



Rescuing Politics

Stephan Ellenwood

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



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Professor Stephan Ellenwood
School of Education
Boston University

"He is only being political" is a kind of sentence we have all heard uncountable times. In contemporary usage the meaning is clear; the speaker is deeming the actions of another as contemptible and self-serving. The consequences of this current connotation are fundamentally dangerous to the ideals and processes of democracies. The negative images and connotations surrounding important terms such as politics, political, and politician often prevent the very discourse needed to elevate our public deliberations and decisions. This constant misuse and degradation of politics has myriad, complex causes.

It becomes difficult to tease out separate causes for analysis because the actions of diverse media, the educational system, historical forces, as well as the politicians themselves have contributed to this development. We can wish that this development were as simple as looking back to a Golden Era in which politics was respected and democracies flourished. But reality is nearly always more intricate than declinists yearning for a glorious past that never existed would have us understand.

Nonetheless it is easy to confirm with considerable confidence that any general public respect for political processes in many democracies is deteriorating into dangerous levels of polarization. We can further confirm that anyone imagining a career as a politician must confront the fact that it is not a respected profession. According to a 2016 Harris Poll, Members of Congress are grouped in the Ten Least Prestigious Professions along with real estate agents and public relations consultants. In a 2016 Gallup Poll rating the Honesty and Ethical Standards of Professions, Members of Congress were ranked lower than car salespeople, insurance salespeople, advertising producers and telemarketers. According to longitudinal data in Pew Polling the portion of citizens who "trust the federal government to do the right thing at least most of the time" has deteriorated from a high of more than 75% in the 1950's and early

1960's to less than 25% today. These are all responses from those who elected the government leaders in free elections across more than six decades.

We can also establish the deteriorating regard for politicians as a serious problem by examining the changes in dictionary definitions of politician. If we look back to Webster's, Collegiate Dictionary of 1936 we see the first definition of politicians as "one versed or experienced in the science of government - a statesman." The second definition is "one who is addicted to or actively engaged in politics as managed by parties more or less disparagingly." By 1993 the Random House Unabridged Dictionary defined politician first, rather neutrally, as "seeker or holder of public office." The second definition is one "who is more concerned about winning favor or retaining power than about maintaining principles." Only in the fourth definition do we see a politician as one "skilled in political government or administration; statesman or stateswoman." Thus, in just over 50 years we see the definition of politician as statesman or stateswoman move from the first to the fourth definition. The constant negativity attached to politics and to politicians completely undermines the vital public discourse vital to sound decisions about important matters common to everyone - good public transportation, care for the environment, schools, budgets, safe food, reliable drugs, and wars, to name a few. The more we disparage politics and politicians the more likely that those deliberations will continue to be governed by avarice, power, and media manipulation. It is vital, then, that political and educational leaders help restore positive connotations to politics as a deliberative process intending to produce the public well-being.

Many factors have contributed to this steady disparagement of the political process. Though some of the difficulty is likely the result of casual inattention and distraction by other issues, we cannot ignore the possibility that some have intentionally acted to diminish public

support of politics and government. Many who prioritize individual liberty and fear government control of their lives have an interest in reducing nearly all activities currently undertaken by government. Their mantra is the legendary "that government governs best which governs the least." They ignore Goethe's more exacting maxim, "that government governs best that teaches us how to govern ourselves." Thus, this paper however focuses primarily on developments in schools in general and the moral education movement in particular that have been part of the problem and can be part of the solution. First, we will analyze what has happened in schooling that has influenced, and been influenced by, the deterioration of politics and the distressing polarization over differing points of view. So much of politics today focuses on divisions and conflicts that are posed as binary - national vs. local, public vs. private, government vs. Market, individual vs. communal. Such harsh distinctions are artificial choices. It is unnecessary to choose when political compromise is a choice. Second, we will assess several possible educational solutions in terms of curriculum, policy, and classroom strategies.

We need to turn back about four decades to identify a revival of interest in moral education. A broad review of changes across those decades helps clarify how and under what conditions we arrived at this specific challenge before education today namely, whether the traditions and context surrounding virtue education might have restricted us from effectively learning and teaching about how the moral dimensions of communal, civic, and global forces can influence us as well as how citizens can influence those forces.

