

The Eclipse of Civic Virtue: Recalling the Place of Public Education

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I

Alexander Sidorkin is not alone in his belief “that the institution of public schooling will outlive its usefulness within the next few decades.”¹ However, the end of schooling — an expensive and inefficient relic of its time — is not the end of education. Cultural and economic forces will open new ways of energizing and focusing on the interests and increasingly diverse options open to learners, certainly enhanced and accelerated by technological developments of many kinds. The implications for teaching are profound. For Sidorkin, teaching “must stop being a wholesale operation, and instead become flexible, on-demand, and right-on-time service. Teaching will become a service profession; only those who need and want teaching will receive it, and those who can learn on their own will be left alone.”²

What this new world of teaching may one day look like is of course an open question, for who can say what cultural and technological changes will unfold? For us at this point in time, the heightened pace of change and experimentation suggest that Sidorkin is fundamentally right: the traditional, “wholesale” model of teaching — millions of teachers meeting tens of millions of students every day in school classrooms across the nation, at the cost of hundreds of billions of dollars — may be supplanted by new ways of doing things. As we write this essay, for example, the Senate in Michigan moves on a bill allowing profit-making home-based “cyberschools” to operate on state funding levels equivalent to traditional public schools. A nearby district experiments with having just one teacher for three large fifth grade classes; the students in each class use computer monitors to receive the teacher’s instruction, while being monitored by a less expensive paraprofessional aid. High schools have shifted social studies classes to an online format at considerable cost savings. Such examples could be readily multiplied across the country.

Accounts of such developments almost invariably focus on the question of results: how does the innovation compare with traditional practices in terms of measurable outcomes? This way of thinking places the new approaches in the context of continuing efforts of public schools to attend to the kinds of learning demanded by current accountability schemes under No Child Left Behind, as well as state mandates to evaluate teachers on the basis of measurable learning outcomes. This accentuates the notion that producing specific learning outcomes is the central concern in education, and in so doing, further emboldens those who envision alternative ways of generating the same kinds of results — many of which do not require the large and expensive apparatus of the traditional public school. Are there not, after all, many new ways to generate the kinds of results people want?

Consider the analogy of public schooling to mainstream twentieth-century, public-spirited journalism. As James Fallows notes, in a generation we have moved

from a system of relatively centralized media outlets, governed in accord with professional journalistic standards regarding the public trust, to today's new media in which consumers "get the news they want" when and how they want it. Fallows captures the shift in this way: "Giving people what they want as opposed to what they should want is a conflict as old as journalism.... [F]or more than a century after the Civil War, American readers and viewers were in various ways buffered from getting exactly what they *wanted* from newspapers and, later, radio and TV news shows. News, like education, aspired to be as interesting as possible but to have an uplifting civic intent". In short, he comments, "With each passing month, people can get more of what they want and less of what someone else thinks they should have."³

For Fallows, although the older model was surely flawed, it did cultivate the aspiration to fulfill a public responsibility in presenting the news. But the game has changed. The status and authority of mainstream journalistic sources is diminished and, more importantly, the governing aspirations of diverse news providers are now many and grounded in commercial, ideological, and consumer interests.

Similarly, civic education represented a vital aim and a central component of the historical mission of public education, shaped by notions of public responsibility for the cultivation of citizens.⁴ Over time however, that mission was eclipsed by an increasing emphasis on knowledge, academic skills, and the individual pursuits of learning and opportunity. In both cases, a high-minded aspiration to control what and how the public learns about what presumably matters most gives way to greater degrees of freedom to control one's own learning.

Surveying the pace and depth of changes in the domain of journalism, Fallows provides a model of critical balance. While noting the energy, accessibility, scope, and variety of journalistic forms today, Fallows asks: "[I]f we accept that the media will probably become more and more market-minded, and that an imposed conscience in the form of legal requirements or traditional publishing norms will probably have less and less effect, what are the results we most fear?" Four issues loom large:

- *That this will become an age of lies, idiocy, and a complete Babel of "truthiness," in which no trusted arbiter can establish reality or facts.*
- *That the media will fail to cover enough of what really matters, as they are drawn toward the sparkle of entertainment and away from the depressing realities of the statehouse, the African capital, the urban school system, the corporate office when corners are being cut.*
- *That the forces already pulverizing American society into component granules will grow all the stronger, as people withdraw into their own separate information spheres.*
- *That our very ability to think, concentrate, and decide will deteriorate, as a media system optimized for attracting quick hits turns into a continual-distraction machine for society as a whole, making every individual and collective problem harder to assess and respond to.*⁵

These fears extend the analogy between journalism and public education to reveal a deeper set of links. The issues Fallows identifies pertaining to journalism are deeply implicated as well in the history of tensions at the center of public education. The civic mission of public schooling long wrestled with these very concerns, adjudicating important questions of truth, building unity, and forging a public capacity to focus attention on things believed to matter.

