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Education and the Ethics of Democratic Character

Abstract

This article argues, first of all, that much educational practice in liberal-democratic society officially aims to promote what I call a 'democratic character-ideal' for the citizens of the future. It embodies the Deweyian belief that democracy is not just a form of polity but also a way of life in which individuals can flourish in socially just circumstances. The demanding nature of the ideal may appear to be a problem for it, but I demonstrate how this is not so. What is a problem is the extent to which the actual theory and practice of education is diverting from the ideal, regardless of official protestations to the contrary. Deweyian insights into the links between forms of education and forms of society suggest that the democratic character-ideal's current betrayal or abandonment should yield a radical critique of how considerations of contemporary capitalist economics are undermining what remain widely cherished aspirations of how it is good to live, and how education should help us to achieve those aspirations.

Key words

democratic character-ideal, education, neo-liberalization, "paradox" of democratic education, John Dewey

"It is obvious that the relation between democracy and education is a reciprocal one, a mutual one, and vitally so. (...) After all, the cause of democracy is the moral cause of the dignity and the worth of the individual. Through mutual respect, mutual toleration, give and take, the pooling of experiences, it is ultimately the only method by which human beings can succeed in carrying on this experiment in which we are all engaged, whether we want to be or not, the greatest experiment of humanity – that of living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others."¹

I Introduction

It is, of course, one of the most venerable of philosophical questions to ask "what sort of people should education be seeking to nurture?" and, if we embrace the quoted beliefs of John Dewey, the question has extraordinary, indeed

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John Dewey, "Democracy and Education in the World of Today", in: John Dewey, *Prob-*

lems of Men (1946, New York: Philosophical Library), p. 34, 44–45.

unique, importance in liberal-democratic society. The Deweyian argument for the ascription of this importance can be reconstructed thus:

- (i) the vitality of liberal democracy depends, as a necessary condition, upon the education provided for its (future) citizens;
- (ii) liberal democracy as a form of society (and we must not of course forget the Deweyian point that “democracy” is not just a type of political regime but a way of life) embodies the highest moral aspirations of humanity both in terms of equal individual flourishing and also peaceful coexistence in a just society;
- (iii) as we negotiate and renegotiate the ways in which we work out how best to achieve, or at least approximate to, these aspirations (“renegotiate” because Dewey recognised that social circumstances constantly change), democracy of some form is “ultimately the only method” which allows us satisfactorily to do so;
- (iv) education gives us the opportunities not only to participate in this great experiment but also to partake of its fruits: to flourish as individuals in a peaceful and just society.

Now, it is my sense that this argument, or some form of it, which places education at the very heart of democratic political philosophy, is very broadly shared, and not just in certain philosophical circles. I think that in liberal democracies it is widely assumed (if perhaps sometimes, on some people’s behalves, only implicitly) that education does have this significance and hence bears the consequent functions of democratic social reproduction and sustenance. The Deweyian argument has therefore established itself in the framing of public perceptions of, and arguments about, education’s purposes. (My direct acquaintance with such education is limited largely to the UK but I am confident that what I say has wider resonance.) Indeed, it is hardly stretching the bounds of plausibility to claim that the ideal provides a “commonsensical”² account of what education is for, and why it is so important for liberal-democratic society.

I want to consider, however, the charge that the kind of specific “character-ideal” being propounded in this account – the model of “what sort of person” is being sought – is actually under significant strain, and hence may require us to think again about it. Some of this strain may emanate from practical constraints on what can be delivered by education, given policy-related, and other, considerations, and these may not fundamentally impugn the ideal. (They may simply prompt judgments of how far short of it we are likely to fall.) But I wish to focus on strains that arise internally, within the ideal itself. Specifically, I wish to consider whether:

- (a) the ideal, when fully laid out, is so complex and hence ambitious that its various constituents are probably bound to pull away from each other under any conditions and will therefore not be comprehensively realisable;
- (b) the ideal has become tied to a particular model of democracy – not only liberal, a characteristic to which I have already adverted in my naming of it, but also *capitalist* in form – which, for reasons that are distinct from the ones that may pertain in (a), is in fact incompatible with the full realization of the ideal, contrary to the assumptions made about it in the “commonsensical” ruling ideology of liberal democracy.

And contrary, too, to those who think there is a fortuitous, if unintended, upshot here (“if the ideal is not fully realisable under any conditions, as (a) contends, then it is not to be bemoaned that liberal democracy cannot deliver it in full”), the counter-argument I am expounding and examining says that a

very different kind of character-ideal (or “anti-ideal”) may well be emerging through the socialising mechanisms of contemporary capitalist society: something perhaps along the lines of the Nietzschean “last man”, that Fukuyama famously pondered as the possible result of liberal democracy’s triumph at the “end of history”.³

I want to argue that the ideal’s ambition does indeed appear to give rise to a paradox in its articulation and delivery. But this apparent paradox, I suggest, is not a *problem* for it and I present some considerations as to why this is so.

