
VIRTUE, LIBERTY, AND DISCIPLINE: FOSTERING THE DEMOCRATIC CHARACTER

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The question I want to consider is threefold: (1) what is the nature of the sort of liberty that enables one to live as a free person, but also bound by the requirements of democratic citizenship, (2) what is the nature of the virtues that make this sort of person possible, and (3) what is the nature of the educational experience that helps foster the virtues that make that sort of person?

The concern at the heart of this essay is to recall John Dewey's emphasis on the importance of discipline in the realization of democratic life and democratic education.¹ An important part of this essay is to reflect on the relationship between democracy, virtue, and discipline. These terms are contested and ambiguous, and a large part of my purpose is to examine how they relate to each other in the context of Dewey's view of democracy and democratic education.

The argument of this essay is that democracy requires (is?) a public; without a public, as distinct from a collection of individuals or a marketplace, democracy cannot function. But a public requires a certain sort of citizen, one who is willing to be responsible to and for her or his fellow citizens. This, in turn, requires that society's that would entertain the possibility of democratic life will need to make every reasonable effort, consistent with the individual freedom that democracy entails and is supposed to also protect, to shape its young into that sort of citizen.

The first section of the essay will consider the distinctive nature of Deweyan democracy and its relation to a substantive idea of a common good; the second section will discuss the requirement for virtue of the citizens of any democratic polity; and the third section will briefly consider the pedagogical implications of the understanding of democracy discussed here.

DEMOCRACY AND DISCIPLINE

Perhaps the most salient thing to note is that democratic citizenship is an office, not just a position. Citizen are not just supposed to obey the laws (though we are supposed to do that); citizens in a democracy are supposed to be involved actively in the *making* of laws; our choice of leaders is supposed to be based on the beliefs, records, and agendas of the candidates who stand for election, and we are supposed to keep those elected officials informed of our wishes

This means that democracy, more than any other form of government, requires widespread virtue among its citizens. They must not only be able and willing to obey just laws; they must be able to which laws are just and wise.

Further, these decisions about justice and wisdom must be made not just because of the effects of laws on the individual doing the deciding; we each must have the virtue required to choose public policies that are good for members of the public generally.

Talk of “virtue” is particularly contentious and troublesome in our post-modern age. For now suffice it to say that, as used in this essay, “virtue” is not meant to be absolute or metaphysically grounded, but defined by the practices of a given normative community; in practice, virtue is socially and operationally defined. This will be discussed more fully in the next section.

Democracy here is understood as a normative system of government, not just a procedural one; outcomes, not just procedures and institutions, matter. There must be a shared concern for the common good, not merely a procedural system for mediating between individuals pursuing their individual goods (though protecting the freedom to pursue one’s individual advantage is obviously part of the common good). This normative democracy, often called liberal democracy, begins with a presumption of virtue in the citizenry. Democracy, on this view, is not sustained by the clash of competing interests in which people work to use the power of the government for their advantage; such action, generalized, will destroy, not preserve democracy.² Implied in this position is the idea that population generally have the virtue to refrain from using their liberty to their advantage over other citizens.

Democracy, on this view, is sustained and preserved by individuals choosing to act for the common good, so long as such action does not seriously impinge on their own chances of fashioning good lives. The practical reason for this is clear: power is never evenly distributed, and, just as small “clumps” of matter in the early universe accreted to form stars, planets, and galaxies, so clumps of power tend to accrete to those who acquire some of it. For this reason, democracy requires such virtue of its citizens that people, at least by and large and in general, will act in accordance with Dewey’s dictum that “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children.”³ This applies not just to education but to public goods in general. The alternative would mean that democracy would rapidly devolve into oligarchy; once power begins to concentrate, the process accelerates, with powerful people and groups acquiring more and more power.

In his reflections on democratic life, Dewey’s conceptualization of “the public”⁴ is central: “the public” is not just any collection of citizens. Nor is it, and this is critical in the context of current debates about reform through privatization and market discipline, a market. A public is an intentional collection of citizens organized around a problem; the defining purpose is to identify the problem and find a common solution. The distinctive features of this “public” include the connection to a common problem and the search for a common solution, common in the sense that all are better as a result. Members

of this public, therefore, must have the dispositions necessary to view problems as members of the public rather than merely individuals.

Liberal democracy, however, is not the only defensible ideal. Mill, for example, construed democracy as a project of individual liberty, in which the state should have little or no role in educating or fostering virtue in future citizens. Educating children would be the responsibility of the individual parents, who would instill in them such visions of the proper forms of social life as they themselves individually preferred; democracy would then provide the “marketplace of ideas” in which these competing visions would be discussed and settled. Government-operated schools would inevitably endanger the freedom of individuals to form their own ideas about the proper nature of social life. Today this is one of the justifications for vouchers and privatization against public schools (usually called “government schools” by supporters of privatization).

