

Democratic Education and the Idea of Liberal Neutrality

James Callahan, 2019

This project began as an attempt to answer the following question: Is there an historical democratic education that can be at once neutral toward different conceptions of the good *and* advance distinctively liberal values? In other words, I was interested in the problem of formulating any educational curriculum in a multicultural society where students and their families hold radically different conceptions of the good. Moreover, I believed that the best way to analyze this problem was by examining history curricula in particular. As a result, I read *Diversity and Distrust* by Stephen Macedo, *Political Liberalism* by John Rawls, *Political Theology* by Carl Schmitt, *Why Liberalism Failed* by Patrick Deneen, *Culture of Disbelief* by Stephen L. Carter, and *The Trouble with Principle* by Stanley Fish. Where did this leave my research? In short, I ran into some problems. First, I realized that merely looking at how history is taught was not enough. Far from occurring in just the classroom, education occurs on a societal level; children are socialized through the family, through communities, and through interactions with others. Second, I began to suspect that liberal values might not be enough by themselves to sustain the kinds of bonds needed for a healthy civil society. Third, I came to the conclusion that modern moral discourse was in shambles—a motley assortment of conflicting claims based on rights, utility, and (occasionally) desert.

Into these new complications came Alasdair MacIntyre—a contemporary philosopher typically classed among the communitarian critics of liberalism who has been instrumental in the revival of virtue ethics. What I found refreshing about MacIntyre was that he views the interminable character of modern-day moral debate as a result of incommensurable conceptions of not only justice but, also, of rationality itself. Moreover, he sees liberalism as itself one historically constituted tradition among many. Most importantly, in his work, I found some answers to the aforementioned complications. Thus, with the approval of Professor Franco, I shifted gears and read *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, *Dependent Rational Animals*, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, *Marxism and Christianity*, *Ethics and Politics*, and several lectures—all by MacIntyre—as well as some of the secondary literature.

All this is to say that my honors project will now be on the political philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre. Though my focus has shifted, education will remain an important part of my research. However, I am increasingly convinced that any good moral education has to provide an account of the virtues and the vices. Today, we are faced with ever-increasing atomization, widespread anxiety, disenchantment, and a moral discourse that is seriously muddled. My honors project will try to answer whether liberalism, as a tradition, has the resources within it to respond to some of these problems of modernity. For MacIntyre, the Enlightenment Project was doomed to fail from the start—I will have to determine for myself whether this claim is true. To conclude, this summer was absolutely instrumental in clarifying what I wanted to write about for my honors project. Having used this summer to read most of MacIntyre's corpus and to take extensive notes, I feel well prepared to complete my project next year.

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