

## The Institution and the Virtue

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The relation of master and slave, when there is no mischievous interference between them, is ... naturally one of kindness.

—William Harper's *Memoir on Slavery*, 1838

Dini Metro-Roland and Paul Farber defend the institution of public schooling on the grounds that it is performing its civic education function fairly well, and that abandoning public schools will lead to a fragmentation of civil society. They acknowledge that the institution of public schooling is imperfect, but insist it must be strengthened and focused on the civic role rather than abandoned. The issue as I see it is whether the institution fits the virtues it is charged with promoting.

To defend an institution, such as public schooling, one must admit that it exists, and that it is consequential. But what is an institution? If one assumes that ethical behavior is equally possible in all social environments, this amounts to the denial of the existence of the institution. The very notion of a social institution refers to a set of arrangements (constraints, rules, incentives, penalties) to nudge human behavior in a particular direction — something distinct from other institutions. Therefore, one must admit that some institutions better match certain virtues than others.

One obvious error the authors make is to defend public schooling by comparing it to the absence of public schooling. Anything looks good in comparison to nothing. Good, bad, and fairly well are all relative judgments. The simple assertion that public schools contain opportunities to promote certain virtues does not necessarily mean that the same possibilities do not exist in other forms of education. Nor does such an assertion mean that schools are particularly well suited for the virtues in question, or that schools are better or worse than the alternatives at promoting the virtues of truthfulness, self-discipline, and civic engagement.

Can any social institution support any virtue? I claim there should be a match between the institution and the virtue. For example, the institution of slavery worked well to produce economic growth in the American South. It did very little to promote the virtue of humility among slaves or the virtue of kindness among slave owners. Despite high-minded rhetoric and many attempts to improve the treatment of slaves, the institution was not viable economically and was abhorrent ethically. The same can be said about the institution of bonded marriage. It had evolved to uphold the unbreakable family bonds by denying women the right to economic independence. The rhetoric of virtues, however, did not match the social arrangements of the institution. How does the public school match the virtues of a democratic citizen? What specifically in the core of schooling represents such a match?

Apparently, it is the fact that children are brought together with teachers and with each other and that they learn a certain curriculum of what is considered important (as opposed to what they want to learn). On the first point, we must admit

that children are brought face to face with adults and each other in a great variety of settings. For example, one may argue that an after-school activity site or a summer camp provides a much better opportunity to learn to relate to other people than a school does. In these settings, people come by choice to pursue their common interests and goals, which more closely resembles real life than does school. A forced meeting of strangers about an activity that does not necessarily demand collaboration is less likely to produce an engaged citizen than voluntary meeting of people with similar interest.

The authors imagine that public schools bring together children from different walks of life, thus forcing students to face others whom they would not face by choice. Yet the statistics on resegregation show the failure of this intent. While we can debate the reason for the failure — is it the conspiracy of the white middle class, or the limits on how much schools can solve of larger social problems? — the fact of the failure can hardly be disputed.

The second error the authors make is the free mixing of *should* and *is*. Yes, there is some possibility for dialogical relationships between teachers and students, but no, they are not common, and not intrinsic to schooling. Yes, there was once a kindergarten classroom where “you can’t say you can’t play,” but no, it is not the norm, and it is not organic to kinder-gardening. We can build an institution on hope, but we cannot defend and sustain it indefinitely on hope alone. We cannot keep faith in something because of what it should be.

Compulsory schooling is an institution of bonded labor, in many ways similar to slavery, peonage, and unequal marriage. That is an important characteristic of the institution. One can argue that this fact is unimportant, or that it does not conflict with the virtues of truthfulness, discipline, or citizenship. But I am not finding that argument.

“You have to start off trusting your teachers to develop kindness and justice in you, showing you the right contexts and situations and teaching you in the right way to pick up what is important in these.” This is the account of virtue in public education in Julia Annas’s *Intelligent Virtue*, cited by the authors. There is no doubt that these things do happen and that they can happen more often. However, I have no doubt that there were many instances of loving relationships between slaves and slave owners, or between a husband and a wife where the former literally owned the latter. It is just not very clear how the discourse of the possible can be translated into the discourse of the desirable. The authors do not make any empirical or theoretical claims on how common any of these occurrences are, or how organic they are to the institutional environment of a public school.

Empirically, we have little evidence that students who attend a private school, an online school, or no school at all become lesser citizens. The generation that chose to fight the American Revolutionary War and established the Republic was not educated in public schools. Theoretically, the authors deal with the matter in a very peculiar way. Yes, they say, schools are not that great at the virtue business, but this

only proves we need to have more and stronger schools. Using that logic, hardly anything ever deserves to be changed or replaced by something else.

The essay is a classic conservative argument. It boils down to the general claim that any new thing can turn out to be worse than the old thing, which we at least know. It is a very plausible argument, more likely to be correct than not. Its only problem is that sometimes it goes too far, and we end up defending an institution that has long outlived its usefulness. Imagine how different the history of this country could have been if the South agreed to abandon slavery peacefully during the first half of the nineteenth century. I am not saying that the institution of public school is on the brink of a violent collapse. But it is undeniably being eroded from many different directions: the information revolution, school choice and home schooling movements, the economic consequences of fiscal deficits. The question for philosophers is how we can be more useful: by defending the old institution or by helping to shape a set of new institutions.

The information revolution factor is especially difficult to ignore. The entire arrangement of schooling is a response to the scarcity of access to information. This is disappearing, and I have a tough time imagining schooling can remain unchanged. The invention of newsprint — a radical technological change of the time — destroyed the venerable tradition of sharing the news face-to-face with one's neighbor. Could democratic governments have forced citizens to talk to their neighbors because it is good for democracy? I don't think so.

There is a pragmatic argument to which which I am very sympathetic. The efforts to subject education to the discipline of market choice are likely to ruin the existing public educational system without creating a viable new one. I have never shared the belief that school choice is capable of providing quality education to all children. But we are better off considering better solutions than returning to the good old days of common schools.

However, the splintering and multiplication of educational institutions has already begun, and I fail to see any forces that would stop it. It is possible, of course, that the people of this nation will read Metro-Roland and Farber, come to their senses, and say "Oh dear God, how could we be so wrong! We were blind, but now we can see! Let's go back to the classical model of public schooling at once!" I have a hard time believing in such a scenario, but then again, I am a skeptic.