

## Character Education and Citizenship Education: A Case of Cancerous Relationship

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### INTRODUCTION

A good share of what passes today for moral education bears the label of “character education.” On my reading of the literature pertaining to this area of education most (perhaps all?) of the theory and practice claiming this label is highly conservative in about every way possible. Not to put too fine a point on it, I consider most of it to be conceptually, empirically, morally, politically, and educationally corrupt. Now, obviously I cannot support this entire somewhat grandiose claim in 4,500 words. But it is not hard to find a lot of it strongly supported by others.<sup>1</sup> However, one particular concern has been largely overlooked — the assumed relationship between character education and citizenship education.<sup>2</sup> That particular concern comprises the focus of this essay.

Of course, addressing this concern depends crucially on what one has in mind by both phrases, “character education” and “citizenship education,” and even a cursory glance at the literature on both reveals a remarkable range of interpretation. So, I narrow my focus to one small part of this range. In the case of character education, I am concerned only with one particular approach — but one that currently seems quite popular in both the United States and Canada. This approach is identified primarily by its stipulation of a finite list of particular character traits or virtues that are said to be common property of all concerned and that should form the core of all educational activities in this area. In the case of citizenship education I focus on what I take to be essential aspects of what it means to talk of a “citizen” in a state that purports to be governed by principles of a liberal democracy, and thus what might be required in education directed by the aim of producing such political entities.

As a further refinement of the task at hand I also focus on how we might have good reasons to rule out one way of conceiving that relationship — how we should *not* be thinking about it. My main point, which I seek to support in several ways, is that it is extremely problematic to conflate character education and citizenship education in a manner that fails to see them as inherently different in important ways. Among proponents of the form of character education identified, there is a tendency — sometimes very explicit, other times implicit, or even covert — to assume that one can aim in the same way to produce both the *good person* and the *good citizen*. Many people apparently see these aims as congruent and a healthy development. I see the failure to differentiate them adequately as having the potential to foment an insidious *cancer of the body politic*.

In order to show how I have reached this dire diagnosis I must start by identifying several assumptions. The first assumption is that we are concerned with a society that sees itself as a liberal democracy. The second assumption is that the

capacities and dispositions of the *citizen* are crucial to the health of the body politic so conceived. A third assumption is that a citizen in this sense must be conceived as a distinct *social role*, one characterized by the function that those capacities and dispositions enable.<sup>3</sup> A fourth assumption is that, if we think of a liberal democracy as shaped and guided by the ideas of the political theory of liberalism, this function is mainly concerned with engaging *reasonably* with other people in this role, in the *public realm*, and in the face of different kinds of inevitable disagreement and *conflict*. A final assumption is that there are concomitant virtues that characterize citizens' capacity to effectively function in this way that are shaped by this role — *not* by particular conceptions of the “good person” totally. These assumptions should not be too contentious for anyone acquainted with, and at least partially committed to, the principles of liberalism. They can certainly be found in major liberal philosophical figures, for example, from John Locke, to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to John Stuart Mill, to Isaiah Berlin. And probably the most thorough and prominent spokesperson for them in contemporary times is John Rawls. In what follows, much of what I have to say will draw on his work.<sup>4</sup>

Given these assumptions, I identify two general, suspicious “nodes” of concern, swellings of activity in character education that directly impinge on the body politic. In my view, both have the potential to be malignant...at least if not kept in check, but allowed to grow, to metastasize, and eventually prevent appropriate functioning in the citizen role by those who are shaped by this form of character education. I call the first node the “epistemological node.” The second, I call the “mono-cultural node.” In each case there are two forms that the node can take that appear to me worrisome. I deal with them in this sequence. Although the nodes and their different forms overlap in places, I think it is heuristically useful to separate them in this way for an adequately nuanced picture of my general concern.

#### THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL NODE

The first form of this node is found most often in the writings of some of the major figures widely recognized as having had a significant role in initiating the current wave of interest in character education in the U.S., for example, William Bennet, Ed Wynn, Kevin Ryan, and Thomas Lickona. Since I believe that Lickona has had the most impact, and, if anything, that impact is still growing stronger, I just call this form the “Lickona” form. What distinguishes this form is its *certainty* that “we” just *know* what has to go on the list of virtues that everybody should be taught, and that should always guide all behavior. Of course, the list seems to vary a bit from one source to another, but this does not seem to worry anyone too much because their faith in their certainty rules the day. In his book *Character Matters* Lickona does not tip toe around this issue: “The content of good character is virtue. Virtues — such as honesty, justice, courage, and compassion — are dispositions to behave in a morally good way. They are objectively good human qualities, good for us whether we know it or not.”<sup>5</sup> He then identifies ten “essential” virtues, each with multiple “sub-virtues,” that fit this bill. He does stick in an unexplained parenthetical qualifier, “(although their cultural expression may vary),” but there is clearly no room for epistemological waffling on the content of this list. Rather, it is just an

asserted *fact* that, as he puts it, “They are affirmed by societies and religions around the world.”<sup>6</sup>

The implication of these claims seems clear to me: if someone disagrees with any item on the list — or even has an interpretation of an item that differs from the one offered in the many practical suggestions of how to teach to the list — they are just simply *wrong*. Note this is not *just* a purely factual mistake, like an error in addition or a mistaken belief about the capital of some country, but a *moral* wrongness. After all, those ten virtues are what enable us to be morally good, and they are “good for us whether we know it or not.” Currently, I live in a city that has over 500 ethno-cultural groups, *each* with 5,000 or more members. I am unwilling to just assert that the same simple list of virtues will accommodate all 500! In fact, I doubt it very much. Some epistemological humility is warranted here, not the arrogance of certainty. When the context is public schools and the development of the next generation of liberal citizens, failure to exhibit appropriate epistemological humility in conceptualizing character education is tantamount to disenfranchising a significant portion of the body politic by letting some citizens’ views of what constitutes the “correct” interpretation of the “good person” override those of others. To me this is a cancerous relationship for a liberal democracy.

However, the “Lickona” form is not the only one that this epistemological node can take and still be dangerous. There is a second form that appears much more benign, indeed, much more in tune with the spirit of liberal principles, at least on the surface. I refer to this form as the “willful difference blindness” form. I have heard of several instances of this form existing in different school districts in the U.S. But I have an excellent example much closer to home in the approach taken by the school board in what is known as “York Region,” essentially a large suburb of Toronto. They have developed a character education program, highly touted and publicized, also called “Character Matters!”<sup>7</sup> I use it to illustrate how this form of the epistemological node can be malignant.

“Character Matters!” claims to be a firmly and widely community-based approach. Educational leaders in the district speak proudly of their extensive consultation during the initial stages of development. They refer, among other things, to working with school board trustees, bringing superintendents and principles on board, establishing an advisory committee, holding a series of community forums consisting of a cross-section of the community, sending two teams (consisting of a parent, student, teacher, and business partner) to communities in the U.S. who had already implemented programs in character education, presenting the program to school council presidents, organizing a conference for secondary school students, inviting teachers from all subject areas to prepare strategies for integrating character education into the curriculum, conducting training sessions with a team from each school, and commissioning posters to display the chosen character traits in schools.<sup>8</sup>

All of this may sound very good, especially to anyone who has worked in North American schools and faced the difficulty of doing anything that might smack of

controversy. The attempt to engage a wide range of interested parties in the development stage is indeed surely much better than the heavily top-down process that often characterizes educational innovation in many schools, including those prompted by administrators enamored with the Lickona approach. However, there is in this list an activity that has far-reaching, problematic implications in the context of the problem on which I am focusing. I refer specifically to what happened in the so-called “community forums.” As noted, these consisted of a “cross-section” of the community, including, in the words of Avis Glaze, Bill Hogarth, and Brian McLean, “parents, students, educators, business people, social services, police, and the faith communities”<sup>9</sup> (though nowhere have I been able to find it specified how these “representatives” were actually chosen, and by whom). The main task of the participants of these forums was that they “identified the attributes upon which we gained consensus,” that is, the list of character attributes that would be subsequently promoted as the content of the program system wide after a “Work Group later developed definitions for the attributes.”<sup>10</sup>

How did this actually work? On the basis of my discussion with the York Region Superintendent of Education, my understanding is the following. After some general discussion of character education, participants were invited to suggest “attributes” that they thought should be the focus of the program. (It is important to note here, given my core concern, that I have never heard how exactly the discussion leaders identified what the “attributes” were to be *of*.) These were then listed on a flip chart. The procedure then was to see if everyone agreed with the suggestion of each attribute in turn. If anyone *disagreed*, it was removed from the list. The resulting list thus consisted of those attributes upon which there was “consensus.” (The winners of this popularity contest were the following traits: respect, responsibility, honesty, empathy, fairness, initiative, perseverance, integrity, courage, and optimism.) However, as already noted, it should be kept in mind this consensus was reached *before* the “Work Group” provided definitions of the items on the list.