(b), however, is more troubling, for liberal democracy may have a tendency systematically to misinterpret and hence divert from it in how it tries to educate its future citizens. There is a truly radical import in the character-ideal in the critique it can therefore offer of this tendency, and the upshot of the Deweyian argument is that there are, therefore, truly radical implications for what sort of democracy we should be seeking to promote. This is where Dewey’s leftism, his “socialism of a sort” as we might call it, which perhaps at least until recently (with the dramatic breakdown of neo-liberal politico-economic practices) seemed so out of kilter with the times, could be retrieved as one source of inspiration as we think about where we need to go from here to pursue our noble aspirations for human flourishing in good societies.

II The Democratic Character-Ideal

So, what is the democratic character-ideal which we might wish education to foster and promote? Now, lest you think I have forgotten it, I am not overlooking the distinction between ‘education’ and ‘schooling’: it shall be invoked later in the argument. But I shall begin by contending that the following catalogue identifies eleven facets to the character-ideal which I believe is broadly accepted as underpinning what we might call ‘formal character education’ in liberal-democratic societies. In other words, each of these facets informs its own part of the schooling that children in general receive and which, we may therefore conclude, constitute part of the character-ideal which is being encouraged. To be sure, there are different ways of interpreting and applying these facets, so my characterisation of the ideal is not as restrictive as it might first seem. But it is instructive that it is more specific than some might have expected of a democratic ideal, given the pluralistic openness in ways of life that is commonly associated with ‘democracy’.

These eleven facets can be divided into two groups. The first group constitutes various types and aspects of ‘citizenship’, a term which here very generally refers to the various relationships people have with the world around them:

- (1) membership of one’s state, the most immediately familiar, “political” understanding of citizenship: we want our citizens to be politically literate, disposed to participate effectively and hence be part of a healthily democratic polity;
- (2) membership of one’s particular culture: “cultural citizenship”, involving knowledge and appreciation of one’s own culture, history, traditions and suchlike, something which is deemed to be important insofar as one’s identity is at least partially defined by one’s culture (of course, cultural membership may be multiple for some);

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By ‘commonsensical’ I mean to denote something that is widely taken for granted, as self-evident, a ‘given’.

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Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992, London: Hamish Hamilton).

- (3) membership of ‘society’ more abstractly or generically understood: “civic” or “social” citizenship, conditioning how one relates to others in general (typically going beyond “how to behave in public” to include notions of certain social responsibilities to the others in whose midst one lives);
- (4) membership of the “human community”: “global” or “world” citizenship (the implications of what it means to belong to a world of other humans, again with the notion of responsibilities at their centre);
- (5) a denizen of the natural world: “environmental” citizenship, dealing with our responsibilities to the natural world;
- (6) an economically equipped or “enabled” self: capable not only of financial self-management but possessed of the skills and dispositions needed for the functional requirements of, for example, the labour market.⁴

The second group is a set of facets which are somewhat more (not wholly) self-pertaining in the sense that they are not directly focussed on one’s interaction with the wider external world:

- (7) a “responsible”, “disciplined” self: capable of rational thought and self-organisation, the generic skills of “life-planning” or “life-management”;⁵
- (8) a “relational” self: equipped with the abilities and dispositions for close personal relationships as well as the wider socio-political engagements described above;
- (9) a “healthy” self: such that one acquires an interest in one’s own well-being in terms of physical and mental health insofar as circumstances facilitate;⁶
- (10) a “flourishing” self: disposed and equipped to develop one’s talents and powers;
- (11) a “knowledgeable” self: not just functionally literate and numerate, but also equipped with a general knowledge that has both intrinsic and instrumental value.

However else these various character-facets might be encouraged in civil society, all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, can also be identified as underpinning the objectives of a standard school education nowadays. Students are taught, both directly and indirectly, in disciplines and skills which nurture each of these facets at some point and to some degree.⁷ And my contention is that these various objectives are more or less uncontroversial: together, they constitute what we generally expect education to promote, because we think that each child should be encouraged to engage with the concerns and the potentials encapsulated in each facet. It is their right and/or responsibility to do so if they are equally to have the chance to lead good lives, in various senses of what a “good life” is. This egalitarianism is central to what makes it a democratic ideal and, of course, it is easy to see in this listing a very comprehensive rendering of Dewey’s version of democracy as a way of life fit for human beings with all their interests, capacities and potentials.

Having proposed that this character-ideal underpins the typical education afforded children, I nevertheless now need to say something in support of the underlying assumption here that it is indeed appropriate for the liberal-democratic *state* to propagate the ideal in the education it provides and sponsors. Some might agree that the eleven facets do indeed constitute our ideal of what we should encourage people to be concerned about in terms of their

own development but deny that the state has any right or responsibility to make children engage with the ideal in their formal schooling. For example, we have seen how part of the ideal incorporates what are familiar notions of citizenship and civic virtue – and there is a lively debate as to what role schooling may have in the inculcation of civic virtue among the citizens of tomorrow. Some believe that schooling is often ineffective in performing any such role, and they therefore conclude that this is therefore a good reason not to have “civics lessons”. The “inefficacy of the state argument” could follow J.S. Mill’s important liberal observations on the matter.⁸ James Tooley, a British educational theorist, also argues against the claim that the state is somehow competent enough to codify, gather in and tidy up all aspects of a child’s formal and informal education in one overarching school curriculum.⁹

In a recent edition of *Social Philosophy and Policy*, James Bernard Murphy goes further and argues that civics lessons will actually and inevitably embody partisan conceptions of the citizenship character-ideal and its attendant virtues, for these are reasonably contested concepts (in John Rawls’ sense).¹⁰ He writes: “to demand civics lesson that offer inherently partisan conceptions of civic virtue violates the civic trust upon which vibrant common schools depend. These civics lessons would truly lack all civility.”¹¹ Given that the other aspects of how to live well in the ideal of democratic citizenship would be viewed from such a perspective as being at least as contestable (for, apart from anything, they rely in part on essentially contested conceptions of the values and concepts at issue), supporters of this argument would think Murphy’s judgment could apply *a fortiori* to the character-ideal in its entirety being promoted in schooling.

