

Inner Truth: Essential but Insufficient

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A good education involves not only self-understanding, self-expression, and liberation; it also entails a conversation and negotiation with the identities and values of the world around us. This sort of education, Steven Zhao observes, involves the “constant friction between the external curriculum and inner self.”¹

Drawing from the work of Charles Taylor, Zhao explores the complex question of what it means to define our “authentic selves” on our own terms, to resist external power structures and instead claim unique and uncontested insights into our own experiences, interpretations, and values. Zhao asserts that the authentic self deserves recognition and expression—and from a pedagogical standpoint, that schools and teachers should provide opportunities and support for such expression. Schools need to be places where students experience “educative liberation,” where identities are welcomed from the margins. Anti-oppressive education, Zhao asserts, is a form of “unlearning” whereby interiorized selves are given room for expression and the community is asked to cultivate greater appreciation for what Taylor terms the “ethical frameworks” of previously marginalized citizens—in simple terms, seeking to understand what matters to them and why.²

But Zhao also asserts that while students’ inner selves deserve recognition and support, we should acknowledge that these selves emerge in part from external influences of the cultures surrounding us. In this sense, the self is inherently intersubjective and mediated socially. Furthermore, Zhao contends, a good education must subject students’ inner selves to some scrutiny, for at least two reasons.

One reason is because students may be facing what Zhao terms “internalized obstacles”: students’ past experiences and influences have stunted or limited their capacity for growth and flourishing. For example, we can imagine students who have been raised in an ethically insular environment, where questioning of cultural tradition is discouraged or prohibited, where their sense of self is unhelpfully constrained by norms they may never have even thought to interrogate. In this context, scrutiny of inner truths can facilitate liberation.

A second reason for exposing students' inner selves to external scrutiny has a civic rationale: democracy, Zhao observes, not only functions to free individuals, but "to generate necessary degrees of conflicts intrinsic within our existential condition with encountered others." In a pluralistic society, our ethical frameworks will inevitably conflict, and sometimes we will need to negotiate among them as we shape our lives together. When advocating for public policy with which our fellow citizens disagree, civic virtue entails an obligation to explain our reasons—which often means, in some respects, explaining ourselves.

But a conundrum arises here as we consider the educational project of learning to explain ourselves in ways that expose our inner selves to scrutiny. Zhao repeatedly emphasizes the importance of "distributing recognition equally." How do we square this with the need to sometimes prioritize some values more highly than others, to favor certain visions of the good life? Not everyone can get their way as we mutually construct norms, policies, and laws. How do we maintain equal distribution of recognition amidst the scrutiny and critique upon which liberal democracy depends in the face of disagreement?

Stephen Darwall's dual notion of respect—recognition and appraisal—may provide a way to better understand and manage this tension. "Recognition" respect emphasizes the incommensurable worth of others; it makes no distinction based on merit but instead acknowledges that our basic personhood confers a fundamental moral status. While this egalitarian nature of recognition respect is vital, such a conception alone is insufficient, because none of us are mere instances of the universal. Rather, we are particular individuals whose very uniqueness contributes to our worth and hence the respect we are owed. With this in mind, "appraisal" respect is what we usually mean when we say someone deserves our respect; we evaluate and commend characteristics of a person, such as honesty or generosity.³

These dual forms of respect seem contained in how Zhao frames Dewey's notion of "democratic faith in equality"—citizens should have an equal chance to have their priorities heard and considered, but then judgments are made about their relative merits or value, endorsing "certain possibilities over others." We recognize, we seek to understand, but we also appraise.

One way to navigate the inevitable tension between recognition and

appraisal might be to conceive of this external engagement with inner selves as focused less on interrogating core identities and beliefs. Instead, deliberation and critical analysis would focus on the implications of those values for our shared life together. It is likely easier for citizens to consider possibilities for compromise and accommodation about laws and policies rather than being asked to modulate the core beliefs that inform their stance on such policies.

But none of these distinctions will matter much if students don't trust the dialectical process that Zhao advocates. Such trust requires steady and faithful cultivation. Teachers and students earn the privilege of critiquing others' values and beliefs by first investing deeply in efforts to understand and appreciate what matters to one another, and why. As Uma Narayan reminds us, we exercise—through repeated practice—epistemic humility by keeping in mind that our understanding of unfamiliar perspectives and values will be inherently limited and sometimes mistaken.⁴ As Zhao argues, however, the limited insights we can generate can only serve our democratic purposes if we reclaim the dialectical intent of such engagement.

As philosophers of education, I hope we can not only sketch the task abstractly but also develop some concrete illustrations. Zhao alludes to the controversies over free expression on college campuses; with this example in mind, what are the pedagogical moves necessary to encourage an appropriately dialectical negotiation between the exteriority of free-speech traditions and the interiority of student identities that experience such speech as threatening or demeaning? How do schools and teachers foster such intersubjective conversations? And what social conditions are needed to undergird such conversations? What kinds of relationships need to be cultivated beforehand? What sorts of sanctuaries need to be available afterwards for students to regroup and refresh?

Lastly, as Danielle Allen argues in her book *Talking to Strangers*, civic trust is cultivated and liberal democracy is sustained when citizens engage in accommodation, compromise, and sacrifice—how can educational institutions develop cultures and practices whereby these burdens are more equitably shared?⁵ Attending more fully to these sorts of questions is vital if we are to create pedagogical space for inner selves to be honored, while doing the hard dialectical work of living shared, but not identical, lives.

1 Steven Zhao, "The Authenticity and Adaptivity of Liberal Democracy," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 2 (same issue).

2 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3 Stephen L. Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, ed. Robin S. Dillon (New York: Routledge, 1995): 181-197.

4 Uma Narayan, "Working Together Across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice," *Hypatia* 3, no. 2 (1988): 31-47.

5 Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).