

**Christina Easton**

## **Educating in respect: against neutral discourse as a norm for respectful classroom discussion**

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Easton, Christina (2018) *Educating in respect: against neutral discourse as a norm for respectful classroom discussion*. *Philosophy*, 93 (2). pp. 187-210. ISSN 0031-8191

DOI: [10.1017/S0031819117000602](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819117000602)

© 2018 The Royal Institute of Philosophy

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89496/>

Available in LSE Research Online: July 2018

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## Educating in respect: Against neutral discourse as a norm for respectful classroom discussion.

### **Abstract**

Since 2014, British schools have been required to ‘actively promote’ the value of ‘mutual respect’ to the children in their care. This is relatively unproblematic: liberals are agreed that good citizenship education will involve teaching mutual respect. However, there is disagreement over how ‘respect’ should be understood and what it should imply for norms of respectful classroom discussion. Some political liberals have indicated that when engaging in discussion in the classroom, students should provide only neutral reasons to defend their views. This paper provides a number of arguments against this claim. For example, I argue that this norm relies on a distorted understanding of what it is to respect others and that it stifles the development of civic and epistemic virtue in the next generation of citizens. Even from within the perspective of political liberalism, there are good reasons to favour critical discussion of non-neutral reasons. Education policy should therefore accord greater priority to discussion of students’ actual motivating reasons than to discussion constrained by a norm of neutral discourse.

### **1. Introduction: Teaching respect in schools**

Liberals are agreed that an important aim of civic education is to cultivate mutual respect. This is the case across the division line between comprehensive and political liberals, who disagree over the role that values such as autonomy and individuality should play in political justification.<sup>1</sup> Despite this agreement, it is seldom fleshed out how ‘mutual respect’ is to be understood or what its implications are for classroom practice. Specifically, it is unclear what norms are implied for respectful classroom discussion: should students be taught that respect requires that they provide neutral reasons in defence of their views?

These questions have gained new urgency in light of recent educational policy. Since 2014, the British Government has required that all schools ‘actively promote ... mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’, alongside other ‘British values’.<sup>2</sup> Schools ‘must now have a clear strategy for embedding these values’ and the success of this strategy is part of the inspection process. In the official statement that accompanied the guidelines, Lord Nash stated that the Government wants to ensure that ‘young people

---

<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive liberals allow that political principles be justified with reference to liberal values such as autonomy or individuality, whereas political liberals seek to justify political principles with references to values that *all* reasonable people can accept. For the view that liberals unite over the importance of mutual respect, see Amy Gutmann, ‘Civic Education and Social Diversity’, *Ethics* 105 (1995), 557–579 and Blain Neufeld, ‘Political Liberalism and Citizenship Education’, *Philosophy Compass* 8/9 (2013), 781–797, 787.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, ‘Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools’. Online (November 2014). Retrieved 9 August 2017 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/380595/SMSC\\_Guidance\\_Maintained\\_Schools.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf). Since not all British people agree on these values, nor are these values exclusively British, it may be more appropriate to see this document as listing *liberal* values.

understand the importance of respect and leave school fully prepared for life in modern Britain'.<sup>3</sup>

This policy is born out of Prevent, a branch of the Government's counter-terrorism and de-radicalization programme. But it is also part of a more general project of educating for citizenship. Lord Nash expressed his hope that teaching these values will help children to become 'valuable and fully rounded members of society'.

Given that this 'British values' policy is in place in a multicultural society where people disagree over (1) *what* we should value and (2) how values such as 'respect' and 'tolerance' should be to *interpreted and applied*, one way to make sense of this requirement is by allowing these values to be both promoted and questioned through classroom discussion of controversial issues.<sup>4</sup> This fits well with a growing consensus over the importance of critical discussion in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> In the UK, the home of such discussions, if they take place, is usually Religious Education, PSHE or Citizenship. In the US, the home of such discussions, if they take place, is usually Social Studies.

In all these contexts, a question arises of what 'respectful' discussion of controversial issues should look like in practice. Put more abstractly, given that education is (in part) a preparation for civic life, what should be taught as norms for respectful discussion?

## **2. Respect, political liberalism and neutral discourse**

Some trends in political liberal thought point to the idea that neutral reason-giving should be a norm of respectful discussion. Charles Larmore argues that when two people disagree, 'each should prescind from the beliefs that the other rejects'<sup>6</sup>, 'retreating to neutral ground, to the beliefs they still share'<sup>7</sup>. The thought, shared by other political liberals, is that when deliberating together about political issues, we should argue using 'public' or 'neutral' reasons.<sup>8</sup> I use these terms interchangeably to refer to reasons that do not rely on accepting

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, 'Guidance on promoting British values in schools published'. Online Press Release (27 November 2014). Retrieved 9 August 2017 from

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published>.

<sup>4</sup> For some brief arguments in favour of critical discussion of 'British values', see Christina Easton, 'How to teach children about tolerance – and its limits', *Times Literary Supplement*. Online (18 July 2017). Retrieved 9 August 2017 from <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/tolerance-ethics-students-education/>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the work of Generation Global (<https://generation.global/how-it-works>, retrieved 22 September 2017). On the importance of discussion, see Kenneth Primrose, 'Religious Education - reclaiming what is being lost', *Theos*. Online (18 September 2017). Retrieved 22 September 2017 from <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2017/09/18/religious-education-reclaiming-what-is-being-lost>. Cf. Angie Hobbs, 'How teaching philosophy could help combat extremism', *The Conversation*. Online (16 March 2017). Retrieved 9 August 2017 from <https://theconversation.com/how-teaching-philosophy-could-help-combat-extremism-74386>. For arguments and evidence of the benefits of students engaging in critical discussion of controversial issues in Social Studies classes in the US, see D. E. Hess and P. McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Larmore, 'Political Liberalism', *Political Theory* 18: 3 (1990), 339–360, 347. Henceforth, 'PL'.