There is no doubt that, if I am nevertheless right that this character-ideal actually does underpin democratic schooling, then this fact probably puts paid in

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In addition to these 6 in the citizenship category, “European citizenship” could be added for some of us, of course, though I would tend to treat this among the elements of (some of) these others, and not a facet of the ideal which is wholly distinct in its own right.

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I coin the latter phrase as an alternative to the former for those who agree with Charles Larmore that talk of “life-planning” suggests a rather bureaucratised, rigid conception of how to live well: Charles Larmore, “The Idea of a Life-Plan”, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1) (1999), pp. 96–112.

6

Obviously, this does not mean to disregard those with physical or mental ill-health or handicap. Rather, I am saying that education encourages people to be as healthy as they can be in their own circumstances.

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I do not say that these exhaust the objectives of all educational curricula: a religious education, for example, would clearly need to be reflected by a further facet in this list. More generally, in multicultural societies education for minorities is sometimes tailored to suit the

needs of cultural reproduction which may diminish the significance of at least some of the stated facets.

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John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1972, London: Dent), chapter 5.

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James Tooley, “The Good, The Bad and the Ugly: Conceptual and Practical Problems with Labour’s Citizenship Education”, paper presented at the British Educational Research Association conference, September 2000. It is difficult to see how Tooley’s “neat and tidy” objection does not in fact count against other parts of the curriculum, and the school’s objectives more generally, which one presumes he would not want to jettison.

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See the discussion of “reasonable disagreement”, in: John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (1996, New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 54–58.

11

James Bernard Murphy, “Against Civic Schooling”, in: *Social Philosophy and Policy* 21 (1) (2004), p. 265.

practice to the “anti-perfectionist” insistence that the state should somehow be “impartial” with respect to conceptions of the good.¹² Anti-perfectionism goes hand-in-hand with the purely deontological understanding of democracy, which says that its function is essentially only of procedural fairness and it is not in itself concerned with substantive notions of the human good. This dessicated rendering of “democracy”’s meaning and value is what the Deweyian ideal rejects – and I urge rightly so. As a public political philosophy, Deweyian democracy (which forms part of an American tradition of democratic thought which stretches from Whitman and Emerson, through Dewey to thinkers such as Cavell and Rorty) in effect holds that its foundational moral starting-point, the equal moral autonomy of individuals and the respect they are thereby owed, is not indifferent to the fundamental ethical question of whether they become, say, flourishing people or “last men”.

And the reason that this character-ideal is, in its entirety, a legitimate matter for state schooling in my view is that democratic equality requires the provision of an equal opportunity for all to strive towards the democratic character-ideal and *only* state schooling can guarantee that provision. My argument for this would follow, *mutatis mutandis*, the Crick Report in the (ultimately persuasive¹³) case it made for the introduction of “citizenship” into the UK’s National Curriculum:

“Citizenship and the teaching of democracy, construed in a broad sense (...) is so important both for schools and the life of the nation that there must be a statutory requirement on schools to ensure that it is part of the entitlement of all pupils. It can no longer sensibly be left as uncoordinated local initiatives which vary greatly in number, content and method. This is an inadequate basis for animating the idea of a common citizenship with democratic values.”¹⁴

(I am not hereby committed to any view on whether this position is hostile to private education, whereby sufficiently wealthy parents can buy a better-quality education for their offspring,¹⁵ nor on what – if anything – could or should be done about the unequal informal educational opportunities that pertain beyond the school.¹⁶)

III The “Paradox” of Democratic Education – and its Resolution

Back to the ideal. When you think about it, it is extraordinarily challenging. It looks significantly more ambitious than, for example, the ethically richest of the ancient Greek models of education for the good life – and remember that these models were only for a privileged, leisured class (facilitated only by the labour of women and slaves). Now, the more we ask our schools to do the more we may be compromising their ability to deliver a successful and equal education – and many of its own advocates (such as Amy Gutmann and Stephen Macedo¹⁷) have admitted that even civic education on its own is typically ineffective on this score.

In many walks of life, of course, the fact that something is not effective is often decisive in the justification of its abandonment. The point that this fact about civic education is not decisive against it for Gutmann and Macedo seems to be based in part on the conviction that, without the noble ends of civic education and individual cultivation – if we stripped education back to the “3Rs” of reading, writing and arithmetic (or even based its primary justification on the acquisition of these basic skills) – we would rob education of its inspirational, noble, uplifting character.¹⁸ One really could be sanctioning

an enervating acceptance of the “last man” as the appropriate ideal for the age (on the grounds that such indifference, which would be characteristic of a certain kind of anti-perfectionism, would have no more to say in favour of richer ideals than it would the “last-man” model).

