

The Philosophical Foundations of Civic Education

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There is little that is morally “neutral” about civic education—the attempt to train young people to be good citizens and to engage in civic life. Adults who teach history, civics, or social studies, who guide adolescents in community-service projects, or who recruit youth as activists generally do so for “normative” reasons—because of values they hold and wish to share with young people. They seek to transmit these values and virtues to help young people build and sustain societies that better approach these ideals.

Likewise, most scholars who study and evaluate civic education do so because of their own demanding moral principles. They have chosen to examine community service or youth organizing—instead of distance-learning or the stock market—because something about civic education strikes them as deeply valuable. Yet those who study and evaluate civic education programs are often reticent about their values or unsure how to defend them or even to articulate exactly what they are.

Normative Reasons for Civic Education

Reasonable people have defined “good citizens” in various ways: for example, as dutiful members of communities, as independent critics of public institutions, as bearers of rights, and as proponents of social justice. Adults who practice or who study civic education, or do both, have considerable influence over youth, since young people generally do not choose their educational experiences. As a matter of accountability, these adults ought to explain—both to the youth they serve and to other adults—which civic values and habits they are trying to develop, and why. In short, those who lead or study or evaluate civic education should be willing to participate in a democratic discussion about their public work.

An explicit discussion of the values that guide civic education can reveal tensions among them. One tradeoff (as an example) involves quantity versus equality. Voluntary programs may attract many adolescents who already have relatively strong commitments to

civic engagement and relatively strong skills for civic and political participation. Student governments, for instance, usually draw students who are already on a leadership track. Those students tend to be successful in school and thus relatively likely to hold privileged social positions as adults. Offering them civic opportunities may enhance their capacity to participate in politics and community affairs.

That is a good result if we want to develop more experienced leaders in the next generation. But it is not the outcome we seek if we are mainly concerned about creating opportunities and experiences in civic leadership for young people who would otherwise not have them. Educators may have to choose between emphasizing the sheer number of students they reach versus the distribution of those students across segments of society and thus the equality of civic participation by social class.

Another type of tradeoff involves a tension between autonomy and authority. For example, even if it is desirable for young people to become tolerant, trusting, caring, and committed to the common good, there is a separate question about whether any particular group of adults (e.g., parents, teachers, policymakers,

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or taxpayers) has either the responsibility or the right to inculcate these values in them. Depending on one’s theory of how power should be exercised in education, one might think that it is the duty of public school teachers to decide which values to inculcate in their students, or that they should teach only the values that elected officials select for public schools, or that they should try to leave value questions to parents, or that student-teacher communities should choose values democratically.



(Kids Voting Kansas)

We need normative reasons and arguments to address a third tradeoff or dilemma, which is whether to reform people or institutions. If young people do not engage with a public institution (for example, if they do not vote), that could be because they lack some mental state that we wish they possessed, such as interest, knowledge, concern, confidence, or commitment. Or it could be because the institution is severely flawed and does not deserve to be engaged. (For instance, electoral districts in the United States have been drawn to discourage competition, thereby making most campaigns meaningless.) Whether to change young people's minds or reform institutions—or both—is a crucial issue that cannot be addressed without deciding deeper questions about justice and the structure of a good society.

In addition to helping us understand tradeoffs, explicit normative argument and discussion of the philosophic basis of civic education can reveal persuasive reasons to invest in civic development—reasons that would otherwise be overlooked. These reasons, as we shall see, go beyond the default justification for any educational investment, that is, its impact on the value of the individual student over the long term in the labor market, as indicated by scores and degrees. To be

sure, there is evidence that some civic opportunities increase “human capital” in this sense. For example, mandatory service-learning in high school seems to improve students' grades and increases their likelihood of completing college. Nevertheless, even if service-learning enhances students' grades, it may turn out that other programs do so more efficiently. There are many persuasive reasons that justify civic education and service-learning that do not depend on the effect of these programs on the long-term success of students as defined by economic rewards, for example, in the labor market.