I suppose most people tend to think of consensus as an unqualified good thing. Certainly it is indeed often something worth striving for. However, this is not always the case, especially in contexts in which the manner of seeking consensus vitiates its meaning. I think this is one of those contexts. The problem is that a character education program is being built on a foundation that methodologically *rules out disagreement*. If someone disagrees with the list, that very fact disappears from view. (Indeed the Superintendent of Education spoke only of the fact that apparently everyone agrees with this list — but not at all about what might have been suggested, but not successful in making the “consensus” list.) Moreover, it is especially notable to me — given its central importance in liberal theory — that *justice* did *not* end up on the list. This absence is crucial, since justice is arguably the core virtue that grounds how citizens in a liberal democracy seek to deal with disagreement and conflict.

Nonetheless, even if justice were on the list (and it often is in other cases of this form of the epistemological node), there still remains the fact that disagreement

about the *meaning* and *relative weighting* of the different items that do make the list is also ruled out of order: consensus was reached *before* a small team developed the interpretations that would be attached to the items. If we recall my starting assumptions that a liberal democracy thrives only when its citizens learn how to deal with disagreement and conflict, and to practice the virtues that enable this orientation, this second form of the epistemological node may be even more insidiously malignant than the Lickona form. The method of (supposed) consensus seeking through hiding disagreement promotes a kind of “willful difference blindness” and unwarranted certainty that in the end looks very much like the Lickona form. But since this end is achieved through activities that look (but *only* look) democratic, it bids to be even more malignant for the role of citizen. This prognosis is made even more worrisome when we understand that the proponents of this approach explicitly conflate character education and citizenship education — and apparently see no problem in doing so.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE MONO-CULTURAL NODE

The other node that I identify and problematize can be seen as a resultant, secondary growth from the epistemological node, what I call the “mono-cultural node.” At this cite in the body politic, what comes into view is not things that are done or not done, but rather what *kinds of differences* get occluded when they are done or not done. Liberalism as a political theory, and a liberal democracy that is based on it, are shaped by the recognition and acceptance of certain kinds of interpersonal conflict, *and* the conscious, public attempt to structure the interaction of citizens in such a way as to deal as fairly as possible with that conflict. Although I also think that it fails egregiously to accommodate some *kinds* of conflict (that between kinds of social groups — such as racism<sup>12</sup>), I still think that this aim of facing conflict is one of the major strengths of liberalism. Again there are two forms of this node, two ways this approach to character education impedes the functioning of a healthy citizenry needing to have this orientation.

The first form of this node I call the “conceptual confusion” form. It pertains to how character education of this type can block attention to the difference between the “good” and the “right” — as two irreducible normative concepts related to each other in a particular way in liberal theory. As identifying concepts, these terms pick out qualitatively different ways of making meaning about different kinds of concerns that matter ultimately in the context of human flourishing and interaction. Moreover, it is the contrast between the work done by the “good” versus the “right” that is so crucial to liberal political theory, particularly for someone like John Rawls.