But let us anyway think harder about how we might couch this “failure” claim: in what ways might it be the case that schools will be unable to educate their pupils effectively in the development of the democratic character-ideal? I am not going to canvas all possible sources of its (potential) failure (like anything else, it could fail through insufficient resourcing, for example, and I shall not talk about cause of failure here). But there is a feasibility question about the extent of the character-ideal’s ambitions, and we can also raise a related but distinct question about its internal consistency (the relationship between its various constituents).

It looks very plausible to argue against the ideal, as the inspiration for democratic education, by pointing out that it is just way too ambitious for all but the most extraordinary of individuals, regardless of any external resourcing issues. How can we expect most individuals (the “mere mortals” that most of us are) to be able to engage with, and display even a limited modicum of competence in, the range of facets, commitments and disciplines embodied in this ideal? Think of the sweepingly large practical implications of the six facets of citizenship alone, even before we begin to consider how we might engage with the self-pertaining aspects. Human beings are just too finite in their abilities, their range of dispositions and the sheer time and space available to them often to come remotely close to be capable of living according to some reasonable approximation of the ideal.

The “consistency argument” looks as if it may compound the feasibility problem further by the contention that the kinds of skills, attitudes and aptitudes nurtured in certain spheres in one of the ideal’s aspects are always likely to pull away (negate or otherwise undermine) from those that are appropriately fostered in another facet of the ideal. There is a familiar claim that civic education (which is typically, in a way, pro *status quo* and will emphasise responsibility, virtue, respect for the law and suchlike) does not necessarily sit well with the free-thinking individualism that other aspects of education seek to

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For a comprehensive discussion of this familiar ideal in contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy, see: Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (1986, Oxford: Oxford University Press), Part II.

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In the sense that the government accepted its recommendations.

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Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship: *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (1998, London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority), p. 7.

15

I reflect on some aspects of the case for and against inegalitarian education in an inegalitarian world in: “Egalitarianism and Merit in a Non-Ideal World: The Problem of Two-Tier

Education”, *Politics and Ethics Review* 1 (1) (2005), pp. 1–21.

16

Put another way: democratic state provision of such education ensures (local defects notwithstanding) an equal basic (generous/sufficient) minimum, without necessitating equality more generally.

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See: Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (1999, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press), pp. 106–107; Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust* (2000, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), p. 235.

18

See, for a version of this argument: Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (1997, Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 170.

encourage. The consistency argument says that, once we have fleshed out the democratic character-ideal fully, as I have done, we can see just how profound and far-reaching the consistency problem may be. The upshot, so critics who adopt these lines of thought may say, is an education that constantly disappoints in its radical under-delivery of its own promise.

Now, the “consistency” problem *is* one to which I do believe the delivery of the ideal in educational practice is prone, though I shall be suggesting that this is due not so much to some abstractly intrinsic flaw with the ideal as to how it is interpreted and implemented in certain kinds of policy and socio-economic contexts. The question of how to balance the demands of the ideal’s aspects is always there to be asked. But the contingencies of context crucially impinge on the answer to that question. Before I explain what I mean here, however, I want to suggest why the “feasibility” (or perhaps I should say the “over-ambition of the ideal”) problem is not a problem, and why the reason that it is not a problem does not undermine its democratic credentials.

Earlier, I referred to “the apparent paradox” of democratic education and this is how it may be restated: democratic education is premised upon the provision of an equal opportunity to learn to develop ability, or “capacity”, in the whole range of aspects in the democratic character-ideal. But this education is conducted in full knowledge of the fact that individuals will typically develop in ways that fall short, perhaps far short, of even a vague approximation to the possession of equal capacity in all of these various aspects. Such education looks *doomed* to fail in this egalitarian enterprise. (I accept that some version of this “paradox” may probably be manifested in all bar the most minimal of curricula, but it is especially acute in this instance because of both the ambition of the ideal, and its curricular implications, and its claim to be democratic and therefore egalitarian.)

The putative paradox is resolved, however, when we realise that the point of the character-ideal is not to lay down a precise model of what sort of people we should all be in democratic society. To be sure, it identifies the range of concerns on which we should all reflect when we consider how we might live well. But that is very different from thinking that everyone’s mode of living well should be expected to weave each and every aspect into itself substantively – and this reservation arises not just for human limitation/finitude reasons. True democracy, that which animated Dewey’s vision, enjoins us to make the best of what we can of ourselves, both as individuals and among our fellow human beings. And the point of the democratic character-ideal is that it gives us all an equal opportunity to learn about and explore the range of possibilities that are open to us all.¹⁹ The richness of the ideal arises not from any absurdly utopian ambition about what we can all do but from the richness of those possibilities, thereby condemning any form of education – formal or informal – which suppresses them and stunts the development of the full range of powers and talents among people as a whole.

