

Political Liberalism and Moral Education

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What sorts of social orders serve the common good? What are the qualities of citizens that would serve the common good — not merely their own interests — and enable people of diverse ideals of the good to work across their differences? And what is the curriculum or pedagogy appropriate to creating such citizens?

John Covalleskie takes a position on all of these questions in “Moral Formation as a Pedagogy of Welcome” in order to articulate a normative ideal for the moral education of the young. Covalleskie’s position is often strongly worded as well as a pleasure to read. If I read it aright, he argues something like this: social orders that serve the common good are “strongly communitarian” and deliberative (as opposed to aggregative) democratic, not liberal or libertarian individualist, and they are not neutral about the best ways of life. They are composed of members of a democratic republic, not individuals, and their members have internalized the norms of their community and prioritize the common good over their own individual interests. But they also are not obedient, but rather autonomous, prophetic in critiquing community norms, and they “make decisions freely.” The pedagogy for this ideal is a formal (schooling) and informal *pedagogy of welcome*. The informal component involves inculcating each individual member in the community’s moral norms, albeit “in a way that allows for critique.” The formal component involves teaching communal construction of norms of inclusion and fostering capacities for putting oneself in the shoes of the other.

In this brief commentary, I wish to pose just one critical question about this fascinating view: Why does Covalleskie believe that the social order appropriate to a pedagogy of welcome is strongly communitarian rather than politically liberal (in the Rawlsian sense)? I’m not sure this is Covalleskie’s answer in his essay, but one response perhaps nascent in it states that politically liberal orders are neutralist, individualist and, if contemporary conditions are any indicator, thereby insufficient to provide — or actually positively hinder — the conditions needed to support the emergence of the right kind of citizens, those who are autonomous, inclusive, and who make a priority of the common good. Again, I don’t know if this is Covalleskie’s argument. But I think it’s worth examining in connection to his view, perhaps just for contrast. The argument, I will claim, is a straw man (and quite tendentiously, I will call it *the straw man* argument) in that it significantly misconstrues political liberalism. Correcting the misinterpretation will show that Covalleskie’s goals for civic education are much more compatible with liberalism than he seems to entertain. In the rest of this essay I make my case.

A first misconstrual in the straw man argument is that contemporary conditions are some indication of the weak promise of politically liberal social orders to foster the right kind of citizenship. Contemporary political and social structures fall radi-

cally short of politically liberal standards of justice and the legitimate use of political power and cannot, therefore, be evidence of the inferiority of those standards. Political liberalism is not a defense of the *status quo*.

Second, political liberalism is not neutral with respect to all ways of life. According to John Rawls's *liberal principle of legitimacy*, "Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason."¹ Explicating the full implications of this principle is beyond the scope of this commentary, but the stipulation concerning reasonable endorsement is all-important here. Adherents to some ways of life, for example some (though not all) evangelical ones, do not recognize the possibility of reasonable disagreement about fundamental questions of faith or personal morality. They also thus do not recognize a need to settle the terms of social cooperation in a way that is mutually acceptable to them and to others, or what's the same, in a way that all (not-un)reasonable citizens can endorse. This conflicts with the liberal principle of legitimacy; because it would be deeply disrespectful to reasonable citizens to use the coercive apparatus of government to implement policies appealing only to adherents of unreasonable ways of life, the liberal principle of legitimacy forbids government to do so. So political liberalism is not neutral among all ways of life. Adherents to unreasonable ways of life will be quite unhappy with the policies of a politically liberal regime. But that is a problem for them, not for political liberalism.

This insight also sheds some light on the sense in which political liberalism is and is not a form of the much-maligned "individualism." Politically liberal citizens are self-interested in the ordinary sense that their own interests matter to them as self-respecting persons. They are not going to adopt a policy that will be very detrimental to their well being. They emphatically are not egoists, however, in the sense that they are incapable of or unwilling to consider the interests of others, or the good of the whole society, in deliberating about policy in the public sphere. Quite the contrary, their commitment to reciprocal respect in setting basic terms for social cooperation, in Rawls's view, will inevitably lead them to seek a *political conception of justice*, one built up from shared ideas common to the public culture of pluralist democracy, and therefore favorable to the diverse interests of all reasonable citizens. Rawls's own such conception is built up from the ideas of freedom, equality, and fairness and emanates, he thinks, in the two principles of justice as fairness.² We could quibble over the merits of Rawls's argument, but supposing it's correct (a fair assumption since its rectitude is not under debate here), the resulting view is not recognizably like "individualism" as Covalleskie seems to understand it. By the first principle, no one's political liberties should be worth more than those of others. By the second, the interests of the worst off person are of the highest distributive priority. And so on. There's certainly some room for criticism here. G. A. Cohen may well be right, for example, that the justification of the difference principle holds the welfare of the least well off hostage to the unwillingness of the better off to do surplus labor without

additional compensation.³ Still, critiques like Cohen's suggest friendly refinements rather than refutations of the basic view here: just reject the difference principle in favor of a principle of equality. In short, on no reasonable interpretation are politically liberal citizens unconcerned with the common good. They are quite concerned to give one another justice and to respect one another's ideas about the good by using political power only in ways that can be justified to all reasonable persons.

So, those confusions out of the way, what is the promise of politically liberal social orders and pedagogical approaches to support the emergence of autonomous, inclusive citizens concerned for the common good? I think it's pretty good and preferable to a strongly communitarian approach.

Let's start with inclusivity and concern for the common good. Political liberals are not, of course, interested in rallying around any one specific way of life, including any wherein individuals are expected to subordinate their most basic welfare interests to some abstract ideal or to the good of others. But this does not mean it cannot give us something to aspire to. If this degree of self-sacrifice is what Covalleskie's concern for the common good requires, so much the worse for it, particularly given that political liberals *are* very much concerned to ensure that there are no second-class citizens among them (that is forbidden by the fair value of the political liberties) and that no one is prevented from enjoying the all-purpose means needed for the pursuit of their own ideal of the good. Political liberals are in short committed to giving one another justice and to respecting one another's reasonable ideals of the good. If this is not a common good worth rallying around, I don't know what is. Insofar as young political liberals are to be inculcated into this ideal as well, I see no reason for thinking that they cannot be inspired.

Second, Covalleskie's citizens have the autonomy and freedom to critique the moral communities in which they find themselves, but strongly communitarian arrangements do not necessarily guarantee social provision of the relevant rights and social goods for this (freedom of thought and assembly, cultural exit rights, the social bases of self-respect for all citizens), whereas politically liberal arrangements by definition do (and *at the same time* that they permit myriad subcultural groups to form and their members to operate as they like within the framework provided by those rights). Indeed presumably the contrast here between strongly communitarian and other orders consists in part in the insight that the former and not the latter constrain individual autonomy to preclude rejecting the core moral principles of one's community. It is open, of course, to any strongly communitarian order to democratically take on commitment to autonomy-protecting rights and social goods. But this is just to convert them to that extent into liberal orders, particularly if they take them on constitutionally; insofar as they do not, well, again, so much the worse for their them.

In conclusion, for these sorts of reasons I believe that there is less distance between the politically liberal society and the one appropriate to a pedagogy of welcome. I wonder if Covalleskie would agree.

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1. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 137.
 2. See especially Rawls's argument in Parts I and III of John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
 3. G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).