<sup>8</sup> See Bruce Ackerman 'Why Dialogue?', *Journal of Philosophy* 86: 1 (1989), 5–22; Larmore, *Patterns* (op. cit. n.6); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Expanded Edition) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Rawls officially restricts his argument to 'constitutional essentials and matters of basic

a particular, controversial conception of the good or ‘comprehensive doctrine’.<sup>9</sup> Public reasons offer grounds that *all reasonable people* can accept, independently of their views on more controversial matters.<sup>10</sup>

For Larmore and others, this ideal of public discourse is motivated by respect for persons.<sup>11</sup> The concept of respect at play here is broadly Kantian. However, it does not require uptake of the Kantian view of autonomy and personhood: one need not accept that critical self-reflection, encapsulated by the motto ‘Sapere aude’, is essential to the good life.<sup>12</sup> From the political liberal perspective, to require this would be to commit the comprehensive liberal mistake of relying on controversial values that not all reasonable people accept. Instead, Larmore appeals to a minimal idea of personhood as ‘simply the capacity of thinking and acting on the basis of reasons’.<sup>13</sup> This is a form of ‘recognition respect’; recognising this feature in a person imposes a constraint on how you may treat them.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, recognition of a person’s rational nature means that it is wrong to *force* someone to comply, for this would not be ‘engaging directly their distinctive capacity as persons’.<sup>15</sup> In Larmore’s words, ‘to respect another person as an end is to insist that coercive or political principles be as justifiable to that person as they are to us’.<sup>16</sup> So, to be respectful, we should provide grounds that will draw on the reason of our opponent.

A similar idea is found in John Rawls’ *Political Liberalism*. In order to be a legitimate exercise of power, political decisions must be justifiable to the people they constrain. Out of respect for citizens as free and equal, political decisions must be made on the basis of public reasons.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, to the extent that citizens are involved in the decision-making procedure, their deliberations must also be on the basis of public reasons. Thus, we have an ideal in political liberalism that civic discourse should be neutral discourse.

---

justice’, but he does also say that ‘it is usually highly desirable to settle political questions by invoking the values of public reason’ (215). Larmore specifies that he does not see the liberal ideal of political neutrality as applicable to public discussion generally, and allows that sometimes we engage in discussion with the aim of convincing others of the worth of our views about the good life (PL, 348 and Patterns, 47). However, as we shall see, it has been common for political liberals drawing on these works to take neutrality as applying to public discourse more generally.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Conception of the good’ and ‘comprehensive doctrine’ have varied definitions in the literature. I take ‘comprehensive doctrine’ to have broader scope, and use it to refer to a view (or set of beliefs) held by an individual or group that have implications for how we should live. These include beliefs about the nature and constitutive elements of a valuable life, but may also include metaphysical beliefs that impact upon questions of how we should live, such as beliefs about the status of a foetus. Importantly, these beliefs are *controversial*; not every reasonable person accepts them.

<sup>10</sup> The notion of ‘reasonable’ does important work for political liberals, yet its definition is controversial. Rawls suggests ‘reasonable’ has two aspects (op. cit. n.8, 54). Firstly, a willingness to propose, and abide by, fair terms of co-operation. Secondly, a recognition that since reasonable and rational people can arrive at different, sometimes conflicting comprehensive views, it would be wrong for exercises of political power to be based in non-public reasons (138).

<sup>11</sup> See also Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 159 and George Klosko, ‘Reasonable Rejection and Neutrality of Justification’, in *Perfectionism and Neutrality* ed. S. Wall & G. Klosko (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 167–89.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, ‘An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?’, in *Practical Philosophy* ed. M. J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Larmore, PL (op. cit. n.7), 349.

<sup>14</sup> S. L. Darwall, ‘Two Kinds of Respect’, *Ethics* 88:1 (1977), 36–49.

<sup>15</sup> Larmore, PL (op. cit. n.7), 348.

<sup>16</sup> Larmore, PL (op. cit. n.7), 349.

<sup>17</sup> This is Rawls’ ‘liberal principle of legitimacy’; op. cit. n.8, 137.

### 3. The application of neutral discourse to education

If public reason-giving is a key part of ideal civic discourse, then learning to argue in this way should form an important part of civic education. It should be taught as a norm of respectful classroom discussion of civic issues. This case can be made more strongly if we see schools *not* as part of what Rawls calls the ‘background culture’, but as part of the basic structure of society, where public reason applies.<sup>18</sup> According to this view, classrooms are a public space, where teachers act in the role of an ‘agent of the state’ and therefore are required to be neutral.<sup>19</sup> The teacher must only give reasons that all reasonable people can accept, and should encourage students to do the same.<sup>20</sup>

The implication that classroom discussions should be guided by a norm of neutral discourse has seldom been brought out by political liberals. Matthew Clayton comes close, in arguing that ‘children should be raised to appreciate the merits of deliberation through public reason and taught the associated virtue of political restraint’.<sup>21</sup> The most explicit endorsement of this norm comes from Blain Neufeld and Gordon Davis (N&D).<sup>22</sup> They offer what they argue is the Rawlsian position:

‘A political liberal civic education would teach students the skills and concepts necessary for them to interact with other citizens on the basis of civic respect. This would involve teaching them that ... they cannot appeal to reasons that depend on the truth or correctness of their particular comprehensive doctrines when deciding fundamental political issues.’<sup>23</sup>

N&D propose that this can be achieved as follows. Students should be required to participate in debates on ‘politically divisive’ issues, where the ‘rules of the debate’ are such that they are only allowed to provide public reasons. Reasons that rely on comprehensive doctrines will be ‘ruled inadmissible’. This exercise will ‘help students appreciate the importance of not justifying political actions on partisan religious grounds’.<sup>24</sup>

We can strengthen N&D’s case by adding that not only will this help students appreciate the *importance* of giving public reasons, but it also enables them to recognise these reasons and practise formulating them. Recognising the difference between someone disagreeing with you because they do not share your comprehensive doctrine and someone disagreeing with

---

<sup>18</sup> Rawls (op. cit. n.8), 14. It is not clear whether Rawls views schools as part of the basic structure. For the view that they are, see Martha Nussbaum, ‘Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39:1 (2011), 3–45, 38–9 and Neufeld (op. cit. n.1), 793, n.4.