Democracy is, after all, also about diversity: it is good that we develop in different ways, doing what we can with what partial elements of the character-ideal we so choose (if we are fortunate to have such an opportunity). It is good that some concentrate on local citizenship, others on global citizenship, others on their individual talents, others on their family lives, still others on, say, the ostensible “narrowness” of monastic life, whilst others “mix-and-match” a combination of them. The crucial point here is that we know full well that one of the most powerful ethical critiques of many forms of society and modes of living is that they are unjustly constrained and repressive of

the possibilities for good lives, and what the present ideal sets out to do is to specify that range and not a template for how each individual life should be led. This resolution of the paradox thus helps to disarm the anti-perfectionist attack that democratic education of this form is illegitimately endorsing one conception of the good over others. We can see, indeed, that the ideal is in fact a combination of goods: in its full-blown version, it reflects the “perfect state” of perfectionism, but, by dint of natural necessity, different people will realise different parts in different ways to different degrees – and *that* is its point and its goal.²⁰

Democratic education should equip us with the Socratic ability to examine our own lives, to choose from the range of possibilities – perhaps to keep on developing through life (again, if we so choose) as Dewey might recommend: “since growth is the characteristic of life, education is at one with growing; it has no end beyond itself”.²¹ Certainly, it should dispose us to care about how we are living, what we can and should be doing with our lives. I am here reminded of Vaclav Havel’s observation: “the tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.”²² The point about democratic education is that it should make us care, or at least capable of caring, and equip us with at least some of the means by which we can fashion our lives in ways that show that we care about them.

IV “Neo-Liberal Democracy” versus Democratic Education

You will gather that I think the ideal that I have briefly and incompletely sketched here is a very noble one, the most appropriate character-ideal for democracy and *ipso facto* democratic education. But we must not be complacent about the readiness of its availability or achievement.²³ Or, rather, we must be fully apprised of the ease with which the ideal can be misunderstood, corrupted or otherwise rendered unavailable.

Earlier, I expressed the fear that what a lot of contemporary educational practice is producing may be rather nearer the Nietzschean “last man” than the kind of ideal, diversely expressed, that it originally hoped, and generally still professes, to promote. The idea of the “last man” expresses the claim that the modern mode of character is unambitious, enervatingly contented to indulge in private pursuits often for usually shallow and hedonistic purposes, all because there is nothing left to struggle for in this technologically blessed age

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John Dewey, “Democracy and Educational Administration”, op. cit., p. 60.

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A pluralist of Isaiah Berlin’s stripe argues that different human goods are uncombinable: what I am suggesting here is that the democratic character-ideal – *qua* ideal type – can nevertheless posit them in one character-ideal.

21
John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916, New York: The Free Press), p. 53.

22

Quoted by: Steven Lukes, “Vaclav Havel: The Meaning of Life at the Ramparts”, in: Steven Lukes, *Moral Conflict and Politics* (1991, Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 275.

23
More might be said in justification of the ideal, and some might demand that more be said before we accept it. But I shall not detain the present argument by responding to that demand here.

of comparative riches.²⁴ The stated fear about education does not arise from any belief that this form of living is what is consciously aimed for; rather, it recognises that it is an unintended by-product. But, according to the argument that we can develop out of the fear, it has been allowed to displace the democratic character-ideal because of an essential reconceptualisation of education's function which, due as much as anything to an ethical inattention in educational policy-making, has unwittingly frustrated what remain its official goals with respect to the nurturing of good living for citizens.

Let me elaborate further this thesis about modern education. Many have thought, and many still think, that education is autotelic: its justification lies in its intrinsic, rather than instrumental, value and that once we subordinate education to the status of a means for a particular end, we lose its meaning and somehow rob it of its integrity. I doubt whether supporters of this view ever meant it strictly, in the sense of rejecting the idea that education had *any* instrumental purpose: of course it was meant to facilitate certain other ends, and this is of course clearly evident in the democratic character-ideal. Education is never merely "for its own sake", though love of learning and of what is learnt for themselves remain central to this account of its worth. The point is that there are certain types of end towards which education should never be subordinated as means, and there are certain ends towards which it should never be *wholly* subordinated (matters of degree being vital here). The thesis being presented here, then, claims that this is the point that has been forgotten or disregarded.

In the U.K., as Frank Furedi has recently argued,²⁵ the state has increasingly used education as the means to address and fix a growing array of social problems, which has profoundly altered the nature of the curriculum, the styles of teaching (and, absurdly, he thinks this has backfired in the way it has alienated youngsters from their schooling). The instrumentalisation of education with respect to certain policy objectives has, in effect, crowded out at least some of the objectives in the democratic character-ideal, or misinterpreted their meaning even though supporters of the new educational theories and practices would almost certainly not officially disavow the democratic character-ideal.

