

Can We Educate for Justice in a Pluralistic Society?

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Before I could begin to formulate any response to this question, I got stuck on the question itself. So, let me pause briefly to focus on what is being asked here.

First of all, I would assume, given the other questions that are part of the series, that the important words in this question are “can” and “pluralistic”? That is, is this a task that we would be *able* to do in a pluralistic society, even assuming it were to be understood as the proper job of higher education? This first question is really about the limits of pedagogy. It might be asking in what sense “justice” can be taught at all—and then in what ways might this teaching be affected by the fact that the society is a pluralistic one.

Then there is a second question, the more epistemological one—is the “educating for justice” possible in a society where all values are supposedly to be tolerated and respected? And there are really two aspects of this second question—Is “educating for justice” perceived to be problematic in a pluralistic society because we cannot agree on justice as a virtue worth teaching? Or, is “educating for justice” problematic because we do not have a clear unified sense of what justice is—even if we did think it was something we wanted to teach?

Depending upon how one addresses these questions, the answer to the original question—Can you teach justice in a pluralist society?—will be either a decisive “no” or a resounding “yes.”

If, for example, we assume that the teaching of justice is equivalent to advocating a set of particular affirmations or prohibitions, or if we think of “teaching justice” to be equivalent to seeking to create a static state of affairs—in either case to be foisted by one group upon every other group—then clearly the teaching of justice is not compatible with a pluralistic society. Or, if we assume that we have to have figured out exactly what justice is in order for everyone in a pluralistic society to see if that virtue is worth pursuing through education—then we would never even get to the pedagogical issue of whether such a virtue or such an ideal can be taught.

Think of the many tomes that have been written over the centuries in pursuit of clarification as to what constitutes justice and how it should be pursued. There are certainly enough of these worthy books around even from the past fifty years (Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Whose Justice?, Which Rationality?* and others by Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick, John Rawls, and Ronald Dworkin to name just a few) to draw us to conclude that we are no closer at the theoretical level to arriving at general agreement on the nature and content of justice than were the ancients.

If we were to focus on the epistemological aspects of the situation, we can very quickly work ourselves into a state of paralysis and despair—a state of affairs that is all too familiar to academics whenever we try to say anything definitive to the part of the world that non-academics are fond of calling the “real world.”

And while academics and others with the time and circumstances that allow them to puzzle about such matters at the theoretical level, continue to ply their trade—and we as a society have every reason to hope that they do—people continue to suffer and to bear the weight of the existential reality that arrangements in this world do not seem to be as they should be. Something is terribly wrong. In fact, many things are. Children go hungry in a land where there is plenty of food, and a sixth of the world’s population lives on less than a dollar a day while the few struggle with the burden of decisions such as what on earth to wear in the morning. (And this is only to mention two of the most obvious examples of where the world is not ordered fairly, and where things and people are not valued rightly and treated accordingly.)

So, while we wait for a definition of justice on which we can all agree, we wait in a world of pain. At least most people with half a heart do.

And I would suggest that it is at the heart of this painful waiting that we might find some reason to hope—and some basis on which to move from “no” to “yes” in deciding whether we can possibly educate for justice in a pluralistic society. For it is, after all, the pain and sense of unease that allows us most easily to make common cause in a pluralistic society. To be sure, the pain will be understood differently by the various parties involved. And there will be lots of fingers pointing in different directions as to who is responsible for the pain. But the pain—or at least the unease, if pain sounds too melodramatic for some—is the basis on which we can perhaps gain some consensus. Things are not as they should be. Conservatives, classical liberals, communitarians, libertarians, etc. will all have different explanations of the pain and different solutions to offer—but again, the pain is our common starting place.

Pain might be the basis of an alternative understanding of what it might mean to “teach justice” in a pluralistic society. At least this offers some hope of getting us beyond the paralysis of having to wait for a common vision of justice before we can teach anything in the realm of values. We may not be entirely clear on where we need to go or how to get there, but we do know that all is not well for us as human beings, either as individuals or as a community.