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum (op. cit. n.19), 39, n. 65.

<sup>20</sup> I do not address the issue of the extent to which teachers should be neutral (although see §E for some relevant discussion). For a detailed treatment of this issue, alongside the results of a large, mixed-methods study, see Hess and McAvoy (op. cit. n.5).

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Clayton, *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 148.

<sup>22</sup> Blain Neufeld and Gordon Davis, ‘Civic Respect, Civic Education, and the Family’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42:1 (2010), 94–111.

<sup>23</sup> N&D (op. cit. n.23), 98.

<sup>24</sup> N&D (op. cit. n.23), 99.

you because they think that you have given a poor quality public justification is difficult, and so is a skill that requires practice.<sup>25</sup>

N&D's practical proposal is also motivated by the need to find a way to promote political autonomy in students without, at the same time, promoting moral autonomy. Moral autonomy involves critical reflection on one's life as a whole and so has wider scope than political autonomy. Rawls explains that his political liberalism only 'affirms political autonomy', which includes 'participating in society's public affairs and sharing in its collective self-determination over time'. It 'leaves the weight of ethical autonomy to be decided by citizens severally in light of their comprehensive doctrines'.<sup>26</sup> Since the value of moral autonomy is controversial, classes that encourage students to critically reflect on their comprehensive doctrines should be *offered*, but not *required*.<sup>27</sup> To require it would be to promote moral autonomy and therefore this policy would not be justifiable to all reasonable citizens.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, even from the minimalist perspective of political liberalism, the development of political autonomy *is* required. And, since it is part of showing 'civic respect' that 'citizens employ the ideas and values of public reason when deciding fundamental political questions', practices necessary for learning this skill (such as N&D's proposed practice of debates restrained by a norm of neutral discourse) should be part of the compulsory curriculum.<sup>29</sup>

There is a further, important implication of N&D's view. Since there is no requirement for children to encounter comprehensive doctrines that differ from their own, their view does not push towards the 'common school ideal', where children from a diversity of racial, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds are brought together. Learning the art of public reason-giving can, in theory, be achieved in a homogenous setting, with others who share one's comprehensive doctrine. Homogenous schools (such as faith schools), where students are not exposed to different comprehensive doctrines, are therefore permissible.<sup>30</sup>

#### **4. Non-neutral discourse and discussion of comprehensive doctrines**

In opposition to N&D, I will argue that students should be encouraged to bring all (relevant) reasons, including those based in their comprehensive doctrines, into class discussions of controversial issues. Engaging with discussion of comprehensive doctrines is *more important* from the perspective of essential civic virtues than is practising the art of public reason-giving. This should, therefore, be part of the compulsory curriculum.

To summarise, I disagree with N&D over two related issues:

---

<sup>25</sup> Kent Greenawalt acknowledges this difficulty when he says that as things stand, citizens cannot be expected to draw this distinction. He suggests that perhaps citizens of a 'highly educated, participating citizenry' could. This leaves open that we should be training the next generation of citizens so that they are equipped to understand and utilise this distinction. See Kent Greenawalt, 'Religion, Law and Politics: Arenas of Neutrality', in *Perfectionism and Neutrality* ed. S. Wall & G. Klosko (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 257–80, 272.

<sup>26</sup> Rawls (op. cit. n.8), 78.

<sup>27</sup> Neufeld (op. cit. n.1), 784, 789.

<sup>28</sup> In Section 6, I suggest that Rawlsian political liberals like N&D should not be concerned if moral autonomy is a by-product of some policy, provided the policy itself is neutrally justifiable.

<sup>29</sup> N&D (op. cit. n.23), 98.

<sup>30</sup> Neufeld (op. cit. n.1), 790.

- A. Whether it should be taught as a norm of respectful discussion that students present neutral reasons, or whether respectful discussion is more about listening to one's opponent and engaging seriously with their deepest, most important reasons.
- B. What should take priority as part of the compulsory curriculum: (i) discussion of political issues guided by a norm of neutral discourse, or (ii) engagement with comprehensive doctrines? N&D indicate that *only* (i) should be part of the compulsory curriculum. I do not commit to whether (i) should be compulsory, but say that (ii) should be part of the compulsory curriculum.<sup>31</sup>

My view leaves room for the possibility that neutral reason-giving be part of the compulsory curriculum, without absorbing *all* the debate taking place. The mandatory curriculum could provide opportunities both for discussion of comprehensive doctrines *and* for practising formulating public reasons, depending on the pedagogical aim of the lesson.

In support of my view, I will provide a number of reasons to think that a norm of neutral discourse would pull against other things that reasonable people should value in future citizens, such as epistemic virtue, genuine mutual respect, and honesty. Whilst I seek to avoid taking a position on whether public justification is part of ideal political discourse, some of the points raised have negative implications for that ideal. However, I try to emphasise that these worries become especially acute when public reasoning is promoted as the norm for respectful discussion *amongst children*. There are a number of facts distinctive to this situation:

1. Children are *future*, not current, political decision-makers. The argument for neutral discourse is usually reached via the argument that only neutrally justifiable policy is legitimate (see Section 2). But classroom discussions do not lead to the formation of public policy. The ideal classroom is a safe space where there is freedom to play with different ideas, with little serious consequence.
2. The 'common school', where people from a diversity of backgrounds are brought together, is a unique and valuable setting. The opportunity to engage with such diversity is rarely found in the world outside. Moreover, the ideal classroom has the structure and discipline to engage with this diversity in an organised and sensitive way.
3. Children are not autonomous or rational to the same extent that average adults are. Moreover, they are less likely to have fully-fledged, comprehensive sets of beliefs. Certainly, they rarely have what Rawls calls a 'fully comprehensive' conception, a 'precisely articulated system'.<sup>32</sup> One implication of this is that it is not disrespectful of children (in the sense that Larmore is concerned with) to appeal to reasons that they do not accept. A second implication is that failing to talk about comprehensive doctrines has negative consequences that are not there in the case of adults. Since children are at a crucial stage in belief and character formation, there may be a responsibility to contribute to the development of good beliefs and character that is absent as a consideration when thinking about adults.

