

The “Thick and Thin” of Democratic Morality

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In his essay “Pluralism, Justice, Democracy, and Education,” Ronald Glass offers a very thoughtful, compelling, and important argument for democracy as inherently pluralistic and deliberative. Its importance is especially felt in the context of a rising tide of moral dualism and intolerance. Glass maintains that moral pluralism is inherent in democracy and with it moral disagreement and conflict. The existence of moral pluralism in turn necessitates democratic deliberation. It is deliberation between citizens that is the defining moral feature of democracy. Not only is deliberation necessary politically, it constitutes the process through which morality is structured. Glass offers a democratically deliberative model of morality. In turn, if democracy is so constituted, then, Glass argues, a democratic education must be devoted to the cultivation of deliberative capacities.

While in strong and general agreement with Glass’s position my response centers on one area of concern: the apparent downplaying of the importance of democracy as a system of rights as well as being deliberative. In this regard, I will use Michael Walzer’s metaphor of “thick and thin” moralities to frame Glass’s argument. A thin morality is one constituted by general and universal principles. A thick morality is that which is constituted by deliberation conditioned by history, tradition, and culture. As Walzer suggests:

This dualism is, I think, an internal feature of every morality. Philosophers most often describe it in terms of a (thin) set of universal principles adapted (thickly) to these or those historical circumstances. I have in the past suggested the image of a core morality differently elaborated in different cultures.¹

This dualistic metaphor captures our moral reality. We should not try to escape the dualism for it fits what I am inclined to call the necessary character of any human society: universal because it is human, particular because it is society.²

Moral principles are necessarily “thin” in the sense that they are abstract and general. They are broad guidelines, which require specification in terms of the particularities of individual situations and contexts. There exists a plurality of cultural value and moral systems that are distinct but which have implicit in them the thin core of moral principle. Moral principle, therefore, can be conceived as both universal and plural simultaneously, and both conceptions are essential. They are universal in a thin sense and plural and particular as lived. Moral universalism and moral pluralism are not, from this perspective, contradictory; they are interdependent.³

Sissela Bok makes a similar point: “Certain basic values necessary to collective survival have had to be formulated in every society. A minimalist [that is, thin] set of such values can be recognized across societal and other boundaries.”⁴ These basic values are indispensable to human coexistence, though far from sufficient, at every level of personal and working life and of family, community, national, and international relations.⁵

These basic values pertain to rights, duties, and norms in three areas: (1) Positive duties of mutual care and support, (2) negative duties of no harm to others, and (3) norms of rudimentary fairness and procedural justice. Bok maintains that they are necessary for the kind of trust that underlies all social relations and thus are essential for societal order on all levels.⁶

Societies have produced a diversity of maximalist (thick) values that are not common but can be consistent with the three kinds of universal minimalist values. The thin, minimalist values are immanent in the context of the thick, maximalist values. Again from the perspective of values, universalism and pluralism are interdependent. Diversity can be honored while common values and universal rights respected. Also critique of local values and cultural norms and practices can be legitimate if those values, norms, and practices violate universal values and rights. In turn, a plurality of local values and practices can be compatible with universal human rights and values.⁷

In the case of a liberal democracy the “thin” principle of Autonomy or Liberty is implicit in the dynamics of pluralism. Historically this principle has been defined as the right to define and pursue one’s own conception of the good life consistent with the equal right of others to define and pursue their own good. David Held defines the “principle of autonomy” as follows:

Persons should enjoy equal rights and, accordingly, equal obligations in the specification of the political framework which generates and limits the opportunities available to them: that is, they should be free and equal in the determination of the conditions of their own lives, so long as they do not deploy this framework to negate the rights of others.⁸

From this perspective, democracy is a system of rights premised upon the logic of moral equality.⁹ If the citizens of a democracy are morally equal and thus autonomous, then they are free to define their own moral values and goods. Democratic autonomy thereby generates moral plurality by its very nature. The thick plurality of democratic civil society and culture is founded upon a guaranteed right of autonomy. However, the generation of plurality founded upon thin principles is not monological, as Glass suggests. It is dialogical; it is deliberative. It requires a public space of positive political freedom; a conception that has been virtually lost in modern political discourse but revived here by Glass.

Hannah Arendt, for example, argues that the aim of “revolution” is not liberation from political or economic oppression, but the establishment of political freedom.¹⁰ The result of liberation is the establishment of certain rights that guarantee autonomy. However, Arendt maintains that liberty in this sense is not the “actual content of freedom”; the content of freedom is “admission to the public realm.” For liberty to be real, a “body politic” must be formed, wherein a public space is created. As Arendt put it: “a body politic which is the result of covenant and ‘combination’ becomes the very source of power for each individual person who outside the constitutional political realm remains impotent.”¹¹ As Arendt demonstrates, at the basis of all authentic revolutions is this notion of founding a public space wherein autonomy is exercised. All of this suggests that liberty is contingent upon the creation of deliberative spaces. I thus agree with Glass that public deliberation and a morally pluralistic civil society are central to democracy.

However, my central point of disagreement with Glass, and the reason for invoking the distinction between thick and thin, is to suggest that the thin order of moral equality and autonomy is both immanent in and protective of the moral plurality, the thickness, of democracy. In other words, I disagree with the dualism that Glass asserts between moral pluralism and moral singularity. I see them, not as contradictory, but as mutually reinforcing. The logic of equality and autonomy is implicit in deliberative nature of democracy, and in turn, genuine democratic deliberation is only possible if the participants adhere to certain thin principles of fairness that emanate from equality. Glass in fact acknowledges this need, however, he concludes that “Democratic citizens have no recourse to moral theories to resolve disputes outside those created through processes of deliberation and struggle, so they best become skilled in the arts of each if justice is to have meaning in a secure society.” This statement, however, begs the question: if there is no recourse to a moral theory outside of deliberation, what makes democratic deliberation possible? What will guarantee the right to form and participate in public spaces of deliberation? In totalitarian systems there are no public spaces of deliberation, for no system of established rights to autonomy and fairness exists. Without a codified system of legal rights and an independent judiciary what will protect individuals, especially minorities, in the deliberative process? It seems to me that a thin moral framework in some sense “outside” of deliberation is necessary to ensure the possibility of democratic deliberation. The two are not contradictory; they are mutually interdependent. Thus, while acknowledging the importance of pluralism and deliberation, I do not think we should lose sight of democracy as a system of human rights.

If democratic morality is both thick *and* thin, then democratic education must address the cultivation of, not only the capacities of deliberation, but an understanding of democracy as a system of rights premised upon the logic of equality. Democracy requires the development of an understanding of both the thick and thin of democracy.

1. Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (South Bend, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1996), 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 8

3. Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Rights: Four Inquiries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80-84

4. Sissela Bok, *Common Values* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 13.

5. *Ibid.*, 19.

6. *Ibid.*, 14-16.

7. *Ibid.*, 24.

8. David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

9. Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

10. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

11. *Ibid.*, 171.