Philosophical Perspectives—Utilitarianism

Contemporary moral and political philosophy provides rich and diverse resources for thinking about the reasons for youth civic education and development. One starting point is to ask how each of the main current schools of moral philosophy would assess major forms of civic education. Philosophers are often eclectic; they easily draw from more than one school or tradition. Nevertheless, the main schools of moral philosophy provide useful heuristics for understanding the moral bases of civic education.

One major stream of modern moral reasoning is consequentialist. It assesses any action or institution by measuring its net outcomes or effects. The leading form of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which presumes that the consequences that matter are measures of human welfare. Welfare, in turn, can be defined in terms of subjective satisfaction or happiness, objective indicators, such as life-expectancy, or the ability to satisfy preferences. Utilitarianism has had an enormous influence on welfare economics and, more generally, the social sciences. It is a demanding ethical doctrine, requiring that we do whatever is possible to maximize aggregate welfare. If taken seriously, it would require deep changes in social policies, including (most probably) massive increases in educational investments.

A utilitarian might favor civic education programs because they have been found to enhance students' welfare. For instance, Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP), funded by the federal government and the Ford Foundation, enrolled thousands of ado-

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lescents in many states between 1995 and 2001, offering participants mentoring, tutoring, some financial assistance, and community-service opportunities that also involved analysis of social issues and problems. An evaluation using a true experimental design found that for about \$2,500 per year over four years, QOP was able to reduce to 8 percent the likelihood that a student would drop out of high school, compared to 44 percent for the control group.

For a utilitarian, the cost of this program would be a disadvantage (because having to pay taxes presumably reduces the welfare of the taxpayers); but the social benefits might outweigh the costs. People who complete high school are generally better off, economically and in other ways, than those who do not. They also contribute more to the economy, thereby enhancing other people's welfare. Indeed, the evaluators estimate the social benefits of QOP at \$39,037 per student, and the net benefits (i.e., the benefits minus the costs) at \$28,427. "This exercise," they conclude, "shows that QOP will pay large dividends." A utilitarian reading this report would conclude that programs like QOP are moral imperatives, unless some other approach turns out to be even more effective.

Utilitarianism also supports a separate argument for effective and equitable political education. Jeremy Bentham, the first utilitarian, asserted that representa-

tive democracy was the form of government that would best promote aggregate welfare. Democratic governments were most likely to address genuine public needs and allocate resources efficiently. Our actual democracy, however, is marked by highly unequal participation and does not respond equally to everyone's needs. In order to achieve more equitable representation, we need to help young people develop the skills, habits, knowledge, and motivations that will increase their participation in civic and political life. Kids Voting USA is a nonprofit organization that provides curricula, materials, and professional development for high school students in hundreds of districts across the nation. The students' culminating experience is a mock election modeled on the official election in the district where they are enrolled, but there are also intensive discussions and class projects related to local government and current issues. An evaluation by Patrick C. Meirick and Daniel B. Wackman found that the program increased students' knowledge of politics (measured by current factual questions, such as "Who is the governor of Texas?"), reduced gaps in knowledge between the most and least knowledgeable students, and increased the consistency between students' opinions on issues and their voting behavior.

The evaluators cite evidence that knowledge of current political events is a precursor to voting. Voting is a source of power but is unequally distributed. Kids Voting USA "works" to the extent that it decreases political inequality by increasing usable political knowledge and reducing gaps between social classes in the amount of political knowledge. The underlying reason for that goal might be utilitarian, since a polity that responds equally to all members should maximize aggregate welfare.

Utilitarianism does not provide direct reasons to protect individual autonomy or freedom of choice. Utilitarians would support programs that enhance social welfare (including civic education) even if youth do not wish to enroll. Most Americans have utilitarian intuitions with respect to adolescents: we are often willing to override the autonomy or freedom of choice of young people to promote their welfare. Yet we may question who has this power and responsibility and what limits they should respect.

Philosophical Perspectives—Kantianism

Unlike utilitarianism, Kantianism puts autonomy at the center. Kant argues that we have two fundamental duties: to develop our own rational autonomy, and to help others develop and pursue reasonable goals of their own choosing. The measure of an action is not its consequences, but the quality of the freedom—the kind of human will—that lies behind it. To be autonomous, goals have to be freely chosen, but they

also have to be rational (i.e., examined, coherent, and capable of public justification).