I do not have the space to lay out in full the evidence for this claim, so a snapshot of one dimension of the phenomenon must suffice. The dimension is a clear product of the "neo-liberalisation" or "financialisation" of educational practice, which is becoming ever more pronounced in the U.K. This is, of course, a product of the turn to neo-liberal economics which requires increasing self-reliance and flexibility on the part of citizens in an era of accelerating economic turbulence and instability. It is no exaggeration to say that there has been a conscious effort, particularly since the election of the Blair government in 1997, to produce a new kind of character-ideal among citizens to cope with the vicissitudes of the 21st century capitalist economy by (i) altering individual outlooks and aspirations (for example, by expecting to have to change jobs instead of building lifelong careers); (ii) acquiring a whole package of "skills" which in effect are designed to reduce reliance on the state and other social agencies in financial and career-planning (and some aspects of life-planning more generally, such as parenthood) in the context of what is called "risk": the likelihood of negative changes in one's circumstances beyond one's control.²⁶ Here, for example, is the educational philosophy of Tom Bentley, one of the Blair government's leading advisers: "the *main* task of a contemporary education system is to prepare its students for a world in which there is less order, less predictability and more chaos, where old solutions are running up against complex, apparently insurmountable challenges."²⁷

In education, what this has meant in general is the significant inflation of the “economic” facet in the democratic character-ideal and, I would contend, the identification of certain other aspects of the ideal with economic ends. “To flourish as a human being” is increasingly equated, to the exclusion of flourishing’s other possible dimensions, with being able to cope with the economic world. The way in which the highly instrumentalised language of “skills” has become ubiquitous (one’s ability to have relationships, to look after oneself, to develop one’s talents, to interact with more widely: all of this is now referred to as the business of skills-acquisition, as if the individual in question was a machine to be programmed with specific abilities to perform different functions).

Many radicals have thought that some such economic agenda has been behind education in capitalist societies all along, but whereas once they had to talk in terms of a “hidden curriculum”, my point is that not only is it hidden no more, but it has demonstrably changed the content of education, and the kinds of arguments for it in public-justificatory argument. The latter is particularly evident in the heightened pertinence of the claim that “we have to prepare our kids for the real world”: you “let them down” if you don’t teach them how to survive in the “dog-eat-dog” world via the financialised liberal education. This kind of argument is part of the ruling ideology now, because it comports with a virtually irresistible interpretation of our social reality, especially in the circumstances of severe economic crisis. And part of the favoured solution in neo-liberal ideology – which, in the U.K. at least, has not been noticeably challenged despite the crisis, is to view society and social institutions as akin to a capitalist business, and hence the remedies to social problems as akin to business solutions. Indeed, businesses are often brought in to deliver public services, including education, in practices that were unthinkable a generation ago.²⁸

In brief illustration of the kind of education that has emerged, here are some extracts from the UK’s Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) on “Economic Wellbeing and Financial Capability” curriculum aims for 14-16-year olds:

“The Importance of Economic Wellbeing and Financial Capability”

Education for economic wellbeing and financial capability aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills and attributes to make the most of changing opportunities in learning and work. Through their learning and experiences inside and outside school, students begin to understand the nature of the world of work, the diversity and function of business, and its contribution to national prosperity. They develop as questioning and informed consumers and learn to manage their money and finances effectively.

24

Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, op. cit., pp. 300–312. Of course, this is presented as a generalising ideal-type that is applicable only to certain forms of society. There are many who would say to this ideal with respect to their circumstances: “if only”.

25

Frank Furedi, *Wasted: Why Education Isn’t Educating* (2009, London: Continuum).

26

See, for example: Alan Finlayson, “Financialisation, Financial Literacy and Asset-Based Welfare”, *British Journal of Politics and In-*

ternational Relations, 11 (3) (2009), pp. 400–421. The language of “risk” as supposedly characteristic of modern society is most closely associated, in this discourse, with: Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way* (1998, Cambridge: Polity).

27

Tom Bentley, *Learning Beyond the Classroom: Education for a Changing World* (1998, London: Routledge), p. 177 (my emphasis).

28

See: Frank Furedi, *Wasted*, op. cit., chapter 1, esp. pp. 48–49.

Education for economic wellbeing and financial capability improves motivation and progression by helping students see the relevance of what they learn in school to their future lives. It expands their horizons for action by challenging stereotyping, discrimination and other cultural and social barriers to choice. It helps students to aim high. Students build a positive and realistic view of their needs and capabilities so that they can make effective learning plans, decisions and transitions. They become aware of changing career opportunities and develop the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about which learning programmes to take.

Students learn to be enterprising. They develop the ability to handle uncertainty, respond positively to change, and create and implement new ideas and ways of doing things. They learn how to make and act on reasonable risk/reward assessments and develop a ‘can-do’ attitude and the drive to make ideas happen.

‘Key Concepts’

There are a number of key concepts that underpin the study of economic wellbeing and financial capability. Students need to understand these concepts in order to deepen and broaden their knowledge, skills and understanding:

1.1. ‘Career’

- a. Understanding that everyone has a ‘career’.
- b. Developing a sense of personal identity for career progression.
- c. Understanding the qualities, attitudes and skills needed for employability.

1.2. ‘Capability’

- a. Exploring what it means to be enterprising.
- b. Learning how to manage money and personal finances.
- c. Understanding how to make creative and realistic plans for transition.
- d. Becoming critical consumers of goods and services.

1.3. ‘Risk’

- a. Understanding risk in both positive and negative terms.
- b. Understanding the need to manage risk in the context of financial and career choices.
- c. Taking risks and learning from mistakes.

1.4. ‘Economic Understanding’

- a. Understanding the economic and business environment.
- b. Understanding the functions and uses of money.”²⁹

Of course, at least some of these objectives seem (certainly at first sight) eminently sensible. No one wants children to be financially incompetent as adults, so why not teach them about money matters? The “economic facet” has its place in the democratic character-ideal, after all. But the claim here is that it is being magnified at the expense of the ideal’s other dimensions. For example, it does not require much critical reflection to sense how the conception of personal being, and therefore wellbeing, is being conceptualised in financialised terms: note, for example, that everyone has a “career” (a claim no less pregnant with a very particular ideological interpellation of the subject for having scare quotes around it).

