaged than the advantaged? How can we justify such a decision?
13. Can utilitarians avoid the following? It is ethically permissible to allow 15 percent of the population to live in poverty (not starving) if their condition ensures the prosperity of the other 85 percent.
14. In trying to achieve equity in schools, should we prescribe the same curriculum for all students?
15. Is community always a good?