The adjustments to moral, virtue, and character education that were first proposed in the 1970's were a reaction to two long-standing educational traditions. One of those traditions held that schools should remain value-free. This tradition was premised in part on the principle that in a free, pluralistic society schools should not teach values. It was widely accepted that students

should learn values from home and church. That principle was itself based on a conviction that virtually all of a student's education was the result of a fixed, information-saturated curriculum and direct, teacher-centered instruction. In actual daily practice this meant that teachers and textbooks would be value-free. It further included a belief that generally one's intellect and one's values are separable.

The second long-standing tradition understood schools as the incubator of widely agreed upon basic virtues. Schools created a basic, but limited, civic code that allowed the schools to operate smoothly and efficiently. The fundamental human virtues such as honesty, fairness, kindness, and responsibility were explained as part of a discipline/behavior code and were largely teacher-delivered. Seldom were the complexities and nuances of those or competing virtues studied within the basic curriculum. And even less studied were the complex moral questions evident in public policies.

Late in the 1960's many educators began to consider the implications of contradictory goals of directly teaching simple virtues/values on the one hand while somehow also trying to remain purely value-neutral on the other hand. The first challenge to these long-standing traditions was the values-clarification movement. It experienced a wide range of criticisms, most of which focused on its failure to integrate with the regular curriculum. It claimed to enhance each student's personal psychological-social development with a three stage process for identifying important personal values. The model centered on a series of value decisions presented in descriptions of typical incidents that students face. The most serious criticisms were based on the fact that the incidents themselves were sterile, de-contextualized, and simplistic. Significantly for our purposes here, values clarification emphasized personal authentication and included little attention to public, civic issues.

Soon after the values clarification movement appeared on the educational stage the re-opening of moral education was taken in a markedly different direction by Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive moral development project. Kohlberg's project forcefully confronted the values clarification plan as superficial and relativistic. His reform expanded Piaget's famous stages of development into moral education. He provided a series of case studies in which teachers could guide students through their moral development from obedience-to-rules all the way to an elevated conception of a moral-social justice in which rules and laws would be challenged peacefully and then revised to comply with more important, higher moral principles. Two difficulties emerged: one, the cases in Kohlberg's model were more analytic exercises than they were realistic, nuanced, and humane judgments; and two, in actual practice the students rarely were involved in the later stages of development involving social civic issues. It was made clear that ordinarily only people such as saints, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. reached this level of development.

The emphasis on Kohlberg's jurisprudential analysis in the cognitive moral development model ignores the "morality of caring" which characterizes women's approaches to the posed moral dilemmas. Carol Gilligan has argued persuasively that, especially in Kohlberg's putatively higher and better stages of development, a woman's action derives " from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract." (Gilligan, 1982, p.19)

Other critics of both the Values Clarification Movement, the Cognitive Development Movement, and Restoration of Core Values Movement indirectly began to open the door to the communal dimensions of moral behavior. In exploring ways in which consequential moral education can extend beyond rational analytic procedures and beyond a "bag of virtues" (as Kohlberg and others disparaged it) the power of humane judgment was integrated with moral

development. What judges identify as "justice with mercy" and Aristotle's "habits of right action" can surely be taught. These two concepts are much more complex and vital than trying to establish a humane integrity based exclusively on rationality, feelings, or a checklist of obviously nice virtues. A list of desirable core values remains important and pedagogically attainable in a monocultural community. But in multicultural communities and in the 21st century global community that are alive with diversity, conflict, progress and growth, achieving educational success in moral education requires reaching beyond personal virtues. Some forms of social, civic, communal responsibility need to be precisely defined and carefully integrated into the comprehensive pre-K- 12 classrooms.

The contributions of many endeavoring to strengthen students' individual moral behavior have been diverse and important. But the attention within those many efforts to deepening students' sense of communal responsibilities have been slight. Redirecting the energies of moral educators toward solving this problem is becoming more important on nearly a daily basis. Success in those redirecting efforts needs to begin by recognizing and challenging the formidable power of the status quo in curriculum design. Despite the combined successes over the last four decades to revive moral education they have only very modestly moved the status quo on deepening students' sense of civic-communal responsibility.