---

<sup>31</sup> Whether (ii) is compulsory has implications for the common school ideal. I support the idea that schools should be places of diversity, and this is implied by my view on the importance of encountering other comprehensive doctrines. However, this consideration does not necessarily weigh more heavily than considerations that support faith schools (such as freedom of religion), and so I do not commit to a view on this debate.

<sup>32</sup> Rawls (op. cit. n.8), 13.

In what follows, I try to show how these facts contribute to a norm of public reason-giving being particularly inappropriate for the classroom context.

## **5. Arguments against neutral discourse in the classroom**

### **(A) Artificially restricts the content of discussion, pushing out important conversations about values**

N&D argue that compulsory debates designed to teach ‘adequate civic respect’ must be restricted to ‘fundamental political questions’.<sup>33</sup> Yet as soon as we come to the practical question of which issues to select for discussion on the compulsory curriculum, we encounter the difficulty of drawing a line between the political and non-political sphere. We find that if a line must be drawn, this will be done so artificially and somewhat arbitrarily. N&D’s view therefore implies not only that we should exclude certain types of *reasons*, but also that we should exclude certain *topics*.

Neufeld suggests the issue of legal recognition of gay marriage as an example of what might be discussed.<sup>34</sup> Now clearly, secular arguments can be provided both for and against gay marriage. However, much of the strongest opposition to gay marriage is religiously motivated. Indeed, a major reason that disagreement runs so deeply here is because this is a question of faith for some people. For them, this is not a purely political issue, in the sense that it is not an issue that they can discuss meaningfully when detached from their religious views.

Finding a purely political issue is a practical problem, but its roots are theoretical. Rawls argues that political liberalism presents a ‘freestanding liberal political conception that does not oppose comprehensive doctrines on their own ground’.<sup>35</sup> He insists that ‘we always assume that citizens have two views, a comprehensive and a political view and that their overall view can be divided into two parts, suitably related’.<sup>36</sup> But as we have seen in the example of gay marriage, this response is inadequate, for often people’s views cannot be neatly partitioned in the way that Rawls envisages. Often our comprehensive views, particularly if religious, inform our political views.

Rawls’ view does not attend to the way that political and religious beliefs actually function in people’s lives. He argues that ‘political values ... normally have sufficient weight to override all other values that may come in conflict with them’.<sup>37</sup> This under-estimates how much there is at stake in one’s choice of comprehensive doctrine and how much weight people attach to their religious beliefs.<sup>38</sup> In reality, our choice of comprehensive doctrine affects how we prioritise different values, which then influences our viewpoint on even the most fundamental political matters. For many people, religion and politics have a deep and pervasive role in their lives, such that these domains cannot be compartmentalised without changing the

---

<sup>33</sup> Neufeld (op. cit. n.1), 788.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Rawls (op. cit. n.8), xlvi.

<sup>36</sup> Rawls (op. cit. n.8), 138.

<sup>37</sup> Rawls (op. cit. n.8), 139.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. M. Clayton and D. Stephens, ‘When God Commands Disobedience: Political Liberalism and Unreasonable Religions’, *Res Publica* 20 (2014), 65–84, 79.



nature of the truth-claims that are held (for example, by re-interpreting them as expressions of preference rather than claims about reality). The views held in one domain interact with and affect the views held in other domains, and it is for this reason that issues such as gay marriage are so difficult to negotiate in the complex, real world.

In light of this, I do not think that it will be possible to find purely political issues for discussion that are at the same time important and meaningful. However, if we were to make this our aim, it would be at the expense of discussing more obviously partisan issues. This would represent a loss, for reasons that emerge throughout this paper. For now, it is worth highlighting three initial worries with restricting the content of discussion.

Firstly, contemporary debates over values are precisely the sorts of issues we want the next generation of citizens discussing, for as adults, they need to be able to engage intelligently with these unresolved issues. Even if future public deliberation must be neutral, such deliberation will be more successful if we understand each other's beliefs and values.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, there are benefits to be had from discussing values together. Kwame Appiah has argued that it is by evaluating stories together and talking about the values within them that we can begin to align our responses. Even where no 'alignment' of views is achieved, the process of discussing values helps 'keeps our vocabulary of evaluation honed', so that we at least have a shared moral vocabulary with which to engage with each other.<sup>40</sup> This 'shared vocabulary' and ability to communicate over sensitive issues should be seen as important by anyone who values public deliberation amongst citizens.

Thirdly, as we noted as our third fact in Section 4, children are still in a process of moral development. To deliberately avoid conversations about values leaves a gap in their education. Whilst it may be unacceptable from a political liberal perspective to teach that certain controversial values are the *right* values, this does not imply that schools must not talk about values at all. Nor does it imply that schools avoid partisan content. Many important conversations about values – such as forgiveness or charity – have traditionally been discussed as part of religious discourse, and these conversations are central to formulating values. By discussing partisan stories, such as the Christian Parable of the Lost Son, students are able to begin reflecting on these values.

### ***(B) Not conducive to reaching good answers***

An important reason for discussing values left out in the last section is that we want children to arrive at good answers to controversial questions.<sup>41</sup> As we noted in Section 4 as our first fact, the classroom should be a safe space where students can try out and play with different answers to controversial questions. To restrict classroom discussion to only public reason-giving would be to give up too early: we want young people to make good decisions on how to answer controversial questions, rather than (or in addition to) knowing how to proceed if and when disagreements prove intractable.

---

<sup>39</sup> See §G below for further discussion of this point.

<sup>40</sup> K. A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (London: Penguin, 2007), 30.