A Kantian would not be concerned about the impact of civic programs on objective measures of welfare, such as graduation rates. However, a Kantian might be impressed by programs or opportunities that seem to enhance the autonomy of their participants. Programs would seem especially promising to Kantians if they encouraged young people to reflect upon moral issues and choices, form and defend their own opinions, and act accordingly. This kind of moral reflection would make the actions more the students "own" and more freely chosen because better informed.

The Just Community (JC) approach to civic and moral education is a good example. This approach began when the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg and colleagues helped several schools to implement regular community meetings that would make almost all important decisions after explicit moral discussion, using democratic processes (e.g., one person, one vote; open discussion and debate). Such self-governance develops students' (and teachers') autonomy, critical moral reasoning, and leadership as well as a sense of group membership, affectionate ties, and responsibility. The school's aspirational norms and values become embodied in rules and sanctions and the intrinsic value of community. In the JC schools, students' moral reasoning is significantly higher after two to three years relative to that of students in comparable groups.

To continue with the same example, the Just Community's focus on self-governance at the community level leads to self-governance or autonomy on the individual level, which translates into better school attendance, class participation, and academic performance. The effects on academic performance would strike a utilitarian as strong arguments for JC; for Kantians, they matter only insofar as success in school implies greater self-control and self-empowerment in the sense of autonomy or a sense of free agency for students.

Both Kantians and utilitarians have reasons to favor programs such as QOP and the Just Community (assuming that the evaluations cited above are accurate). However, their reasons are quite different, and this difference matters when we confront questions such as whether to mandate service-learning, whether youth should always co-lead their own service projects, or whether to count economic welfare as a positive outcome of service and thus design programs with this outcome or even this incentive in mind. Utilitarianism and Kantianism may converge in the choice of programs of civic education, but they will often suggest different ways of implementing them

Philosophical Perspectives— Civic Republicanism and Communitarianism

Civic republicanism offers a third relevant school of contemporary moral philosophy. Its core idea is that civic participation (deliberating, collaborating, volunteering, advocating, and voting) is not a cost. It is not work that we must unfortunately do in order to sustain a just society. Rather, it is a good: a dignified and rewarding form of human behavior.

Civic republicans view civic opportunities for young people as intrinsically valuable, regardless of their outcomes on society or even on those individuals. For example, a one-time service project is unlikely to boost any long-term outcomes; thus it has weak appeal for utilitarians. But civic republicans could argue that schools and colleges are good communities insofar as they offer opportunities for collaboration and service. Civic republicans could argue, further, that young people should be exposed to the satisfactions of participation so that they may choose to be engaged when they are adults. They would propose, however, that even one-time service projects are valuable in themselves or for their own sake.

A fourth school of contemporary moral philosophy, communitarianism, draws on the writings of David Hume (1711–1776), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and other classic sources to argue that our duties are not abstract and general, but derive from our particular and contingent connections to fellow members of our own communities and families, with whom we happen to have common histories. When we deny these bonds in the name of utility or autonomy, according to communitarians, we deprive ourselves of the basic materials of a good life. If one takes this approach, one may emphasize civic participation within groups or "identities" to which individual students already belong rather than to society or the polity considered in the abstract or as a larger whole.

To see the force of the communitarian approach, consider the nonprofit organization Facing History and Ourselves, which provides curricula, professional development, and materials related to historical examples of severe intergroup conflict, such as the Holocaust. Students are encouraged to discuss and critically evaluate their own identities and responsibilities in response to these cases. An evaluation by Schultz, Barr, and Selman found that students in Facing History and Ourselves "showed increased relationship maturity and decreased fighting behavior, racist attitudes, and insular ethnic identity relative to comparison students."