Any attempts in highly durable traditional curriculum model to increase focus on social responsibility is inhibited by two powerful traditions. First, in the basic curriculum for students up to age ten or twelve a student's social education is generally confined to learning about school rules and basic mannerly behavior toward each other. Through middle and senior high school students overall social education is dominated by the study of history, often on the

distant past. Over the past four decades with all the effort toward inducting moral education into the basic social education the curriculum was only modestly moved away from the information-based, past-centric emphasis on history. Only very recently has there been any consistent effort to study ways in

which the past has influenced contemporary life. Today some state-level curriculum frameworks and teacher licensure requirements include standards and/or evidence that a student's study of the past includes analogies across generations (e.g.-how the Vietnam War compares to the Iraq War) or causal connections (e.g.-how decisions about post-civil war reconstruction influenced the 1920's civil rights movement). But by far most of the students' time was spent focusing on a part they regarded as totally inert. History teachers largely and regrettably ignored William Faulkner's wisdom when he noted, "The past is not dead - it is not even past."

An experienced, savvy history teacher once noted the origins of our avoiding the study of recent history in school curriculum. He commented that "the school year always seems to end just as the history classes reach the time that the parents of the students in the room were born." This is no accident. Very recent history usually involves unresolved controversial issues. Schools generally avoid controversial, contemporary issues because they can quickly become heated. The cost of connecting the past to the present seems high. As a result we graduate too many students without experience in resolving differences and without understanding how civic and public policy decisions have moral consequences, often many years later.

The problems surrounding the concept of politics and virtuous civic institutions such as parliaments, courts, heads-of-states, as well as schools are profound. These problems involve polarizing language, media superficiality, educational inattention to changes in public discourse, and avaricious leaders. The many programs and successes in re-invigorating virtue education over four decades have improved the ability of young students to make good decisions and good

judgments; some even focused on developing the wisdom of young people. But the heavy emphasis has been on improving each individual. Moral educators have done far too little in establishing both the importance of, and ways in which, public institutions and public discourse can become virtuous. Schools must consider the ways in which even virtuous individuals can perish if they are in a corrosive educational or political ecology. There are ways to solve these problems aptly identified in H.L. Mencken's "Why Nobody Loves a Politician."

"So long as we want to enjoy the excitement of democracy we must be prepared to endure its curses, and one of them is the fact that when two men stand before a mob, the one honest and the other a fraud, the mob always prefers the fraud. The fraud is always longer on promises and readier with soothing and hence can be more charming to persons incapable of thought"

These final three words, "...incapable of thought" are where moral education must expand. There is a risk of solipsism in emphasizing individual virtues so heavily. To turn our attention to public thought more productively we need to imagine it as a struggle between Ambrose Bierce's sardonic definition of politics, "A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage." (Bierce, p.101) Jonathan Ree's challenging such cynicism about politics in a democracy with his lengthy and elegant distillation of Hannah Arendt's ideas:

"Arendt had a distinctly high-minded conception of politics, seeing it not as the bureaucratic administration of collective concerns or a burdensome public duty, still less as a self-interested continuation of warfare by other means. Politics for her was a precious cultural achievement rather than a regrettable social necessity, and it involved the careful maintenance of institutions that enable people to converse freely and respectfully about the world as they see it and as they would like it to be. It was essentially concerned with problems of a kind that will never have perfect solutions, and that therefore require improvisation, invention and endless critical discussion. Politics required us to set aside all sentiments of pride, indignation, shame or resentment, as well as any pretensions to superior expertise, in order to become responsive intelligent citizens willing to negotiate all our differences on a basis of complete equality. Politics, in short, was the opposite of totalitarianism, and it depended

on an open-hearted love for "human plurality" - for people not in the mass or in the abstract but in the distinctness and idiosyncrasy of their lives and the infinite variety of their perceptions. It was more like a serene philosophical seminar than a self-interested struggle for power, and it was not so much a means to human happiness as the pith and substance of it." (Ree, p.29)

To overcome Mencken's challenge about the fraudulent coming to win political debates because the citizens are "incapable of thought" moral educators must turn to the kinds of thought necessary to defeat the frauds. Among those habits of mind and ways of thinking would be slow thinking, generous thinking, humble thinking, collaborative thinking, respectful thinking, and creative thinking. Behind each of these alternatives is a respect for being careful with the meaning of terms.