<sup>41</sup> We might also talk about 'finding the truth' or 'getting *right* answers', but I avoid this in order to circumvent meta-ethical controversies over whether there are objective moral and political truths.

Restricting classroom discussions by a norm of neutral discourse will often require that students leave out what they believe to be the most salient reasons. This is like asking someone to solve a mathematics problem without using the method that they find most fruitful. By asking people to put aside what they believe to be the most pertinent considerations, we blunt the tools at our disposal for reaching the best answers.

A norm of neutral discourse encourages people to cite reasons that are not the ones that *really* motivate them, and this may also prove obstructive to reaching good answers. A trivial example might help to demonstrate this point. You say ‘Come for a drink with me at the George.’ I tell you ‘I’m too tired’. In response, you provide various counter-arguments: ‘You’ll wake up once we’re out.’ ‘The enjoyment you get will make it worthwhile.’ ‘We’ll only go for one.’ None of these reasons will make any impact on me, because even though I am tired, my real motivation is that I am avoiding one of the bar staff after an embarrassing drunken liaison with them last night. It seems like there is something pointless about this exchange. Since I keep silent about my deepest concern, I do not allow for the possibility that my worry is addressed. I am left worried, and you are left offended that none of your counter-arguments changed my mind.

The same is true for more serious examples. Imagine a classroom discussion on gay marriage. Jenny is an evangelical Christian student whose deep opposition to gay marriage is primarily motivated by her belief in the divine truth of Leviticus 18.22. Jenny obediently follows the ‘rules of the debate’, defending her opposition to gay marriage with the public reason that it will negatively impact children.<sup>42</sup> However, since the impact on children is not her deepest concern, it is likely that when faced with counter-arguments from her peers, Jenny will continue to defend her opposition to gay marriage. Even if the impact on children does concern Jenny, the way she assesses the evidence that is presented to her regarding the impact on children will be affected by her deepest beliefs, because how we weigh reasons is affected by our ‘ultimate’ reasons. This is why we must bring these ‘ultimate’ reasons to the fore. Jenny will only be persuaded to change her mind on gay marriage by either being shown that her deeply held belief is wrong, or by being shown that she should depart from that belief on this occasion. Both of these options require engaging in controversial questions that fall clearly outside the political realm, such as questions surrounding biblical interpretation and the existence of God. Even if it is unlikely that Jenny will change her mind, it seems more conducive to resolving the issue to broach these questions than it is to engage in an obfuscatory discussion that fails to get to the heart of the matter.

In fact, there is some reason for optimism about the benefits that discussion can bring for reaching better answers. Drawing on recent empirical research, Mercier and Sperber point to the epistemic gains that come from reasoning together. Reasoning as a group helps us correct flaws and formulate better, wiser beliefs.<sup>43</sup> This is particularly so with children, who often are not as wedded to their professed beliefs as are adults and so are more likely to revise them in light of discussion.

---

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, this neutral reason is often included in public statements by evangelical Christian organisations; see Steven Kettell, ‘Always Read the Label: The Identity and Strategy of Britain’s “Christian Right”’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 17:1 (2016), 1–17.

<sup>43</sup> H. Mercier and D. Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

Where discussion does lead to good answers, and perhaps even consensus, we can have greater confidence in the longevity of this result when it is achieved without a constraint of neutral discourse. Consensus reached via neutral discussion will not be as strong, meaningful or long-lasting, because it is based in reasons partially made up in order to get the other side 'on board'. In contrast, if consensus is based in values to which the participants are truly invested, participants are more likely to believe in, and abide by, the results of these discussions.

**(C) Too narrow understanding of the purpose of discussion**

So far we have worried about the consequences of artificially restricting the *content* of discussion (§A) and about neutral discourse obstructing the search for good answers (§B). A third worry reminds us that discussion may have other aims beyond reaching good answers and that forgetting this may lead to something of value being lost.

Larmore's 'norm of rational dialogue' is aimed at resolving disagreements in order to reach political settlements.<sup>44</sup> He understands 'justification' as

'...a proof directed at those who disagree with us to show them that they should join us in believing what we do. It can fulfil this pragmatic role only by appealing to what they already believe, thus to what is common ground between us.'<sup>45</sup>

William Galston has critiqued this for being 'an excessively rationalistic account' of dialogue.<sup>46</sup> Galston rightly points out that the purpose of much dialogue is to 'invite one's interlocutor to see the world the way you do'. In which case, rather than prescind, we should be 'stubbornly bearing witness to one's stance at the precise point of difference'.<sup>47</sup> This seems right, for many good discussions do not simply appeal to abstract reasons that any reasonable interlocutor will accept, but also appeal to experiences, with the aim of helping your opponent understand why you think what you think.

This sharing of experiences need not always be done with the aim of getting your opponent to switch sides. When I ask my daughter why it is that she is so interested in *Love Island*, I hold no hope that she will convince me that there is value in this programme. Rather, I want to understand her better. There seems to be worth in people just being curious and interested in each other in this way. Even where there is little prospect of discussion changing minds or leading to consensus, there is value in understanding and engaging with those with whom you disagree. One might plausibly say that this is intrinsically valuable, but to be more palatable to a political liberal, one could point instead to the instrumental benefits of this engagement, including the value of forming relationships and being united in the pursuit of social harmony and good answers.

The engagement that comes from sharing our personal stories and deepest beliefs gives value that public political discussions could never give, for it is these sorts of conversations,

<sup>44</sup> Larmore, PL (op. cit. n.7), 347–8.

<sup>45</sup> Larmore, PL (op. cit. n.7), 347.

<sup>46</sup> W. A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 105.

<sup>47</sup> Galston (op. cit. n.48), 106.

where we try to *fully attend* to the other, that develop a sense of shared humanity and shared goals. Appiah argues that it is through engagement with the experiences and ideas of others that we can live peacefully together. Such conversations do not have to lead to consensus – indeed, he thinks they rarely will – rather, ‘it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another’.<sup>48</sup> To make a slightly different point, and to frame it in the language of political liberalism: it is through these conversations that children will be better able to understand the reality, and permanence of, deep disagreement.