Similarly, in Federalist #10 Madison argues that it is hopeless and unrealistic to depend on virtue to prevent citizens from forming factions to enrich themselves and increase their power. Madison’s view of democracy presumes that individual liberty makes the formation of competing factions inevitable; the preservation of liberty lies in the shifting and re-formation of factions. Democracy is preserved not by the virtue of its citizens, but by their desire for power and wealth, leading to shifting and unstable factions that lack the capacity to harden into castes and that check the accumulation of power by others.

So the Deweyan notion of a democracy of shared responsibility, of each of us wanting for all children what the best of us want for their own children, is just one among competing visions of democracy. What follows about the nature of democratic citizenship and what the implications of that are for democratic education, must be taken to be “all things considered.” This essay is not intended to change the belief that democracy is a competitive game instead of a cooperative one. But if democracy *is* best understood as a cooperative way of life, then certain things follow in preparing people to be citizens of that sort of society.

One of the key points of this essay is that democratic citizenship requires good character. Discipline is part of that character, both in the sense that discipline is among the personal characteristics of people of good character, and that we do not develop good character without discipline. The thesis is that without discipline, one is unlikely to either fulfill the demands of democratic citizenship or fulfill one’s own plans. Hence, a democracy requires a citizenry with discipline in order to function as a democracy, and citizens of a democracy require discipline in order to fashion good lives for themselves. Education, including schooling, is one important means by which discipline is fostered.

Discipline is not submission to the will of another, not blind obedience, but is, as Dewey pointed out, directly related to the pursuit of one's own interests, both in the sense of what it is in one's interest to pursue and what one is interested in.⁶ This is very different from the view of discipline reflected in the practice of schools, where "discipline" is most often understood as "obedience."⁷

One of the problems thinking clearly about democracy is that there is a paradox at the heart of the idea: on the one hand, democracy requires a great deal of discipline on the part of its citizens, willingness to work for the good of others as well as my own good, and the intentional and reflective commitment to obey laws with which I might personally disagree, and to do so absent supervision and intrusive enforcement. On the other hand, democracy is also the absence of restraint and the liberty to pursue one's own projects, provided that one does not interfere with the rights of others to do the same. Democracy, in short, is the commitment to a full measure of both individual freedom and communal responsibility; it is about rights and obligations, which are, often enough in the event, incommensurable ways of talking and thinking about social life. The complex relationship between discipline and liberty/freedom is discussed in the next section.

THE NATURE OF LIBERTY

Before considering its role in the democratic polity, we need to consider liberty as a feature of individual personal life first. After considering the relationship of liberty or freedom and self-discipline, we can then examine how these things interact in the nature of a democratic polity.

Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished between negative liberty and positive liberty, between the external conditions that allow me to pursue my own projects and the internal conditions that allow me to do so.⁸ This is an important distinction, since the two forms of liberty are not only different conceptually, they come from two very different sources. Negative liberty is the result of government (or social or communal) action (or inaction). That is, I have negative liberty when no person or institution is empowered to control my actions or thwart my plans and goals; it is the absence of external restraint on my actions. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is the actual ability to engage in the actions that will help me realize my goals. More than an absence, it is the presence of the attributes that allow me to act in accordance with what Dewey refers to as ends-in-view.

Even in the absence of external constraints, there may be attributes of my lived experience that keep me from my end-in-view. Consider a person addicted to nicotine. In many situations today, that person is prevented from smoking by law; such laws deprive the person of the liberty to light up when and where s/he wishes. The absence of such external constraints would

constitute negative liberty: nothing would be stopping him or her from smoking.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the person in question would prefer to quit smoking, but is finding it difficult to master the addiction to nicotine. There is nothing external to the person preventing her from stopping; what she lacks is the discipline or willpower or whatever-it-is that allows one person to quit when that is the desire, and another person to be unable to do so.

Now it is easy to say that the person in question did not “really” want to quit smoking. This was, in effect, Plato’s response—that people do at the time that which they really want to do, that which is most appealing to them at the time.⁹ I want to resist that explanation, on the grounds that it glosses “really wants” too cleverly. I think Aristotle had it more nearly right: when we do things that we know are not in our best interest it is because our reason is dragged around by our passions.¹⁰ Aristotle’s point, and mine, is that when we are free to do whatever we want at the time, we are not really free at all. As Paul put it in his epistle to the Romans (7:15), he does those things that he does not want to do, and he does not do the things that he wants to do. And it is obvious from his anguish that we should understand that he “really” wants to do the things that he does not do, and vice-versa.