A clear example of the failure to care for the full meaning of a commonly used term involving public virtue is the term "politically correct," or as expressed often in today's warp-speed communications, "P.C." The meaning of this widely used phrase had sinister origins in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Usage around that time made it a sneering rejection of a political position. Most commonly it was used to snidely dismiss advocates of feminist reforms or those attempting to eliminate social prejudice. Often these reforms involved modifying language that connoted traditional social-cultural structures. Thus, a feminist urging the usage of Ms. to replace Miss or Mrs. was challenged as "only being politically correct."

The serious damage from our escorting that term into common or acceptable parlance is three-fold. First, it allows the speaker of the phrase to arrogantly undermine the sincerity of those advocating reform by suggesting their only motive was to appeal to the popularity of a pro-feminist or anti-racist position. Second, it debases two important concepts: political and correct. In its best usage political is a value-neutral adjective describing a process of deliberation. Only in perverted

usage recently allowed has political or politician been associated with self-seeking greed or crass manipulation. Similarly, the concept of something being correct is undermined by this pernicious, disingenuous usage of "P.C." Open, flexible societies depend on certain ideas being correct; that is, widely agreed upon such as correct manners. That does not mean a particular behavior regarded as mannerly should never be questioned, but it does mean that it is widely agreed upon. By attempting to dismiss one holding a position on a public issue as doing so because they want to be correct the speaker is undermining the concept of agreed upon behaviors. The effect of conservatives constantly using the concept of "politically correct" is a sad paradox of conservatives de-constructing two concepts fundamental to smoothly functioning democracies.

Third, the more the term "politically correct" is effective in dismissing a genuinely held point of view the more we elude the important, productive discussions and deliberations that are essential to an open and democratic society. Easy and nefarious dismissals of those whose ideas differ from ours means that the deliberations in a public issue never engage the key elements of a democratic process - that is, examining the evidence, reasoning, causes, consequences, context, values, and implications of each point of view in a conflict. Reducing polarization and restoring a healthy fluid center are vital moral issues essential to restoring and re-invigorating virtuous public institutions.

What Can Schools Do?

As schools help the civic mind of the next generation they can effect reforms in three ways: re-balancing the curriculum, expanding teaching strategies, re-considering implications of educational goals for the broader society.

Curriculum planning is essentially budgeting time. Much as a financial budget reveals what is truly important to an institution a curriculum schedule discloses the real goals and values of a school. If schools accept the proposition that basic institutions have been weakened by extremism, polarization, materialism and behaviors that are too often amoral verging toward immoral, then an examination of the budgeting both for the formal and informal curriculum is in order. A cursory look and a deeper analysis of the school's attention to social-civic development would indicate a heavy emphasis on long-standing, traditional academic disciplines in general and on history in particular as the main avenue to developing cultural-civic understandings. Importantly the history is taught in an information-saturated way that allows insufficient connection between past events and current public issues. It is possible to make those connections by showing past events as analogous to current issues and by showing past events as causally connected to current issues either positively or negatively. One reform would involve revising the way historical events and patterns are studied by students so they see that analogies and causes are important sources for making sounder public choices amid contemporary issues. A second reform would be to re-balance the amount of time students spend examining the past compared to deeper examinations of the present and the future. Decisions about public-civic choices alive in any community- local, regional, national, or global - are most effective when they include a balanced consideration of contributing past events, current situations, and future hopes and goals. Any reasonable reviews of contemporary school curriculum budgeting would show a severe imbalance toward the past that needs to be considered. We simply are not adequately preparing students to deal with modern social issues with this heavy tilt toward history in their civic education. Correspondingly the dominant structure of school curriculum remains the traditional academic disciplines. Again the powerful changes underway in the 21st century are complex, rapidly shifting

interdisciplinary issues. When students study for 12 years in a strict, traditional academic discipline structure they have difficulty adjusting to the fast-moving, complex, non-disciplinary issues they confront upon graduation.

A second area worth a curriculum re-evaluation involves experiential learning. The long, long tradition of schools serving to prepare the young for a generally static society they will move into was always a bit dubious. But the rapid changes in all societies over the last 50 years and highly likely over the next 50 years have given rise to educational goals known variously as 21st century skills, or soft skills, or turning change into progress. All of these and variations thereof are important, require curriculum time and classroom strategies, and are enriched by exercising them with real-life experiences. Service learning programs that include reflections about the civic dimensions of communities served are a particularly rich form of experiential learning many schools are turning to. The challenge is to elevate such reforms to the full co-equal of traditional academic study. To accomplish that requires reducing classroom time devoted to more traditional subjects and methods. That is a challenge, but the pay-off in terms of involving students has proven to be substantial.

