Review of “On Education”

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Book Review


Harry Brighouse’s *On Education*, part of the Thinking in Action series by Routledge, makes available a useful text for wrestling with some of the most fundamental questions regarding the aims of education. Although Brighouse, professor of philosophy and affiliate professor of education policy studies at University of Wisconsin, Madison, makes plain that understanding his argument requires no background in philosophy and that his book is written mainly for readers interested in education generally, one would be hard-pressed to deny the worth this brief, yet consummately clear analysis of education is for specialist and non-specialist alike. Embracing a position that draws a distinction between schooling and education, one is reminded of Illich’s *Deschooling Society* if only momentarily; and, although Brighouse realizes that schools have been asked to do more and more due to the fragmentation of the family unit and society generally, he also articulates how this should not allow us to ignore the fact that “schooling is the only practical formal mechanism we have for guaranteeing (or trying to guarantee) that all children get reasonable access to education, regardless of how supportive their parents are of education.” (7) More important, echoing Dewey’s insightful recognition that education is a social process that entails a social ideal, Brighouse’s analysis challenges educators in the United States and the UK to develop an understanding of the aims of education as they relate specifically to our respective liberal democratic orders. As I suggest in my brief concluding remarks, however, the only glaring weakness in Brighouse’s analysis is his failure to address some of the structural conditions that lead to inequality in both achievement and access for poor and minority children.

Brighouse divides the book into two parts. First, he articulates and argues for a set of principles that can be used by school leaders, policy makers and educators as they reflect intentionally on the aims and purposes of education. He advances the following four propositions: 1) children have a right to learn about a range of ways of living; 2) schools should prepare children to be self-sufficient members in the economy; 3) schools should provide children with the “tools” necessary to flourish; and 4) if education is effective students should develop into reasonable participants in our respective public democracies. In the second part of the text, Brighouse addresses three controversial policy initiatives: 1) government support of religious schools, 2) teaching patriotism in schools, and 3) the place of citizenship education in schools. Recognizing the complexity of these issues, Brighouse provides a comprehensive, albeit concise discussion that helps the reader think through both the implications of policy initiatives and the way principles are put into practice.

Human Flourishing, Autonomy and a Critical Public Culture
Appealing to *Yoder v. Wisconsin*—a Supreme Court decision that ruled against the State of Wisconsin by reducing the “school-leaving age” for Amish children to fourteen-- Brighouse reflects on what it means for the state to have a compelling interest in ensuring that a young person has the right not to be deprived of the opportunity to examine the range of life choices available. If we hope, Brighouse argues, to enable children to make informed decisions about their lives, embracing autonomously how to live, we need to be sure that young people are able to see both the value of being raised and continuing to live in close-knit communities and the value of moving outside of those communities to live in ways, at times, unimaginable to their parents. In other words, while autonomy plays a central role, Brighouse also acknowledges that even though parents may be a living example of a life worth living, a child should be given the opportunity to determine whether that way of life is worth living for her. We should, then, furnish students with the ability to ask themselves “how ought I to live?”

When children are not well-informed regarding alternatives and are, as a consequence, not able to compare the alternatives, Brighouse argues that we have undermined their ability to make an autonomous decision. Part of living well for Brighouse, is being able to identify with the way of life one chooses to lead. But, because of the different constitutional natures of individuals, it is possible that children, for reasons of their own, will not be able to embrace the life their parents have chosen. For example, a child brought up in a libertarian household might, for reasons of her own, come to realize that the views endorsed and espoused by her parents are not views with which she agrees. Denying the child the opportunity to develop and to explore her “divergent” ideas, in the hope that she might choose a life that she has reason to value, is detrimental to the child and goes against the fundamental idea that education should be about enabling the individual to pursue in autonomous fashion the life she has reason to value. As Brighouse points out, this is not to suggest that her parents have not chosen a way of life that is worth living; it is to acknowledge the fact that there are multiple incarnations of the good life. And, as he tells us, “Different ways of life elevate different virtues, and some children are ill constituted to develop the particular virtues that their parents’ way of life endorses. [This is not to suggest that] some children will, of course, be well suited to the ways of life into which they are inducted by their parents.” (18) Moreover, as Dewey points out in *Democracy and Education*, “To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness...” Refusing to make available the conditions under which a child can discover what he is good for is undeniably negligent.