To summarise, seeing discussion as a rationalistic exercise in public reason, aimed purely at consensus, may come at the expense of our attempts to understand each other.

#### **(D) Does not teach true respect**

As discussed in Section 2, those defending ideals of neutrality have often been motivated by a (broadly) Kantian understanding of respect. According to this view, acknowledging the rational nature of a person results in a constraint on the kind of reasons that are admissible for the exercise of coercion. It may be plausible to take from this that respect requires that coercive policy is neutrally justifiable. But the move from this to the idea that respect requires that *discussion* is neutral is far less plausible.<sup>49</sup> Presenting reasons based on one’s comprehensive doctrine does not involve *interfering* with the person, for they are free to accept or reject the reasons. It is therefore unclear why discourse being non-neutral fails to respect a person’s rational nature.

It might help to make this point clearer to think about what sorts of behaviours in a discussion would disrespect someone’s rational nature. One way would be to fail to provide reasons *at all*. Children sometimes get cut short with the retort ‘because I told you so’, which means something like ‘I am no longer willing to give you reasons and you should accept this on the basis of my authority’. If this is ever appropriate, it is because children are not yet fully rational beings. In many situations, giving this retort to an adult *would* disrespect their nature as a rational being, because it fails to engage with them as a being operating on the basis of reasons. It is not clear in what way giving reasons based on your comprehensive doctrine is similar to this, for in that case, you are still attempting to engage your opponent’s rational nature.

One might plausibly think that it is far more respectful to listen to what people genuinely care about, and to attempt to, as far as possible, take these reasons into account. In similar vein, Galston suggests that we show others respect ‘when we offer them, as explanation, what we take to be our true and best reasons for acting as we do’.<sup>50</sup>

This kind of genuine engagement with your opponent’s *whole set of reasons* might even be supported by further exploration of the Kantian notion of respect. Recognition of the rational will in a person has generally been taken to imply non-interference: we should let the person autonomously pursue their projects, rather than use the person as a means for pursuing our

---

<sup>48</sup> Appiah (op. cit. n.42), 85.

<sup>49</sup> In spite of this, it is common for thinkers to move between neutrality in policy-making and neutrality in public deliberation without justifying this move. For example, see Klosko (op. cit. n.11) and Galston (op. cit. n.48, 98–117).

<sup>50</sup> Galston (op. cit. n.48), 109.

own projects. But it is plausible to think that respect requires more than merely not interfering: perhaps *active engagement* is also required. If you have truly recognised the person as a being acting on reasons, then the correct response should be to engage and interact with these reasons. In cases where the other person is someone with whom you disagree, if we ‘stand back’ and reflect on them as a rational creature, then the response should be one resembling curiosity. Given that, like you, they seek the best answers to the very same questions, how is it that they have reached this viewpoint to which you object? What reasons are there for why they stand where they stand?

In support of this understanding, we can note that one possible translation of ‘Achtung’, which was Kant’s term for the ‘motive of morality’, is ‘attention’.<sup>51</sup> This indicates that part of what Kantian respect requires is ‘really looking’. I suggest that in our context, children should be taught that responding to a person *as a rational being* should require *really attending* to that person – which implies attending to, and engaging with, their deepest reasons.

We might go further and say that restricting classroom discussion to only public reasons is actually *disrespectful*. In asking that people set aside their deepest beliefs such as their religious convictions, it treats these beliefs as if they are subjective, personal preferences. One reason we expect a boss to set aside her preference for her son getting a job is because this is a local preference – her reason has weight only for her. In contrast, most religious people hold their religious beliefs as claims about how things really are. They see these as objective truths, of universal relevance, rather than mere expressions of preference. It may be disrespectful to fail to acknowledge religious beliefs as potentially having such weight.

Given all of this, it seems plausible to say that a focus on presenting neutral reasons would not be sufficiently respectful. A better way to be respectful in public discussion would be to be truthful about our different reasons and to try to get to the bottom of where, at root, we disagree.

The defender of neutral deliberation may say that the above comments misfire in searching for why respectful discussion should be neutral discussion. They may insist that neutral deliberation follows directly from the requirement for neutrally justifiable policy, since deliberations feed into policy. But to argue this seems to be to give up too early on the possibility that meaningful agreement on some issue is possible whilst still bringing in comprehensive doctrines. Before we deliberate on an issue, we do not yet know the range of reasons that people think bear on the issue and whether we can agree. Moreover, it is possible for policy-making to be based on neutral reasons despite deliberation not having been neutral. This point seems especially important in the classroom context, where deliberation is not aimed at forming public policy (the first fact in Section 4). Rather, here we have an educational context, where students are learning about the process of reason-giving and the range of views that people hold.

### ***(E) Conflicts with cultivating epistemic virtue***

---

<sup>51</sup> David Velleman, ‘Love as a Moral Emotion’, *Ethics* 109: 2 (1999), 338–374, 343.

Defending a version of political liberalism, Martha Nussbaum implicitly raises a worry with focusing on public reason-giving in the classroom: ‘for a public official in a leading role to say ‘X’s doctrine is not as well grounded as Y’s’ is ... to denigrate X’.<sup>52</sup> This implies that ‘teachers in public schools should not say that argument is better than faith as a general way of solving all problems in life’.<sup>53</sup> Her concern is that if teachers say that non-partisan, secular reasons are better than religious reasons, then this would be doing precisely what political liberalism seeks to avoid: it would be taking a stand on a controversial issue on which the state should remain neutral.