To many productive educators the power of recent technological changes seems overwhelming and implacable. Yet there are many diverse instances of classroom and curricular reforms that turn this seeming lemon into lemonade. Nearly all of the successes derive from two sources - emphasizing the technology as a resource and slowing down the instruction. Many students are carrying in their pockets and backpacks the equivalent of a full library of information. Just as students need consistent examples of productively using libraries, they need instruction in developing precise, important questions in all fields and then relying on technology to develop rich, wise, full answers to those questions. Problems arise because information often comes too

quickly. Schools as institutions, need to commit to slowing down the process of quick information. The most effective way to accomplish that is to emphasize depth and precision in communication and reflection while de-emphasizing speed and superficiality. The seductions of texting and tweeting can easily overwhelm young minds. Effective school responses involve reflective journals in all subjects as well as careful and caring face-to-face conversations that focus on meaning, complexity, causes, consequences, and context of key ideas involved in civic, political deliberations and decisions.

Let's take a quick look at an example of emphasizing depth and precision. Students can productively analyze the meaning of statements we all hear often as a key element of our public discourse - statements such as, "Everyone is entitled to their opinion," or "that is my opinion" (emphatically), or "There is not much one can do because he has a right to that opinion." Students can conduct research outside of school about what people mean when they make such statements and what people really hear when those, and similar, statements are uttered. They can observe on talk radio and other venues what happens before and after such statements in terms of enlightening their thoughts about public choices. Students can also examine the etymology of the word opinion and locate it in current usage among terms such as sentiments, feelings, beliefs, ideas, concerns, conclusions. When students do that they find that an opinion is well-informed idea, usually just short of a well-supported conclusion. It is not an idea to be blurted out.

Students can further consider the place of opinions in the context of the first amendment free speech clause. That would involve understanding whether there are civic purposes beyond the individual's right to free speech. Of course, the original intentions of free speech were much grander than merely everyone being free to express opinions. The larger goal was the free exchange of ideas in which all citizens were expected to state, listen, reflect upon, and respond to

alternative ideas. The hope was that these exchanges would lead to more thorough and more refined conclusions. That is a far cry from simplistically believing that everyone can utter anything they feel and, as such, it is inaccessible to rebutting

If schools implement these aforementioned reforms they will quickly collide with the emphasis on standardized testing. Simply put, schools need to develop thorough and thoughtful documentation showing the immense breadth of goals set for schools in the 21st century compared to the comparatively narrow bandwidth tested by large-scale standardized tests. Those tests do tell us something about what knowledge and skills the students have mastered. But they omit large portions of things students do know, skills they have developed, and nearly all attitudes and values that the school experience has generated in students. There is no reason to eliminate standardized tests. There are multitudes of reasons to reduce their importance to an appropriate position in school planning and implementation. These test results are simply too convenient because they are simple indicators. They give the illusion of understanding.

Moral educators in particular should be inveighing against the undue emphasis placed on standardized testing. This is especially important as moral educators seek to expand the definitions of virtuous beyond the concept of virtuous individuals to virtuous schools, virtuous institutions, and virtuous communities. The development of each of those is a complex process that is not sequential or linear; that is, it is not best to develop virtuous individuals and then virtuous institutions nor vice versa. The two can only proceed apace in a mutually reinforcing manner. It is possible to assess the success of various approaches to these two goals - virtuous individuals and virtuous institutions - but doing so will require carefully designed longitudinal and qualitative research. Those resulting research narratives will provide successes of how we can educate for virtuous individuals and virtuous intuitions that lead to a positive, constructive, forward-looking

political ecology with greatly reduced extremism, pluralization, and competitive zero-sum competition.

Frequently government is imagined as protecting us against physical violence and fraud. But political acts and government service can also make positive contributions to civic well-being by fostering a public sense of growth and future progress. Public education is a key factor in that effort when it links important concepts like free speech not only to individual freedom, but also to generating fresh, new ideas in combinations. Wise and reflective parents have often noted how children rescue the parents from self-absorption. Lively civic communities can have the same effect by rescuing us from personal, ethnic, racial, or class, or religious self-absorption. The success of that effort depends heavily on expanding the concept of virtue from individuals to institutions.

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