As part of our everyday experience, who among us has not gone to a party or a concert or a day in the outdoors when we know full well we should be studying for a test, planning for a class, or finishing a paper? This problem, what the Greeks called *akrasia*, which we usually translate as “weakness of will” and which I am calling a “lack of discipline,” is a real human problem, and it does not dissolve by saying, somewhat tautologically, that we do what we really want to do at any given time. Frankfurt’s¹¹ analysis of first and second order desires is helpful in understanding the psychology of the problem: there are things that we want to do right now because they are in front of us and attractive (first order desires) and things that we want in the long term and with due consideration (second order desires). The ability to pursue our long term projects and construct a meaningful life, on this view, requires that our second order desires fairly consistently order our first order desires. A person whose long-term (second order) project includes losing weight must resist the immediate (first order) temptation for chocolate far more often than not.

Transferred to the public realm, what this means is simply that democratic citizens in order to be self-governing, require both negative and positive liberty in equal measure. Another way of putting this observation is to point out that democracy is only half about our individual rights; it is equally about our ability to fulfill our responsibilities to the thriving of others, as much as it is our power to influence that outcome. For Dewey, democracy is not just about the freedom to pursue our own interests; it also requires the discipline not to do so in the interest of the common good.

The next thing to consider is the transition from this question of personal discipline and virtue to the nature of democratic social life. Until now I have argued that discipline is necessary for one to enjoy and practice liberty, with the emphasis on how this relates to personal achievement and happiness. In the next section, I want to move to the question of what we can think of as democratic virtues, those personal attributes that are necessary among the citizenry if the polity is to be democratic in reality.

The educational problem for a democratic polity is to make sure that its actions do not interfere with the negative liberty of its members, *while at the same time* providing educational experiences that develop in its young the discipline necessary to exercise their positive liberty. Further, education must foster those virtues necessary for the polity to be democratic, again without undue impact on one's negative liberty.

THE NATURE OF DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE

In this section I will argue that a polity that would be democratic requires that its citizens be virtuous—not saints, but individuals of virtuous character.

The notion of virtue is a tricky one. Whatever view one holds about the metaphysical and ontological questions related to our understanding of virtue and vice, the boundedness of our lived reality is such that we live and make moral choices in a state of uncertainty. In practice, virtue is that set of personal characteristics that count as desirable in a given society; it is the range of what counts as “goodness” in that culture.¹² That is, even if there is some Platonic ideal or divine will that defines in an absolute way “right” from “wrong” and “virtue” from “vice,” the human condition prevents us from knowing this with certainty or completeness. In the lived experience, virtue is always socially constructed; if there is some sense in which virtue is an absolute, that sense is not accessible to us.

This does not mean that we can not make definitive claims, however. While there may not be empirical proof that Sweden in 1935 was morally superior to Germany that same year, or that the United States is a less moral society when ruled by people defending the use of torture than when it ruled by people who do not, that does not make either claim less true (or more, for that matter). But the slipperiness of such reasoning is dangerous; those who are absolutely certain that abortion is murder and must be made illegal are neither more nor less certain about the moral rightness of their position than those who claim that it would be morally wrong to take away from women their current right to have an abortion if they so choose. Similarly, President Bush may be as certain that he has permission from God to torture as I am that he does not.

Since every society requires virtue from its members, every society makes some conscious effort to help foster in its young those virtues it sees as most important to its way of life. Nevertheless, the existence of virtue in its

citizens is perhaps more important to the existence of a democratic polity than in any other.

What any society requires of its citizens is compliance, obedience to the rule of law and order. This is no more or less true in a democracy than in any other state. What is different in a democratic state is that the means by which compliance is attained is *definitionally* important. That is, if a monarchy or a dictatorship attains the compliance of its citizens through coercion, terror, mindless indoctrination, or a Foucauldian regime of observation, this is not a conceptual problem for the government. These approaches might entail practical problems—how to provide the surveillance or how to finance the personnel necessary to do so—but these are not problems of principle. In contrast, for a *democracy* to maintain order in this way transgresses the meaning of democracy.

For this reason, social order in a democracy requires that its citizens be people of virtue, at least on the whole and in general. That is neither to say that all citizens must be good nor that most citizens must be good all the time. What is necessary is that the vast majority of the citizens must be disposed to support the polity and good order the vast majority of the time. Any other condition means that the polity would need to make the choice between the chaos created by general disregard of the law and a severe reduction of freedom. The point is that neither chaos nor enforced compliance even arguably counts as democratic regimes.