The general point is that the nature of education in democratic society is crucially dependent on the actual nature of that democracy and its social and economic realisation, and we have to confront: (a) the fact that democratic societies today are not only liberal democracies³⁰ but capitalist societies; and (b) the functional requirements of capitalism as they are interpreted by those who have relevant power, and in the context of how it is believed it must be managed, impinge increasingly directly and detrimentally on the way such societies educate their (future) citizens, thus frustrating democratic education’s other goals.³¹ And, in the present turbulent economic climate, granting that life-experiences obviously vary enormously across social class, ethnicity, gender and so on, I would say that, by and large, we are producing not com-

fortably enervated last men but whole swathes of people who are under constant and accelerating economic pressures and strains as the exigencies of capitalist economics buffet them this way and that.

If the Deweyian democratic ideal is under attack thus, then has its day actually passed? Somewhat against the grain, perhaps, I believe not. The Deweyian ideal raises questions not only about what sort of education we are giving our children, but what sort of society we live in. And our experiences of that society today, I believe, impel us to see that the ideal may offer a truly radical critique. It forces us to ask questions about how democratic we are, in the full Deweyian sense of “democracy”, and how the way our socio-economic forms have evolved may be moving us further away from, not nearer to, the ideal.³² The claim here is that what is happening to education is not some mere accident, a mistake that can be rectified, but may in fact be an inevitable outcome of the demands that capitalism makes on society. In other words, *it is to be expected* that educational theories and practices are shaped to the prerequisites of the economic order. A change in those theories and practices might therefore come about only if that economic order changes. This is one reason, on top of the manifest deficiencies within the present economic order, to contemplate radical alternatives: ethics (in the Aristotelian sense of how to live well) as well as economics impels us to do so.

Whenever such reflections come to my mind, I think of some words of Terry Eagleton’s:

“... revolutionaries are those realist, moderate types who recognise that to put [the world] to rights would require a thoroughgoing transformation. Anyone who thinks otherwise is an idle utopianist, though they are more commonly known as liberals and pragmatists.”³³

With both of these latter labels conventionally applied to Dewey, he would seem to fall into this unfortunate category and, if revolutionary change may be necessary to reverse the course that education appears to be taking, he may not therefore help us much in thinking through this prospect. But I think this judgment on him would be unfair, and not just because he did not, of course, provide us with a systematic and comprehensive normative and institutional political theory. Recall, however, this injunction of his:

29

From: http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/uploads/QCA-07-3347-pEconoWell4_tcm8-394.pdf. Accessed: 20 August 2008.

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I am here implicitly mounting a critique of the concept of “illiberal democracy” in current real-world manifestations.

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The present argument has focussed on the damage being done to individual flourishing, but one may also reflect on how the economic, financialised approach to the governance of society and education is altering the theory and practice of citizenship, in which citizen input into politics is only deemed as relevant if they are stakeholders, for example. This is of a piece with the treatment of political issues as essential managerial matters of how best (most efficiently) to deliver certain kinds of service to citizens who are largely regarded as passive consumers of said services

when they are not posited as commodities themselves for the labour market. An extended presentation and defence of this analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but a reading of Giddens, *The Third Way*, op. cit., will give one a flavour of the kind of politics which has emerged in recent times.

32

The attenuation of democracy is not to be explained solely by the development of neo-liberalism: liberal democracy has always been a limited form of democracy. And though there are different forms that capitalism may take, and hence different opportunities for democratised power-exercising, we do not have to be economic determinists to see the link between capitalism and anti-democratic tendencies.

33

Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper* (2001, London: Penguin), p. 85.

“The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered and rediscovered, remade and reorganised; while the political and economic and social institutions in which it is embodied have to be made and reorganised to meet the changes that are going on in the development of new needs on the part of human beings and new resources for satisfying those needs.”³⁴

Dewey himself was no revolutionary, of course, yet his own injunction is logically compatible with the possible necessity of revolutionary change in order to keep democracy, with *all* of its aspirations, alive. This may be very hard to contemplate, of course, and it may well be that adequate reform is possible without such change: a lot of argument and campaigning struggle might be required before we can know whether that is the case. In response to what I think (non-melodramatically) is a crisis in our civilisation as epitomised by what is happening to education, we could

- (i) “put on blinkers” to distort our understanding of social reality; or:
- (ii) distortingly³⁵ adapt our preferences as to what sort of ideals we are aiming for; or:
- (iii) gloomily resign ourselves to the radical ethical sub-optimality of our world, haunted by the vision of what should have been; or:
- (iv) keep the faith that, difficult and protracted though it may be, we can remake our democracy and hence nurture self-realizing individuals.

