Nel Noddings

Chapter 9: Social and Political Philosophy

Two Competing Emphases in Social & Political Philosophy:

- Liberalism - emphasizes liberty & equality (In conventional American politics, both liberals & conservatives argue from the assumptions of Liberalism.)
- Communitarianism - Emphasizes how individuals develop within & what they owe to the larger society.

Assumptions of liberalism:

- Individuals are naturally and fundamentally independent.
- Each person has the right to pursue things that might contribute to happiness, material prosperity, health, etc.
- The ideal community is one that regulates persons impartially according to the dictates of law and contracts agreed upon by those affected by them.
Assumptions of communitarianism:

- Individuals are naturally and fundamentally social.
- In pursuing things that might contribute to happiness, material prosperity, health, etc., they must pursue the well-being of others.
- Individuals and relationships flourish where people experience a sense of membership, influence members of the group, have personal needs fulfilled, and share satisfying connections with others.

Communitarians: Humans exist and flourish only within the context of communities. Hyper-individualism yields

- Feelings of isolation
- Alienation
- Deep and profound losses of security
- Losses of self esteem

Communitarians: Voluntary agreements, such as social contracts are too tenuous to promote the kinds of relationships needed for healthy persons and relationships.
Communitarians: A range of factors including common traditions, proximity, shared values, and a commitment to care provide the glue that holds communities together.

What do we mean by “community”? Have previous definition become obsolete?

- The community of kinship?
- The community of place?
- Community of mind?
- The problem is that contemporary Western society and public institutions like schools offer few opportunities to gather with those who are “like us.”

Can we synthesize the two emphases by focusing on key points of each?

1. Each human is a complete being, deserving of dignity, respect, and the full expression of the “inalienable rights” that attend personhood.
2. Persons are fundamentally relational.
3. The best context for their growth and development is a caring and just community.
John Dewey argued that only a school that combined the best aspects of “individualism and socialism” could prepare persons to live within and to maintain a healthy, democratic society.

Kant’s approach to morals can be described as very individualistic (or not).

- The individual’s rationally-arrived-at-decision is seen as more valid than that of church or king.
- But all individuals are assumed to arrive at the same decision if they reason properly.
- So is this approach more liberal or more communitarian?

Is Utilitarianism more liberal or more communitarian?
Is this belief more liberal or more communitarian?

- John Rawls - “Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others.”

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Is this belief more liberal or more communitarian?

- The Utilitarians’ insistence that the things we call rights are products of real negotiations or a consensus of beliefs in actual communities.

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Rawls’s test for social rules is that members of society ought to create rules as if they had no idea what their position in society would be.

- Does that remind us of anyone else's test?
- Does it seem workable?
- What are its implications for education?

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How would John Dewey resolve questions of social justice?

- It is not helpful to separate means from ends.
- Questions of justice should be settled by consequences, not by methods or procedures.
- Democracy depends on the willingness to foster communication.
- Does this approach seem workable?
- What are its implications for education?

Urie Bronfenbrenner: In order to develop, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child. Somebody has to be crazy about that kid.

If children come from homes where they have received little love, support, or guidance, what, in justice, do we as a society owe them?
Children who lack care:

• How would the Utilitarians view the issue?
• How would John Rawls?
• The Critical Theorists?
• Dewey?
• The “Ethics of Care” advocates?
• Martin Buber (The Existentialist)?

If children go to schools with inadequate resources, what should a just society do?

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• How would John Rawls?
• The Critical Theorists?
• Dewey?
• The “Ethics of Care” advocates?

“Attempts to create a sense of community within and around schools . . . are vitally important as educational institutions seek to serve diverse groups of students and their families, many of whom live in worlds where little is stable, safe, or secure.”

Mitchell calls upon educational leaders to take seriously the challenge of creating schools where persons experience ‘a collective sense of belonging’ for only in such a setting can individuals grow, develop, and ‘become something.’"

Mitchell suggests that efforts to build community that are not preceded by deep, honest, and unconditional regard for each person are likely to result in monolithic cultures where difference is not accepted because it somehow challenges the sanctity of the collective.

Many thinkers argue that a vital and healthy community is one that combines liberalism’s concern about the individual with a communitarian commitment to the creation of social systems built upon mutual acceptance, care, and respect.
Can curriculum efforts promote community and caring?

Should we provide the same curriculum for all children, or offer a differentiated curriculum based on needs or interests?

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Should we provide the same curriculum for all children, or offer a differentiated curriculum based on needs or interests?

- Dewey proposed: “What the best & wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children.”
- Does this logic seem helpful?
- What are its implications?
• Mortimer Adler, a (mostly secular) neo-Thomist, believes that everyone should have exactly the same course of study through Grade 12.

• Many Critical Theorists also believe that providing all students with “privileged” knowledge will help to break down barriers of race and class.

• But critics of the Critical Theorists—among them many feminists—argue that the standard liberal arts curriculum is merely the manifestation of privileged knowledge.
Forcing all children to take algebra, physics, and foreign language will not in itself give them a share of privileged knowledge. Indeed such a move may well extend the hegemony of the dominant class.

• Not only will students be deprived of the choices Dewey thought so important to participation in democratic processes, But they may come to believe that there is only one ideal or model of educated persons.

• In a society that needs a vast array of excellences, this could be debilitating. For children whose talents are ignored or undervalued, it could be tragic.
Rousseau:

- “Each individual is born with a distinctive temperament. . . . We indiscriminately employ children of different bents on the same exercises; their education destroys the special bent and leaves a dull uniformity. Therefore after we have wasted our efforts in stunting the true gifts of nature we see the short-lived and illusory brilliance we have substituted die away, while the natural abilities we have crushed do not revive.”

Noddings says it depends on how you define the problem:

- Is it more valid to say that education has failed to enable all children to do “privileged” work?
- Or to say that society has failed to pay adequately for necessary but non-“privileged” work?

What would the best and wisest parents want for their very different children?