Liberal Education through Thick and Thin

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I agree with many of the central claims of Kenneth Strike's thoughtful paper on liberal education and political liberalism. I agree that liberal education cannot accommodate all ways of life within a pluralist society and that its ideals should not be abandoned because of its inability to accommodate all social groups. In the spirit of supporting the project undertaken in this paper, I hope to clarify the line of Strike's argument, while raising some questions about his understanding of liberal education that lead me to qualify some of his conclusions. While Strike argues for a strong account of liberal education, characterized by substantive ideals, I argue that he does not adequately show how public schools support such a vision. I suggest that a weaker version of liberal learning may serve to defend the public school curriculum from the compromises about which Strike is concerned.

Strike argues that liberal education is illiberal in the sense that it may place a greater burden on certain groups, especially religious groups, within liberal society. He accepts John Tomasi's argument that the ideals of liberalism have a "spillover" effect that may undermine the ways of life of some groups, such as evangelical Christians, who nevertheless deal fairly with those who are different from themselves. However, Strike does not think that liberal education must be sacrificed in order to reduce the burden on these groups as Tomasi suggests. For example, in the case of "born-again" parents in the *Mozert v. Hawkins* case, Tomasi believes that the schools might better accommodate Christian parents who wanted to remove their children from a critical reading program. Strike believes that teaching academic disciplines with integrity, like this reading program, is an important part of liberal education, even if it is "illiberal" in its inability to accommodate groups such as the parents in the *Mozert* case. The extent to which liberal education imposes on these groups and the extent to which it benefits other groups is fundamentally uncertain according to Strike. In the face of such confusion, Strike recommends that educators teach their disciplines with integrity and avoid "accommodation that requires complex calculation of educational benefits and burdens."

However, Strike is not simply arguing for liberal learning on constitutional or political grounds. He wants to highlight the importance of "human flourishing" as a fundamental ideal of liberal education that is often ignored by those who commonly reduce it to its political or cognitive aims. He suggests that the ideal of human flourishing complicates the tension between the state mandated curriculum and individual or parental rights. While the political and cognitive aims of liberal education may also conflict with the requirement of liberal neutrality, Strike believes that human flourishing offers an additional set of reasons for teachers to preserve the integrity of their subject matter in the face of demands by particular groups to dilute the curriculum or select from it as they please.

Strike develops the ideal of human flourishing in terms of "the life of the mind." In order to explain this ideal, he draws on John Stuart Mill's account of "the pleasures

of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments" as well as John Rawls's claim that people enjoy the exercise of their complex, realized capacities. He also uses Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of "practices" to explain human flourishing: practices are characterized by intrinsic goods, ongoing development, and a sense of community and cooperation. For Strike, the intellectual pleasure and the enrichment of human experience that he sees at the heart of liberal education help to explain what is lost when such education is diminished or compromised in the name of neutrality.

Although human flourishing can be consistent with pluralism, according to Strike, it is "likely to generate a culture that burdens" some citizens. If the curriculum is instrumentalized, viewed simply as a means toward a range of future ends, it thus becomes disconnected from the intrinsic goods of human flourishing. This instrumental approach to academic subjects may ease the burden on the groups Tomasi is concerned about, but, for Strike, it will compromise the goods inherent in the subject matter, causing them to be "distorted." Human flourishing is diminished when the curriculum is watered down, treated as a prelude to job training, or taught piecemeal to avoid conflicts with religious belief. Preserving the ideal of human flourishing requires maintaining the integrity of the arts and sciences, as they exist in the public school curriculum, even if this compromises political liberalism's neutrality.

While I agree with the thrust of Strike's argument, I find his account of liberal education ambiguous to the extent that it raises questions about the conclusion of the paper. On the one hand, it is clear that Strike is arguing for a very strong account of liberal education, reminiscent of Robert Hutchins idealistic vision at the University of Chicago: "The aim of liberal education is human excellence, both private and public . . . It regards man as an end not as a means; and it regards the ends of life, and not the means to it. For this reason it is the education of free men."[1] Hutchins is clear that the specific questions and ideas in the Western intellectual tradition contribute to the development of human excellence. Strike rejects the account of liberal education in terms of a "canon consisting of great books (largely) the writings of European dead white men." Nevertheless, he accepts strong, substantive *ideals* for liberal education, while avoiding a specific account of its content. He implies that the ideals of liberal education have a universal value that transcends practical or instrumental aims of schooling.

However, in much of the paper Strike seems to conflate this strong, idealistic version of liberal learning with the existing content of the public school curriculum. When discussing the *Mozert* and *Aguillard* cases, he is defending the "integrity" of traditional academic subject matter. Yet, it is not clear that the integrity of the high school curriculum depends on the strong version of liberal education above and the kinds of intrinsic goods that Strike associates with human flourishing. Is the conventional history, math or reading curriculum, a liberal education according to the criteria he sets forth? Of course, the academic curriculum of the public schools is loosely derived from a classical education of the past, but this does not show that the *ideal* of human flourishing is the source of integrity for these subjects today, if it ever was. Strike could address this concern by showing how the ideal of liberal learning is present, if only in some latent way, in the disciplines as they are

commonly taught. However, I think there is a fundamental tension between the state mandated curriculum, which is at issue in the *Mozert* and *Aguillard* cases, and the strong version of liberal learning associated with human excellence and flourishing. The state mandated curriculum in the context of universal public schools is more concerned with basic equality and broad competencies such as literacy than the richness of human experience that Strike connects with liberal learning.

Strike's account of an instrumentalist approach to curriculum is probably the most that can be hoped for in universal, compulsory schooling. Yet, this does not mean that there cannot be a weaker, but still meaningful account of liberal learning. Of course, a purely instrumental approach to schooling that is vocational and specialized cannot be considered liberal in any sense. Yet, Strike characterizes the instrumental curriculum in the following way: "You may come to internalize some of the non-instrumental goods associated with intellectual practices.…Or not. We allow this but political liberalism does not require it." Strike rejects this way of thinking about liberal learning because it "externalizes the goods of practices." Yet, this is the most that schooling can do in a liberal society. It cannot guarantee intrinsic meaning in each subject matter for all students. All we can say is: "Practicing this discipline is likely to make you more marketable and it may help you to live a richer life; ideally it will do both, but there is some chance it might not do either." This approach is instrumental in Strike's language, but it maintains an appeal to the value of human flourishing, although in a more indirect and contingent way.

The ideals of the liberal arts ought to animate the public school curriculum, but only in the limited sense that the academic curriculum should have a general value that includes (but is not limited to) living a richer life. This approach to curriculum is still liberal in the sense that it resists specialization and in that it cannot be reduced to vocational aims.[2] Yet it avoids the strong, idealist account of liberal education that would require a further development of the public school curriculum before we could defend it. In giving up a claim to intrinsic goods, the integrity of subject matter in the public schools may still be defended against dramatic forms of accommodation to particular groups within a pluralist society. Furthermore, there is still room for students and teachers to connect the ideal of human flourishing with their work in the classroom, even if this ideal sits alongside other less lofty purposes of education.

I think the stronger version of the liberal arts that Strike has in mind has an important role to play, especially in many parts of the university and in some exceptional K-12 schools. The specific practices connected with liberal learning can guide and inspire teachers as he suggests. Although it would be nice to think that the integrity of liberal learning, in Strike's sense, is already in the schools to defend, I believe that its role in public schooling is exceptional, and I worry that its place in the university is increasingly tenuous.[3]

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1. Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Touchstone, 1982) 73.

2. Robert Hutchins, *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952) 3.

3. I would like to thank Chris Higgins for his comments on an earlier draft of this response.