A certain image of the good citizen emerges from the evaluation: he or she will be conscious of ethnic identities and capable of working peacefully and respectfully across lines of difference. Facing History is concerned with ethnic group membership as a form of identity. That goal is in some tension with utilitarianism and Kantianism, both of which classically understand human beings as part of a single, undifferentiated human community. For Kohlberg, the highest stage of moral development is a “universal-ethical-principle orientation.” This stage (as Kohlberg wrote) has “a distinctively Kantian ring.” In Kant’s original terms, the fully developed moral agent is a citizen of one universal and undifferentiated Kingdom of Ends. Likewise, in classical utilitarianism, each human being is to count for one and none for more than one. With its respect for, and interest in, ethnic particularism, Facing History and Ourselves seems to depart from classical Kantian and utilitarian thinking.

But bridges can be built. For example, a core Kantian principle is respect for others; if ethnic identity is constitutive of selves, then one must understand and appreciate ethnicities to be respectful of others. Likewise, if people’s happiness or welfare depends on having healthy attitudes toward their own ethnic groups, then understanding and even celebrating ethnic identity is important from a utilitarian perspective.

Philosophical Perspectives – Pragmatism

John Dewey, an American philosopher who wrote on and greatly influenced the philosophy of education during the 20th century, developed a pragmatist the-

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ory of education. Dewey asserted that no general principles (no “antecedent universal propositions”) could distinguish just institutions from unjust ones. The nature of a good society was “something to be critically and experimentally determined.” Any effort to identify and apply independent criteria would be naïve, according to Dewey, because philosophy is always “intrinsically” connected to “social history.”

Dewey’s skepticism or historical relativism would seem to invalidate any normative distinctions, but he tried to construct a positive ideal out of a few modest commitments. One commitment is to learning itself: a good society continuously revisits and changes its nor-

mative commitments. The second is experience: the only way to learn is to try things in the real world. And the third is deliberation: learning works best when people of different backgrounds discuss, plan, and experience together. Therefore, in Dewey’s view, democratic institutions such as “popular voting, majority rule and so on” are valuable only because “to some extent they involve a consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles.”

All groups (even criminal conspiracies) promote some internal discussion, but some groups are better at it than others. The criterion for assessing a group is not whether it endorses the right principles (no such things can be identified), but rather whether its membership is diverse and open. The two questions to use in evaluating a group are: “How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared?” and “How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?”

These criteria can be applied to schools as communities. Deweyan pragmatists understand them as institutions within which people (including youth) make—rather than discover—moral values. We can assess schools morally not by asking whether they have reached the right conclusions about matters like rights and duties, but whether their discussions are diverse, open, and experiential. The Deweyan justification for activities like service-learning is straightforward, as long as the “learning” aspect is strong and participants are diverse. The Just Community is an example of a self-consciously created open, diverse, democratic learning community grounded in this Deweyan ideal. The JC theory of education as development mixes the Kantian emphasis on autonomy and critical moral reasoning with the actual practice of building a self-governing community.

Philosophical Perspectives – The Capability Approach

As mentioned earlier, many actual philosophers draw on more than one tradition in developing their views. An important and relevant example is the “capabilities approach,” defended by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Sen and Nussbaum share the Kantian intuition that autonomy is an essential human value. They criticize objective measures of social welfare, because free human beings may reasonably choose not to pursue these outcomes. For example, some communities are committed to religion rather than affluence. The fact that monks do not eat high on the hog does not mean that they lack welfare. Likewise, an individual may choose hardships in order to be closer to the natural world or to his or her true self.

On the other hand, Sen and Nussbaum reject the idea that autonomy is simply a matter of free choice.

First of all, some actual choices harm the true interests of the individual: using addictive narcotics would be an example. Other choices reflect a narrow sense of what is possible, constrained by cultural biases. Moreover, people need goods before they can be truly autonomous: for instance, education, legal rights, and a sense of self-respect.

Therefore, Sen and Nussbaum recommend capabilities as the criteria of social justice. In a good society, everyone has certain core capabilities, such as working, playing, raising children, participating in politics, and appreciating nature and art. These capabilities can be expressed in various ways or even forgone, depending on the free choices of individuals. For example, if I have the ability to raise children but choose not to act on it, there is no injustice. In Sen's terminology, I may have the "capability" but not the "functioning" of parenthood. Justice is measured by the objective amount and distribution of capabilities, not functionings.