Dewey no less than Plato and Aristotle emphasized the need for education to attend to moral development¹³ as well as the development of the intellectual virtues. His emphasis on the intellectual virtues is obvious; intelligence, judgment, curiosity, introspection, and foresight were all among the aspects of human thriving that were to be developed by a good education. He viewed democratic life, and education worthy of the name, to be a process of using and developing these capacities, most especially his notion of intelligence, which perhaps included all the others.

By implication, Dewey also points us to the importance of what we properly think of as moral virtues as well. We can see this if we pause to think of what a Deweyan public is and what it needs to function. At the root of a public are individuals with a strong regard for others and a great sense of what Aristotle referred to as magnanimity; those with much to share must be willing to do so.

The educational question is what can be done to close that gap? If education for citizenship entails (is?) education in virtue, what does this look like?

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC LIFE

There actually is little mystery left about how we can educate for democratic life. The only real question is why we choose not to.

Nearly a century ago, Dewey described the theory of democratic education in *Democracy and Education*, and then followed up with a shorter and more emphatic clarification of his theory in *Experience and Education*. We also today have some excellent examples of Dewey's ideas in practice in the work of educators such as Vivian Paley,¹⁴ Deborah Meier,¹⁵ Herbert Kohl,¹⁶ and Gregory Mitchie¹⁷ among others.

The first thing to note about democratic education is not directly discussed in Dewey's work: that education for democratic life was to take place in public, or common schools, did not really need defending in Dewey's time; today it does. The reason that education for democratic life demands public schools is not that private schools can not serve the public good; they can, and many certainly do. The reason is simply that the vision of the public good that is embodied in such schools is a *private* understanding of the public good, rather than a *public* understanding of that good. A critical understanding here is that there is a large and fundamental difference between a market, which is how privateers want schools to be governed,¹⁸ and a public, which is how public schools can be governed. The notion of democratic governance is enhanced by the activities of democratic decision making, which is one of the things that public schools allow (though the nonsensical debates currently going on about the status of "intelligent design" in the science curriculum of public schools makes one pessimistic at times about the possibility of democratic governance).

However, the optimistic view is that democratic education will create the reality of democratic governance, it being too late to hope for things to happen the other way around. The question, then, is how schools can realistically contribute to the development of the conditions of democratic governance.

The first condition is that the process of education includes the sort of experiences that foster both the intellectual and the moral and/or social virtues that democracy requires. There are both theories and models about how this can be done. Two widely read and respected, but, alas, not necessarily imitated, educators who have modeled a form of education that seems to exemplify the kind of intellectual and moral/social development conceptualized by Dewey are Paley and Meier. They have created schooling environments where the curriculum is caring intelligently for others, where the focus is on what sort of self does not take the welfare of others into account in making their choices. It is this that on the one hand, defines education for democratic life, and, on the other hand, is sorely lacking in today's schools.

Briefly, the point I think is so critical in the practice of Meier and Paley, and equally so in the theoretical work of Dewey, is that education for democracy is not, itself, democratic, if by democratic one means that decisions are made by a majority, or even a consensus of the children. That is, in both examples, the adults are responsible for, if also responsible to, their students. They are teachers, and they are committed to making sure that the students learn what they need to learn.

The education they provide is normatively, if not fully procedurally, democratic, in that the decisions are made publicly, and with the *expressed* intention of serving a *clearly articulated public good*. And that good is to make certain that two conditions for democracy are fulfilled: that people are capable of exercising their freedom within the bounds set by democratic restraint and that they feel themselves bound by the legitimate needs of others. In Nel Noddings' terms, they care for those with whom they share a civic space, and they have both the intelligence to discern among policy alternatives to do so and the discipline to put such alternatives into practice.

CONCLUSION

If education is a society's intentional effort to prepare children for full participation in the life of the society as adults, then democratic education requires the conscious efforts to foster those virtues that support democracy. We are not doing a very good job of that; it sometimes appears that we are primarily concerned with fostering the virtues of capitalism, and very little concerned with the virtues of democratic life. We need to change that.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank the anonymous reviews and editor who greatly improved this essay from its original draft. The shortcomings that remain are mine, but the argument is much improved thanks to their suggestions.
 2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1966).
 3. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press Books/University of Ohio Press, 1988); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1971/1999).
 4. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 5.
 5. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*.
 6. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, chapter 10.
 7. Lee Canter, *Assertive Discipline: Positive Behavior Management for Today's Classroom* (Canter and Associates: Los Angeles, 2001).
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8. Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).
 9. Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/protagoras.html>.
 10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985).
 11. Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1988).
 12. Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).
 13. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, chapter 26.
 14. Vivian Gussin Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
 15. Deborah Meier, *The Power of their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
 16. Herbert Kohl, *I Won't Learn from You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* (New York: The New Press, 1994).
 17. Gregory Mitchie, *Holler if You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999)
 18. John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990).
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