And in this community of unease—we have a reason to make space for each other—if for no other reason than to insure that we do not destroy each other. For if we do not make space for others, we are very likely to lose our own. And as we begin to make space for each other, we soon find ourselves seeking to name the unease, to study it, to seek explanations of it and to remedy it. In short, before we know it, we are in a discussion about justice.

Here, after some wandering about, I want to make several assertions in direct response to the original question. First, if we think of justice in static terms—the meaning of which one group gets to decide for everyone else—then clearly educational institutions in a pluralistic society should not be in the business of promoting such a justice. But if we think of the pursuit of justice as a conversation whose purpose is to assign right value to people and things and to learn how to treat them accordingly (which is, I think, a helpful vision of justice), then I would argue that institutions of higher learning may offer one of the best hopes in the world to create safe space for that conversation. Universities and colleges—by their very strangeness—by their very nature as places where hundreds and thousands of people very close to the same age leave their families of origin and come together for four years out of their lives with people they have never known before supposedly to prepare for the rest of their lives—these very universities and colleges offer the very best spaces for trying on new ideas, for experimentation, for enlarged imagination, for breaking old habits, for encountering people whose understanding of the unease in the world might be very different from one’s own and for rearranging one’s view of the world—the very things that are central to the pursuit of justice—a world in which everything and everyone is valued rightly and treated accordingly.

And in these strange communities called colleges and universities—there will be something very paradoxical going on. For while they are seeking to create space for the pursuit of justice (that is, as one of the proper goals of their enterprise) they will at the same time find themselves appealing to “justice” as the justification for the space that they are creating and for the rules of the game—that is, the conversation that will be taking place in that space. They will, in short, in two very important ways be thinking about justice in a way that accords well with the virtue of humility and the habit of critical thinking, both of which are so central to the life of the truly educated person, and both of which are essential habits of mind in a pluralistic society.

First, they will be treating “justice” as something of a regulative principle—something that can be appealed to in order to keep discussion going when there is more that needs to be said, something that counts as a point worth paying attention to in a conversation, something, in short that provides the frame and context of the discussion and allows space for the pursuit of the realization of the very thing that is already being appealed to.

Second, they will be working, not with a pedagogy of directives and pronouncements—but rather with a pedagogy of invitation and vision. “Let me show you what I see,” rather than, “this is what you ought to think or do.”

If justice is understood in this way—as a vision that is both the grounding and the hope of our conversations—a vision that holds out before us that someday, everyone and everything will be valued rightly and treated accordingly, then it would seem that “teaching justice” is not only compatible with a pluralist society, but one of the universities’ and colleges’ most interesting and compelling tasks in a pluralist society.

One of the most wise books that I have read in recent years is Robert Nozick’s book *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*. It was sort of a “spiritual” autobiography in

the classical philosophical tradition (shades of Socrates and Marcus Aurelius.) This book offers one picture of the pursuit of justice that seems to offer hope for a pluralistic world.

It is a picture that makes lots of room for diversity of all kinds. It is a picture that draws people to justice, to a world where all things are valued rightly and cared for rightly, rather than forcing them into some preconceived mold. It is a picture that seems to be one of the natural and appropriate roles for liberal education.

In the tradition of Hebrew wisdom literature, in the tradition of Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil (two thinkers already referred to in this conference), and Blaise Pascal, Nozick holds out before us something of a mystical vision of life that argues for the interconnectedness between what we love (or pay attention to) and the kind of people that we will become in the world—

“Speaking of what is ‘due’ may make it seem like a debt owed, though, or an obligation, whereas I mean something more like applause. Or an offering. Or, perhaps, more like love. To love the world and to live within it in the mode this involves gives the world our fullest response. . . . The size of a soul, the magnitude of a person, is measured in part by the extent of what that person can appreciate and love” (p. 266).

Pursuing that knowledge of the world that makes us yearn to see things and people valued rightly and treated accordingly, that is a vision of justice that seems to be an appropriate, and I believe possible, task of liberal education in a pluralistic society.

Works Cited

Nozick, Robert. *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.