I believe that those who have taken education away from the Deweyian ideal have probably fallen victim to (i) and/or (ii). (iii) may engulf one in the depths of despair and it is clearly a frame of mind to be avoided if we can. I think (iv) *is* difficult: it requires potentially enormous faith, courage and probably stubbornness (to name but a few of the requisite qualities). But if I am right that the democratic character-ideal still resonates widely, then by dint of *immanent* critique of how children are being educated today, and thereby working out what kind of society is needed both to facilitate and accommodate what such education aspires to bring forth, we may be able to sustain the faith. As thinkers following in Dewey’s footsteps, it may be our duty to uphold such hope. Think, after all, of the implications if we cannot do so.³⁶

Mark Evans

Odgoj i etika demokratskog karaktera

Sažetak

U članku se, prije svega, tvrdi da većina odgojne prakse u liberalno-demokratskom društvu službeno teži promicanju, kako ga nazivam, ‘ideala demokratskog karaktera’ za građane budućnosti. On utjelovljuje deweyjevsko uvjerenje da demokracija nije samo oblik političke zajednice nego i način življenja u kojem se pojedinci mogu razvijati u socijalno pravednim okolnostima. Zahtjevna priroda tog ideala se može činiti problematičnom, no nastojat ću pokazati da tomu nije slučaj. Ono što jest problem je omjer u kojem aktualna teorija i praksa odgoja odudara od ideala, bez obzira na službene prigovore tom idealu. Deweyjevski uvidi u poveznice između oblika odgoja i oblika društva ukazuju da suvremena izdaja ili napuštanje ideala demokratskog karaktera iziskuje radikalnu kritiku stanja u kojem razmatranja suvremene kapitalističke ekonomije podrivaju široko prihvaćene težnje za dobrim životom i odgojem koji pridonosi ostvarenju tih težnji.

Ključne riječi

ideal demokratskog karaktera, odgoj, neoliberalizacija, »paradoks« demokratskog odgoja, John Dewey

Mark Evans

Erziehung und Ethik des demokratischen Charakters

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel legt in erster Linie dar, dass ein Großteil der Erziehungspraxis in der liberal-demokratischen Gesellschaft offiziell die Förderung des – wie ich es nenne – demokratischen Charakterideals für die Zukunftsbürger anstrebt. Es verkörpert die deweyische Überzeugung, die Demokratie sei nicht lediglich eine Form der politischen Ordnung, sondern geradeso eine Lebensart, in welcher Individuen in sozial gerechten Verhältnissen prosperieren könnten. Die anspruchsvolle Natur des Ideals mag hierbei als Problem erscheinen, doch ich demonstriere, dem sei nicht so. Was das eigentliche Problem ist, ist das Ausmaß, bis zu welchem die aktuelle Erziehungstheorie und -praxis von dem Ideal ablenken, ohne Rücksicht auf die offiziellen Einwände dagegen. Die deweyischen Einsichten in die Verbindungen zwischen Erziehungs- und Gesellschaftsformen suggerieren, dass der gegenwärtige Verrat oder die Preisgabe des demokratischen Charakterideals eine radikale Kritik hervorbringen soll, die Betrachtungen der modernen kapitalistischen Ökonomien untergraben das weit gehegte Streben nach einem guten Leben und der Erziehung, die uns zur Erfüllung dieses Strebens verhelfen sollte.

Schlüsselwörter

demokratischer Charakterideal, Erziehung, Neoliberalisierung, „Paradox“ der demokratischen Erziehung, John Dewey

Mark Evans

Éducation et éthique du caractère démocratique

Résumé

L'article, tout d'abord, soutient qu'une bonne partie de la pratique éducative dans une société libérale et démocratique vise à promouvoir ce que j'appelle l'idéal du caractère démocratique pour les citoyens de l'avenir. Celui-ci incarne la conviction deweyienne que la démocratie n'est pas qu'une forme de communauté politique, mais aussi une façon de vivre où les individus peuvent s'épanouir dans des conditions sociales justes. La nature exigeante de cet idéal peut paraître problématique, mais j'essaierai de montrer que tel n'est pas le cas. Ce qui est un problème est la mesure dans laquelle la théorie et la pratique actuelle s'écartent de l'idéal, quelles que soient les critiques officielles qui lui sont adressées. Les regards deweyiens sur les liens entre les formes d'éducation et celles de société indiquent que la trahison ou l'abandon contemporain de l'idéal du caractère démocratique exigent une critique radicale de la façon dont les considérations de l'économie capitaliste contemporaine minent les aspirations, toujours aussi largement partagées, à une vie bonne et une éducation qui nous aide à y accéder.

Mots-clés

idéal du caractère démocratique, éducation, néolibéralisation, « paradoxe » de l'éducation démocratique, John Dewey

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John Dewey, "The Challenge of Democracy to Education", op. cit, p. 47.

35

As opposed, of course, to "non-distortingly". One example of the latter would be the evident need to reassess views of human flourishing from a Green perspective, which I do not think is necessarily incompatible with self-realization: see my *Self-Realization: Politics and the Good Life in Modern Times* (2007, New York: Nova), pp. 177–180.

36

This article was given as a lecture at the 5th International Course, "Philosophy and Democracy/Democracy and Education", addressing themes from John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, at the Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik, August/September 2009. In the spirit of the occasion, I have preserved something of the lecture's "style" in the present text. I would like to thank Pavo Barišić for the invitation to speak at the event, and the participants (especially Larry Hickman) for their comments.