The political liberal can respond as follows: the teacher (qua ‘public official’) is not saying that non-partisan reasons are *better* reasons. They are merely saying that in a specific realm, that of public political issues, partisan reasons are not the right *sort* of reasons to bring in. It may be for this reason that Nussbaum allows that ‘teachers in public schools ... recommend argument over faith ... for the purposes of citizenship’ and says that ‘in contexts where citizens of many different views debate about fundamental matters, rational argument is crucial.’<sup>54</sup>

Nussbaum’s view appears to be that how the teacher fulfils his role of neutral ‘agent of the state’ depends on the topic of discussion. When discussing purely political issues, the teacher should require that students give neutral reasons. Elsewhere, the teacher must not recommend secular over religious arguments, because he must avoid taking a stand on any comprehensive doctrine. But as was discussed earlier (§A), this relies on a distinction between the political and non-political realm that cannot easily be drawn. If the curriculum avoided all content that implies the falsity of a controversial ‘doctrine’, then this would involve leaving out important topics. In order to teach areas of the curriculum that would normally be considered non-political (the obvious example here is parts of the Science curriculum such as cosmology and evolutionary theory), the teacher must take a stand on controversial issues. To avoid these topics and restrict content to that which has no implications for comprehensive doctrines (if such content exists) would be to fail in the school’s responsibilities towards cultivating an informed citizenry.

But to implement an ideal of neutral discourse would not only fail to impart certain content. If there is a ban on certain types of reasons in the classroom, there is a missed opportunity to discuss the weight that different types of reasons should hold, and in doing so, teach important epistemic skills and virtues. It is right to acknowledge that there is deep disagreement over the best methods for reaching truth (for example, over the weight that should be given to scientific evidence when this is in opposition to revelation). However, there is also widespread agreement that some methods are better at tracking the truth than others. For teachers to pretend otherwise in the interests of neutrality would be to fail in their responsibilities to cultivate epistemically virtuous individuals, equipped with the ability to discriminate between good and bad sources of knowledge. Nussbaum may be right that it is not the business of a pluralistic society to see adults as inferior because of their epistemic failures, but it is surely part of the business of a *school* to teach in a way that guards *children* against epistemic failures.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Nussbaum (op. cit. n.19), 33.

<sup>53</sup> Nussbaum (op. cit. n.19), 39.

<sup>54</sup> Nussbaum (op. cit. n.19), 38–9.

<sup>55</sup> Nussbaum (op. cit. n.19), 29.

One source of the difficulty here is that, just as we cannot easily separate off political from non-political issues, we cannot separate off civic education from other types of education. This is because a good citizen will be one who is able to distinguish between plausible and implausible reasons on a broad range of topics – they are good decision-makers. On a basic level, we want citizens who function well. We want citizens who go to the doctor when they are ill, rather than rely solely on prayer or their local shaman. We want citizens who understand what scientists tell them about the causes and effects of climate change, and who adapt their behaviour in response to reliable advice.

This links with our third fact from Section 4: in the classroom we have people whose belief-sets and characters are still forming. Since schools will unavoidably influence the formation of belief-sets and characters, they should aim to do so responsibly. This includes the formation of epistemic skills and virtues, which one might see as basic ‘life skills’, the teaching of which is therefore justifiable even from a minimalist political liberal perspective.

What are the practical implications of this? We need to find a balance between on the one hand, being so ‘neutral’ as to imply that all reasons are equally good reasons (which would be to fail to help students reach a basic level of epistemic virtue), and on the other hand, undermining the beliefs of some students by telling them that their reasons are illegitimate. Though the teacher should not be pronouncing that some reasons are illegitimate, this will be implied by both the *content* of what they teach (ostensibly non-political topics which have implications for the truth of certain comprehensive doctrines) and their *approach* to some problems (for example, valuing scientific evidence over the Bible when teaching about the origins of human life). At the same time, teachers should make clear that this hierarchy of reason-types remains the subject of some controversy and so is legitimately ‘up for discussion’ in the context of discussing controversial issues.

The teacher should not be policing the boundaries of what constitute legitimate reasons to put forward in discussion. The students themselves can discuss and provide arguments against partisan reasons that they deem poor reasons. This way, the teacher avoids undermining student beliefs in the way that Nussbaum worries about. If the ‘student policing’ is not working, teachers can (and should) be able to flag that some methods of reasoning have achieved wider consensus or historically been more fruitful than others.

To summarise, it is through discussions involving partisan justifications that students can be taught the epistemic skills that help them discriminate between good and bad reasons.

### ***(F) Conflicts with cultivating other civic virtues***

Neutral classroom discourse may also come at the expense of other civic virtues, including honesty, candour and tolerance.

By asking people to present neutral reasons rather than those that are most important to them, this encourages citizens to be dishonest. It makes them pretend to be concerned with reasons that in fact do not really motivate them. This becomes clearer when we think back to the example of Jenny’s opposition to gay marriage (§B). Although Jenny may genuinely believe that same-sex parenting is bad for children, to put forward this reason as her main source of opposition is a kind of dishonesty. It is not what motivates her at a deep level, and

she may even admit that this secular reason only has force for her (if it has force at all) because of her prior belief that homosexual relations are God-forbidden and thus sinful.

A norm of neutral discourse also encourages a lack of candour. It asks that students wear a cloak over their deepest beliefs and motivations. Eamonn Callan has argued that candour is 'a cardinal virtue in a democratic culture of free speech'.<sup>56</sup> We need candour as a condition of free speech, so that viewpoints can be aired and discussed. As such, a lack of candour is bad for the pursuit of truth.<sup>57</sup>

Neutral discourse is also obstructive to teaching tolerance, which almost all liberals writing on education agree is an important civic virtue. One reason why Bernard Williams described tolerance as 'at once necessary and impossible' is because one can only be tolerant in response to something that one truly, deeply cares about.<sup>58</sup> If students discuss using only reasons which all reasonable people accept, then there is little opportunity to show and develop tolerance. In contrast, where students are allowed to bring in the values that they care most about, there is the opportunity to show the deep respect that allows someone to hold their view even though you vigorously disagree with them.

As we noted as our second fact in Section 4, schooling is a golden opportunity for encountering disagreement: the ideal classroom has a diversity rarely found in the stratified world of adult life. Moreover, it is an environment where disagreements can be carefully structured and sensitively arbitrated according to the rules of the classroom. To restrict classroom discussion by a norm of neutral discourse means missing opportunities to develop the civic virtues that are required when encountering real, uncomfortable disagreement.