Although this distinction may seem a commonplace to most philosophers, in my experience even with graduate students it is often perceived as news — and somewhat difficult to keep in mind. Furthermore, recognized academic experts in the study of the character education movement regularly blur the distinction when it serves their rhetorical purposes.<sup>13</sup> So, to be as clear as possible here, I see the basic distinction as follows. The concept of the “good” is utilized when attention is turned to those kinds of activities, states of mind, and states of affairs that are deemed ultimately worth pursuing as *ends* in human experience. Some of these will be

important because they enable other ends; some will be thought to be the anchoring points to “why?” questions and thus considered intrinsically worthwhile. Both, however, might be considered valuable enough to be passed on to the next generation as aspects of how individuals can flourish as human persons (for example, through forms of “liberal education”). In contrast, within this tradition, the concept of the “right” is brought into play to *regulate* the interaction of individuals as they seek to pursue their various conceptions of the “good.” How the concept of the “right” is expressed and used determines the shape of social cooperation. In particular, some of the uses of this concept are positive, aiming at individuals’ furthering the interests of the other(s); other uses, probably the most salient in this tradition, function in the context of the kinds of possible *conflict between and among* persons that arise *because* they have differing and competing conceptions of the “good.”

Clearly, it is as a fundamental expression of one kind of perspective on the “right” that “justice” must be understood. When pertaining to the role of the citizen, principles of the “right,” such as justice, are seen as legitimately regulatory of social cooperation because and insofar as they can be formulated *independently* of any *particular* conception of the “good.” That people *have* their own particular conceptions of the good is assumed, but because these vary and often are not completely compatible, to ground justice on one in particular is seen as fundamentally unfair, a failure to respect persons in their capacity as free and equal citizens. Thus Rawls repeatedly and consistently uses the phrase “justice as fairness” to capture the core idea of his theory. In addition, although not depending in its grounding on any particular view of the “good,” justice, *as prior*, then morally “trumps” any conceptions of the “good” — in the sense of ruling it illegitimate as an acceptable end of a truly democratic citizen — that do not “respect the limits of, and serve a role within, the political conception of justice.”<sup>14</sup>

My point here is that the list approach to character education seems to be blind to this crucial distinction. It just seems to be ignored, despite the avowed intention to produce good citizens. The cancerous danger here is two-fold. First, by not recognizing and teaching about a fundamental conceptual grounding of a liberal democracy, the likely prognosis is that future citizens will lack the capacity to function in the needed ways. Then, second, the result of this tendency will very likely promote an increase in the growth of individualistic mono-culturalism in the society and in the thinking of students. I argue this is a danger because there is no conceptual framework available for teachers to use to facilitate the development of students’ capacity to recognize, critique, and imagine alternatives to contemporary hegemonic views of the good, such as rampant consumerism, anti-intellectual orientations, and neoliberal worship of competition. Even worse, for those citizens who do have conceptions of the good that challenge these, the failure of a character education program to provide them with an effective understanding of the regulatory function of principles of the right unfairly undermines their capacity to argue for social room to pursue those conceptions.

A second form of this node represents a deeper form of unfairness that can surface in a liberal democracy that purports to be multicultural in any serious way.

In contrast to the first form, it might be thought of as more communitarian, and thus called “comprehensive doctrine dominance.” Rawls’ early work was concerned primarily with developing a theory of justice that would adequately support the conceptual distinction just discussed. However, in his later work Rawls tries to articulate a “political” conception of justice as fairness, one that could function fairly in a society characterized by deep diversity within its citizenry. Rawls identifies the “problem of political liberalism” thus:

How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines: Put another way: How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime?<sup>15</sup>

Now the kind of difference and conflict that justice must seek to deal with is not just that of differing and competing conceptions of the “good” as defined above. Rather, in addition, it must also deal with how these conceptions are often based in much more fundamental, systematically developed, and historically stable conceptions of what it means, ideally, to be human and to engage with each other and all aspects of reality from this particular overarching normative perspective. Such a perspective constitutes a “tradition of thought and doctrine” “that covers the major religious, philosophical, and moral aspects of human life in a more or less consistent and coherent manner...[and] organizes and characterizes recognized values so that they are compatible with one another and express an intelligible view of the world.”<sup>16</sup> Since these traditions are not only different, but also sometimes incompatible, if a democratic society is to be truly “multicultural” it must somehow accept and work with these deep differences among its citizens. The relevant conflict here is not just among persons, but also between and among the traditions themselves, for example, in terms of what degree of salience is given to different aspects of moral life, how tensions between such aspects are interpreted and mediated, and especially what meaning is given to common moral terms that nominally appear the same across traditions (such as those that comprise the supposedly universal terms found on character education lists). “Political liberalism” is then an attempt to articulate a framework of *political* cooperation that is “free-standing” from any and all such traditions, but, at the same time, expresses an “overlapping consensus” of the sort that all *citizens* can accede to regardless of where they stand within this deep diversity.