Emphasizing the distinction between general interests and particular interests, Brighouse argues that we should not be forcing children to live lives in particular ways. From a paternalistic perspective we have an obligation to promote the general well-being of children. For example, no one disputes the fact that parents are responsible for promoting the health—physical and mental well-being—of their children. Also, parents and schools should make clear what might, in general, constitute a good life. So, while some might argue that developing your appreciation of music and/or the arts more generally might be part of a good life, this is not to suggest that all children should be forced to gain an appreciation of classical music exclusively or be forced to learn to play the piano. Nonetheless, to claim that certain general values, such as basic socio-economic and political rights including the right to education are not appropriate norms to be used when evaluating educational institutions is to overlook the social function that education plays in our respective liberal democracies.
What Brighouse forces the reader to wrestle with is the role education should play in providing students with the skills necessary to make well-informed decisions about alternatives that they are able to compare. For example, while acknowledging the rampant consumerism and materialist ethic that certainly thwarts a child’s prospective autonomy, schools should develop curricular and co-curricular opportunities that enable children to make life-choices that are the result of sustained reflections involving discussion of what constitutes a good life. And, as Brighouse points out, “an autonomous life cannot be led without the information about the world in which it is led,” including people’s willingness and reasons for adopting certain religious or secularist views and the attitudes that divide advocates of (apparently) competing interests. Also, the autonomous person needs to be able to distinguish between fallacious arguments and non-fallacious arguments. Malcolm X’s words capture the spirit of Brighouse’s argument nicely. In “Malcolm X Talks to Young People” he said

One of the first things I think young people, especially nowadays, should learn is how to see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself. Then you can come to an intelligent decision for yourself. If you form the habit of going by what you hear others say about someone, or going by what others think about someone, instead of searching that thing out for yourself and seeing for yourself, you will be walking west when you think you're going east, and you will be walking east when you think you're going west... The most important thing we can learn to do today is to think for ourselves.

On a related note, Brighouse believes that education should prepare students to be self-sufficient members of the economy, but he is careful to stress that “schools should not...think of themselves as preparing pupils to fit any particular ‘slot’ in the economy.” (34) If, for example, following Nussbaum one maintains that the purpose of education is to enable students to reflect critically about themselves, their traditions and the world more broadly, then by virtue of receiving a well-rounded liberal education that focuses on the basics—literacy both oral and written, quantitative reasoning skills, foreign language acquisition, scientific literacy—students will be able to negotiate the rapidly changing economic landscape. More importantly, Brighouse argues that prioritizing autonomy allows us to see that “restricting the education of some children simply for the sake of long-term growth of the economy, in an economy that is not impoverished, is wrong and it is wrong for distributive reasons; it constitutes using people for the sake of others…” (36) So, in the United States and the United Kingdom where the economies are anything but impoverished, our focus should be on ensuring that children are able to choose and be prepared for satisfying and well-paid work. In other words, “the central point of educating someone is for her own benefit…” (37)

It should be noted that even the most fundamental material goods have no more than the potential to promote well-being. The benefit of wealth, for example, exists only in so far as it can be converted into an actually valued/valuable human state or activity. Food, medicine and housing are valuable because they can be used in order that we may live long, healthy and comfortable lives or because they can promote the feeling of personal strength and security that a person might value. On the other hand, money can be valuable because, among other things, it often allows us to live well protected lives or to acquire the food we need in order to feed our children. In this way, income and tangible assets should be seen as potential means to a number of potentially valuable ends. Having children understand the importance of becoming self-sufficient members of the economy should be a necessary part of educational strategies, but only in so far as students are able to put resource acquisition in its proper place—that is, as a potentially instrumental means whose
effectiveness must be investigated in relation to the specific goals of leading lives they have reason to value.

Importantly, education, according to Brighouse, should also be sure to promote the development of citizens who are both capable and willing to participate in the political process. This is not to suggest that education should promote “blind patriotism” (see Chapter 6), but Brighouse does advocate the idea that children should mature to become citizens that respect the rule of law and that understand the political process and the ways they can use political channels to influence change. And, not coincidentally, our children need to be equipped with skills that enable them to evaluate the justness of policy initiatives, to become self-advocates and to appreciate the importance, a la Rawls and others, of engaging in public debate in ways that respect the basic fact that there are different moral views and we need to seek ways to live in a peaceful, stable and just society that can be endorsed by all “reasonable” people.

If, like Rawls and Brighouse, we maintain that a permanent feature of society is that there will be reasonable yet contradictory moral doctrines and these doctrines could only be maintained by illegitimate force, then it follows that we should attempt to establish a manner in which all people, their comprehensive doctrines notwithstanding, can come to agreement concerning the principles that will govern their associations. Perhaps Brighouse is “hoping” schools should enable students to understand the importance of distinguishing between a political conception of justice and a moral or comprehensive one. Most important, they must take for granted that there is no way to provide a public justification for any comprehensive doctrine. As a consequence, if we accept the importance of establishing a political conception of justice that is not a mere modus vivendi, then we will be in a position that requires that our political conception to be justified if and only if it can be endorsed by all (reasonable) citizens. Remember for citizens to be able to endorse a view, they must understand the political conception and to realize how it serves their interests. If they cannot understand it, then they will not be able to recognize how it is in their best interest. What is important is that understanding, a necessary condition for making a choice that one realizes is in one’s best interest, requires a “language” that is shared. And, therefore, for Brighouse, education in a liberal democracy, namely, the U.S. and the UK, should foster a critical public culture.