### ***(G) Not the best instrument for teaching the art of giving public reasons***

Even if we assume that a primary purpose of classroom discussion is to help prepare students for future public discussions guided by a norm of neutral discourse, it is not clear that the *instrument* that N&D suggest is the most effective one. Presumably N&D's thought is that through their attempts at neutral discussion, students will come to realise what constitute neutral reasons. A student might, for example, attempt to argue against abortion by saying that it is murder, but upon discussion find that her reasons for thinking this are not shared and are part of her comprehensive doctrine.

Though this may be effective, it is not clear why this method should be more effective than allowing critical discussion of non-neutral reasons. If a student puts forward the reasons that really matter to her, and allows these to be the subject of discussion by her peers, then she will better understand how these views differ from those of others. By seeing how people from a diversity of backgrounds respond to her view, she will begin to understand the influence of her identity, background and comprehensive doctrine. In contrast, if she is only ever able to put forward public reasons, it will be hard to form a view on what can and cannot

---

<sup>56</sup> Eamonn Callan, 'When to shut students up: Civility, silencing, and free speech', *Theory and Research in Education* 9:1 (2011), 3–22, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Callan (op. cit. n.58), 12. This is similar to the argument put forward in §B.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Toleration: An impossible virtue?', in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* ed. D. Heyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 18–27.



be reasonably rejected. It may even be impossible to do so without knowledge and understanding of the comprehensive doctrines of her peers. Therefore, even if we accept the importance of citizens knowing the art of public reason-giving, we can still take the view that engaged, critical discussion of comprehensive doctrines deserves greater priority on the curriculum than neutral discussion of public political issues.

## **6. An objection and reply**

Political liberals will object that by advocating critical discussion of comprehensive doctrines, this puts moral autonomy on a pedestal. Since the value of moral autonomy is disputed, the view outlined above is just another part of the problem of disagreement, when what we needed was a solution that can be agreed upon by reasonable people.

In response, we can remind the objector that the starting point here was not the value of (moral) autonomy. My emphasis on critical discussion of comprehensive doctrines came as a response to the problem of reasonable disagreement, the same problem that political liberals are concerned with. I am not asserting that critical discussion of comprehensive doctrines be hailed as valuable in its own right. The *aim* of students bringing their comprehensive doctrines into the classroom is not that they develop a critical stance toward that comprehensive doctrine. Rather, I have argued it is a means to, and sometimes necessary for, various other goods. These are the sorts of goods that political liberals can agree are within the legitimate scope of a minimal, compulsory civic education. For example, I have suggested that critical discussion of comprehensive doctrines helps to develop civic and epistemic virtues, and provides opportunities to practise these virtues through the encounter with real disagreement. It encourages citizens who are able to weigh in intelligently on pressing disputes, and who have thought about how best to answer contemporary problems. It helps ensure social cohesion and a peaceful society, by encouraging shared experiences and a shared language with which to discuss pressing issues. It encourages a truer, longer-lasting respect.

It may be that moral autonomy is developed as a by-product of cultivating these various goods. If this is so, then the *outcome* of a policy requiring critical discussion of comprehensive doctrines is non-neutral. But it would be inconsistent for a political liberal to object to the policy on this basis. This is because political liberals usually insist that they are concerned not that policies have neutral *effects*, but that they have neutral *justifications*.<sup>59</sup> Since critical discussion of comprehensive doctrines can be justified with reference to goods that all reasonable people value, it is legitimate to include this as a compulsory part of civic education.

## **7. Conclusion**

It may be that political liberals are right and that for a policy to be legitimate, it must have a neutral justification. I have argued that even if this is so, this does not imply that classroom discussion should operate according to a similar norm of neutrality. Children can be taught

---

<sup>59</sup> See Rawls (op. cit. n.8), 194; Larmore PL (op. cit. n.7), 358, n.4; Klosko (op. cit. n.11).

that if and when they obtain the power to make decisions that have implications for the freedom of others (in the legislature, or as a voter), they should do so on the basis of public reasons. They can be taught this without neutral discourse constraining classroom discussion, and indeed, I have argued that they will better understand what constitute public reasons if this norm does not operate.

We have seen that a norm of prescinding from controversial views would clash with other desiderata valued by reasonable people, including the need to have citizens who understand each other, who are capable of tolerance, and who make reasonable epistemic judgements, especially on contemporary topics of dispute. If we focus exclusively on teaching children to deal with the *irresolvability of disagreement*, we give up too early. At this foundational stage, where we have before us *children* rather than policy-makers, we should be more interested in students *trying to resolve disagreements*.

The argument in favour of neutral classroom discourse relied on a mistaken understanding of civic respect. Rather than respect requiring that we avoid bringing in comprehensive doctrines, being respectful is about engaging meaningfully with those with whom we disagree, over the reasons that we care most deeply about. This should be the focus of schools aiming to meet the Government's requirement to teach 'mutual respect'. Fulfilling the policy will involve hearing children's *true* reasons for their beliefs surrounding pressing, controversial issues.

So, at the level of classroom discussion, public reason-giving should not be enforced as a norm for respectful discussion. Even if we do want children to learn the *art of giving public reasons*, we should prioritise them learning *the art of reasoning in public* instead.<sup>60</sup>

CHRISTINA EASTON (C.E.Easton@lse.ac.uk) is a doctoral student at the London School of Economics and Political Science, working on liberal neutrality and controversial values in education. Her recent publications include 'Did most Brits fail in their civic duties in the EU referendum?' (Think, 2017) and the co-authored book *Critical Religious Education in Practice: A Teacher's Guide for the Secondary Classroom* (Routledge, 2018).

<http://personal.lse.ac.uk/davisce2/>

---

<sup>60</sup> I am grateful to Luc Bovens, Alex Voorhoeve and David Coombs for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.