What Rawls is trying to work out in his later work is a very complex problem, and the details of his argument go far beyond what I can explicate here. Moreover, even after one has the complete picture in mind, one may or may not agree with his solution. However, part of this complexity clearly emerges when thinking about the relationship between character education and citizenship education. As I have argued elsewhere, if one seeks to address the problem while anchored within one particular “comprehensive doctrine,” even classical liberalism, one must face up to a deep and difficult paradox.<sup>17</sup> To paraphrase, the paradox is that one is at the same time morally affirming the legitimacy of different, irreducible, and incompatible

moral points of view within one society, *and* claiming that there is some moral perspective that all share to ground claims that those located in these different points of view *ought* to respect each other. The relevant point here is that I show how common approaches to this paradox, as illustrated in different approaches to moral education, all fail seriously because, in different ways, they reduce to glossing over one side or the other. Even worse, the way in which they do this serves to hide that failure in service of protecting the dominance of a particular moral point of view.<sup>18</sup> I believe this is exactly what is going on in York Region's program of "Character Matters!" The lack of even recognition of deep diversity, the attempt to reach a consensus on contentious items on a very finite list of virtue traits, the lack of attention to differing cultural interpretations of *even* the items agreed to, and the failure to build into the list those virtues that enable future citizens to recognize, accept, and engage others reasonably across deep differences of "comprehensive doctrines" all combine to support the cancerous growth of a particular, and severely limited, moral point of view within a distinct comprehensive doctrine. On my reading, this doctrine can be characterized (at least) as a shallow, conservative, Christian, capitalist, and a-political view of the good person — masquerading as the good citizen. The kind of conflation of character education and citizenship education that grounds itself in this doctrine could very well prove lethal for a liberal democracy.

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1. For example, Michael Davis, "What's Wrong with Character Education," *American Journal of Education* 110 (2003): 32–57. Also see Tianlong Yu, *In the Name of Morality: Character Education and Political Control* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

2. The only exception I have found is Sue Winton, "Does Character Education Really Support Citizenship Education? Examining the Claims of an Ontario Policy," *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 66 (2007): 1–24. Winton reaches similar conclusions as I do in this essay, but via a different kind of analysis.

3. Kenneth Strike, "Justice, Caring, and Universality: In Defense of Moral Pluralism," in *Justice and Caring: The Search for Common Ground in Education*, eds. Michael Katz, Nel Noddings, and Kenneth Strike (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

4. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); and John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia Press, 1993). Although I think Rawls' work is crucially important in the context of this essay, and largely correct for the purposes of this argument, I hasten to add that I also consider it to be woefully inadequate to handle *some* kinds of conflict in the public realm, namely forms of group-based oppression such as racism.

5. Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters* (New York: Touchstone, 2004), 7.

6. Lickona, *Character Matters*, 7.

7. That the *government* of Ontario has recently mandated that all school boards in the province must follow their lead is, I believe, evidence of significant metastasis that has already occurred.

8. Avis Glaze, Bill Hogarth, and Brian McLean, "Can Schools Create Citizens?" *Orbit* 33, no. 2 (2003): 1–3.

9. Glaze, Hogarth, and McLean, "Can Schools Create Citizens?" 2.

10. *Ibid.*, 2.

11. *Ibid.* Also see Robert Howard, Marvin Berkowitz, and Esther Schaeffer, "Politics of Character Education," *Educational Policy* 18, no. 1 (2004): 188–215.



12. Here I would point to my argument in Dwight Boyd, "Liberal Legacies and Oppressive Relations: Facing a Dilemma for the Subject of Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 33, no. 4 (2004): 3–22.
13. Howard, Berkowitz, and Schaeffer, "Politics of Character Education," 190.
14. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 176.
15. *Ibid.*, xviii.
16. *Ibid.*, 59.
17. Dwight Boyd, "Dominance Concealed through Diversity: Implications of Inadequate Perspectives on Cultural Pluralism," *Harvard Educational Review* 60, no. 3 (1996): 609–30.
18. Boyd, "Dominance Concealed," 623.