Policy Discussion

Brighouse’s analysis of some of the controversial policy issues today demonstrate convincingly why a clear understanding of educational aims must precede discussions of policy initiatives. In his discussion of government funding of religious schools, for example, Brighouse confronts the reader with ways in which government funding of religious schools may in fact enhance the chances that students will develop into full-fledged participating citizens able to make autonomous choices by distinguishing between fundamental values agreed to by most citizens and the selfish and narrowly self-interested values that tend to make their way into public discourse. So, while most like to maintain, in cavalier fashion, that religious schools undermine autonomy, foster social division and fail to produce democratic citizens, the over secularization of schools can undermine students’ ability to appreciate the many ways religious views inform their fellow citizens’ choices and the appropriate and inappropriate ways that sectarian views can be promoted in a liberal democracy.

And while Brighouse argues against teaching patriotism, understood as uncritical acceptance or love of country, he does endorse the idea that citizenship education should be compulsory. Keep in
mind, citizenship education involves, according to Brighouse, three programs of study: 1) knowledge and understanding about becoming an informed citizen, 2) developing skills of enquiry and communication; and 3) developing skills of participation and responsible citizenship (116). The problem with promoting patriotism, however, is two-fold. First, because we believe that it is important for states to be legitimate and to enjoy the consent of the governed, we should not manipulate and coerce students to accept blindly and uncritically the policies of our respective governments. In other words, while citizens are called to respect the rule of law, they are also asked to evaluate whether their government’s policy initiatives are just or unjust. To be able to evaluate critically government policies requires that citizens be able to act autonomously by becoming well-informed regarding alternatives and developing the skills to be able to compare and endorse the alternatives available. Moreover, promoting patriotism leads, inevitably, to a distortion of the “facts” that are an integral part of the legacy our children inherit. So, while we should celebrate “progress”, we need also to confront the nightmares that continue to be lived by some of our fellow citizens. These nightmares, as some might argue, have been, in part, the result of policy initiatives adopted and rationalized in a mean-spirited and selfish manner.

**Concluding Remarks: Segregated Schools**

By not paying heed to the structural constraints that lead to inequality in educational achievement and access, Brighouse is guilty of articulating an educational philosophy that overlooks the resegregation of schools in the United States. If we agree with Justice Warren, who more than fifty years ago said, “education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments” then we need to highlight discussion of the structural conditions that undermine our children’s ability to pursue happiness. Furthermore, and more importantly, Warren maintained that education is “a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” Yet we continue to see schools segregated along class and racial lines and schools being funded in ways that have been deemed by some states, e.g., Ohio, as unconstitutional. We appear unable or unwilling to overcome the economic and racial injustices that are easily visible in public education.

Is it socio-economic power that drives inequity? Is it race that drives inequity? The intersection between race and class, and of how “white” could be conceived of as ‘property” and therefore, how one is granted privileges through ownership, needs to be discussed if we hope to enable a significant change in our liberal democratic orders. In fact, educators tend to turn a blind-eye to the structural conditions that continue to make it heroic for young men and young women of color to succeed in education. Failing to engage these issues when discussing education, and failure to create a space for dialogue on these issues is undeniably negligent. This failure harms our institutions, the prospects for healthy democracy, each of us in education, and all of those excluded. It perpetuates the idea that educational philosophies, even when articulated from a social perspective, can be expressed without regard to race and class.

If one takes an historical view realizing that social institutions, such as education, are the result of a system of privilege and exclusion, one will be disturbed by the our willingness to dismantle diversity initiatives and, more specifically, affirmative action, on the basis of anecdotal information. As Michael Eric Dyson reminds us when discussing Tupac Shakur "… as a fetus in jail in his mother's womb [Tupac says], he was in prison even before he came to life….What a powerful metaphor. What an unavoidably fatalistic self-identification with incarceration as the result of black male striving at least within the proletariat, within these urban centers where social distress is an
everyday phenomenon." This helps us put into context one of Gary R. Howard’s profound questions: “How can White Americans, those who have never been touched viscerally by the realities of race, break out of their cultural isolation and ignorance?” We are sadly mistaken if we think that, as educators, we don’t have to work hard to imagine what it is like to be_________________. If we are unwilling to cultivate our sympathetic awareness of the changing global and local landscape and of the diverse challenges that people from different walks of life have to overcome, then not only have we failed our youth, we cannot hope that others will strive to become more sensitive and appreciative of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. We will fail not only to teach, but also to learn. More important, the growing economic inequality (wealthiest 1% earn more than 14 times U.S. GDP per capita) does not and should not be exacerbated further by a gap in levels of educational quality. The education of our children, the future of this nation, is a social problem and as such it should be a social concern.

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