The capabilities approach would support certain forms of youth civic engagement, for several reasons. The youth themselves would develop one particular capability, namely, political participation. Some of their other capabilities might be strengthened as well; for example, service appears to boost educational success. Finally, Sen and Nussbaum believe that communities must decide democratically how to develop and promote the capabilities of their own members. Civic and democratic education (which may or may not include service) seems relevant here as a means to develop the capability of political participation and thus to help to promote democratic decision-making and thereby optimize society's support for capabilities.

This brief sketch of philosophical views toward youth civic engagement has omitted other questions that are equally relevant. For instance: Who deserves citizenship (i.e., full membership in a community)? What rights and obligations should come with citizenship? What civic or political roles should be played by, for instance, elected representatives, voluntary associations, and the clergy? Which public problems should be addressed by the people acting through the state, and which should be addressed in civil society? Plainly, these are enormous questions, basic to political theory. Even a short list underlines how deeply our views of "civic engagement" depend upon our ideas of justice, fairness, the good life, and the good society.

Conclusion

This article has cited a small sample of the voluminous empirical research on the effects of various programs and experiences that could be defined as "civic education." The social scientists who produce this research know that *values* are important to educational programs

(and to society in general) as both explanations and outcomes of human behavior. They know that values differ among people, communities, and programs. Social scientists often study values—their development, their correlates, and their prevalence in different cultures and times. Some social scientists who study values are willing to see the world from different value-perspectives from their own. But it remains difficult for social scientists to evaluate values—that is, to talk about what is objectively good or bad, right or wrong.

We still live in a positivist age. Positivism implies a strict distinction between facts (seen as observable and testable) and values (seen as important and interesting but also as arbitrary and subjective). The controversial claim made here is that the designers of programs, evaluators, and researchers should adopt values of their own, put them on the table, and defend them, because the debate about values—not who holds which values, but which ones are good—is the most important discussion. The alternative is to try to hide values in an empirical literature that is actually rife with value judgments.

Science should be a public enterprise rather than one that hides behind a cloak of value-neutrality or "objectivity," which in the end is impossible. Science itself is based on and respects many values—such as intellectual honesty, a refusal to plagiarize, falsify, or misrepresent findings, respect for argument and evidence, openness to criticism, a willingness to consider that one could be wrong, and so on. A science without a basis in virtues and values—that supposes that coercion is as good as persuasion, for example—is not a science at all.

Good evaluators know that programs embody values and that different programs embody different values. They are skillful at elucidating the values that each program represents. That someone holds a particular value is an empirical claim. It is either true or false (or maybe a mix of the two). A normative claim is different. It is a claim that particular values are good or right, or bad or wrong. That kind of claim is rarely published in social science journals and academic program evaluations (although it is the mainstay of academic philosophy and political theory).

A social scientist might say that working class urban youth hold a particular value, and that this value is important to them and important for the effectiveness of any programs that engage them. The researcher may quote such youth and even design an evaluation in collaboration with them. But if the researcher asserts that the particular value is right or wrong, that claim is no longer seen as science. In a scientific publication, the author is supposed to reduce the significance of his or her value judgments, which are understood as opinions or even biases, not as facts. And yet nothing is more important in understanding and evaluating civic

education than having good values, making them explicit, and explaining why they are good.

It is hard for social scientists to take on moral beliefs and arguments in their own terms. With a few exceptions, such as Facing History and Just Communities, one cannot find much explicit moral argumentation in either the justifications or the evaluations of civic programs. Disclosing one's own ethical judgments as facts about oneself is relatively straightforward. Defending them is harder, especially if one does not resort automatically to utilitarianism. Moral argumentation requires a shift out of a positivist framework, as one gives non-empirical reasons—reasons that go beyond observable facts—for one's positions. Moral philosophy and normative social theory—as we have argued—provide rich resources for arguments about the values that society should hold and that it ought to try to transmit through civic education to future generations.

Alas, references to influential and relevant schools of philosophy, such as the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum, are entirely missing in the empirical literature on youth civic engagement. The problem, however, goes both ways. Recent academic philosophy in all of its schools has not benefited enough from reflecting on innovative youth programs, a method that Plato, Erasmus, Rousseau, Dewey, and others found generative in earlier times.

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