Nonetheless, for a clear-eyed critic of public education such as Sidorkin, the question is what schools have done and now do on these fronts, and the record is dubious at best. In its first century or so, the hay day of schooling's civic mission, one finds all manner of Americanization programs, patriotic mythmaking, and deeply rooted discriminatory practices. Since that time, the civic role of schooling has been diminished, though occasionally invoked in order to advance one or another kind of reform agenda. These have included certain forms of progressive, social-justice-oriented efforts exercised through schools, as well as diverse "character education" programs aligned with the prevailing conventions of order in schooling. In any case, as Sidorkin has noted, such social and civic efforts have often been marginalized and ineffectual, and in any case they are eclipsed today by the preoccupations with academic performance, individual advancement, and economic efficiency.

What then can be said of the civic role of schools in addressing the vital issues Fallows identifies? If the answer is, "not much," then the days of traditional schooling are deservedly numbered. Is there more to the story, something more to see in the daily reality of school practices?

II

The comparison with journalism highlights a crucial distinction. Unlike journalism, which operates by way of diverse media, schooling centers on direct presence: face-to-face engagement in public spaces designated for that encounter. Our contention is that classrooms are everywhere a kind of theater of action with respect to all four domains of concern identified by Fallows. At any level, a classroom confronts those present with situations that routinely place demands on all concerned. The situational demands generate diverse tensions with respect to the habits and dispositions of those present in the classroom space.

Take, for example, Fallows's fear of a cultural slide toward "truthiness." Viewed broadly, the issue involves profound beliefs about and commitments to the nature of truth. But as Bernard Williams suggests,⁶ at the heart of the matter, much more significant than the intellectual debates about "Truth," are the everyday virtues of truthfulness: sincerity and accuracy. How do dispositions to care about and strive for these ideals develop in a person? What kinds of interaction and circumstances — including pedagogical ones — contribute to such dispositions and their exercise? More importantly, perhaps, how are the various challenges, failures, or shortcomings in speaking sincerely and striving for accuracy addressed? Classrooms invariably constitute a space where tensions and issues concerning the virtues of truthfulness come into view and are addressed in some way.

Similarly, Fallows expresses concern that in contemporary culture a chronic difficulty involves sustained public attention to what “really matters.” But consider where the very idea of “what really matters” comes from. One must learn to recognize a distinction between what feels important to me, now, and things that are, in some sense, important in themselves, or for us all together. The daily drama of classroom life centers on precisely this distinction as, however convincingly, those involved shift — or resist shifting — from the fleeting and personal objects of interest to what is considered to matter. Sometimes a sense of reverence even emerges for things — ideals, traditions, values — that, as Paul Woodruff suggests,⁷ provide the basis for genuine respect in classroom settings. But in any case, habits and dispositions regarding notions of what really matters invariably emerge in the context of classroom life.

So too with respect to Fallows’s fears about social fragmentation and disconnection. Classrooms are laboratories of social experience where individual tendencies, dispositions, and virtues are expressed regarding issues of identity and difference. In some kindergartens, as Vivian Paley’s title reminds us, the idea might be, “you can’t say you can’t play.”⁸ Across the years of school experience, classroom life generates tensions that test, draw out, and modify characteristic patterns of social understanding and engagement. There are many ways key virtues such as fairness and benevolence are routinely addressed in public school settings, overcoming, or falling prey to, the rudimentary tendencies of cultural parochialism, animosity, and prejudice.

Finally, where Fallows worries about distractibility, one might think of the millions of classrooms as a vast array of sites in an ongoing struggle to discipline attentiveness and draw out sturdy dispositions of self-control. The struggle is sometimes a losing battle, and fought for the wrong reasons, but also often not, and classroom settings present a tremendous range of options as to the kinds and quality of attentiveness that are sought and achieved. The central and mundane fact of life in schooling is precisely that it demands development of self-control and the intellectual virtues of sustained attentiveness in learning; there are hours to get through every day and countless occasions shaping one’s capacity to exercise powers of attentiveness in many ways and for diverse reasons.

What this suggests is that, with regard to Fallows’s deep concerns, school settings embed the young in circumstances that routinely bear on the way key habits, dispositions, and virtues relating to those concerns develop — for better or worse. Importantly, the relevant virtues are not somehow added on as one more thing to accomplish. If anything, they are built into the fabric of school life — but in what ways, and how shall we think about this? A closer look at virtue will bring what is involved into sharper focus.

III

We contend that public schools play a civic role that addresses the kind of concerns raised by Fallows in ways that often go overlooked and underappreciated. The very structure of schools provides a unique place for the cultivation of

intellectual and moral virtues that are vital to personal and societal flourishing. The virtues that we would like to call to mind are found neither in the sterile moralizing of nineteenth-century textbooks, nor in the data-driven character-education programs today. Rather, they reside in the simple, day-to-day interactions between committed teachers and their students.

Julia Annas's recent book, *Intelligent Virtue*, provides a compelling framework for thinking about virtue and its place in public education. Using a skill analogy, Annas's account of virtue emphasizes the central role that learning plays in its cultivation. One does not simply become virtuous; rather, like the acquisition of higher-order skills, being virtuous is a gradual achievement that requires certain conditions to be met over an extended period of time. Annas illustrates virtue's developmental character as follows:

[V]irtue is a matter of habituation but not of routine. To become kind or just requires learning how to deal with experience of various kinds for yourself and not just copying what someone else, or a book, says. You have to start off trusting your teachers to develop kindness and justice in you, showing you the right contexts and situations and teaching you in the right way to pick up what is important in these. But because your learning is not just mimicking but involves the drive to aspire, what you develop is a disposition based on understanding (to some degree, of course) of what it is to be kind and just, such that you can respond to new and even unfamiliar situations in ways that express what you have learnt from familiar ones.... Virtuous activity thus involves ongoing selective and differential engagement with the world, not a repetition of a routine once learned and then safely relied on.⁹

A few observations can be made about this description of virtue. The first is that it involves a *learner-teacher relationship* that begins with trust in the authority of the teacher and gradually moves toward the learner's active and critical independence. What is noteworthy about this relationship is that it is necessary, sustained, and adaptive to various stages and changes in social context. Not only must the teacher model the virtues, but she must also provide opportunities for her students to practice virtue in various non-routine ways. As students develop their virtues, this relationship becomes dialogic; students serve as teachers to others and draw from sources of virtue that extend well beyond the family, classroom, and local community.

In Annas's account, the development and practice of virtue demands both the intellect and aspiration of the learner. The distinction between learning by heart and by rote memorization turns on one's active intellectual and aspirational engagement. One does not just do what is right or what one is told, one must do the right thing for the right reasons and with the right desire.

Initially, this intellectual and aspirational engagement takes on a superficial, forced quality. The beginner concerns herself with reasons and justifications of action, and the aspiration to act virtuously and the act of doing so often run counter to her feelings and inclinations. As she moves from beginner to expert, however, she becomes less consciously aware of the reasons for virtue and more alert to the specific demands called for by the occasion. The unnatural, forced quality initially evoked in right action recedes as her feelings and aspirations align with the practice of virtue that expresses a commitment to goodness because it is good.

A similar process occurs as one learns a new language. The beginner awkwardly stumbles through conversation, scrambling to find the proper word and to speak with the correct pronunciation, while the fluent speaker uses the language as an extension of herself, adroitly expressing her feelings and delivering the appropriate responses to her interlocutor's queries. What seems like a cold and alien world to the beginner becomes home to the fluent speaker as she learns to feel and dream in the adopted language. In both cases, intellectual activity and aspirations are present, even if their energies have different targets.

Whether it is a high-level skill or the practice of virtue, the move from beginner to expert does not just happen. It requires relationships, right reasoning, right desire, and a sustained presence amidst others from which innumerable opportunities for authentic encounters with changing, complex patterns and situations come together to comprise a habituation.

IV

Since the beginning of the last century, a substantial amount of a person's childhood is typically spent in school. One's schooling encompasses tens of thousands of hours of classroom time with thousands of classmates and hundreds of teachers working alone or together on countless projects and assignments. It is easy to dismiss such a wholesale, taken-for-granted undertaking. From above, the iterations of classroom activities, grades and graduations appear predictable, unimpressive, routine.

Our claim here is modestly provocative. We believe that with an eye to virtue, public schooling is neither ineffectual nor routine. Even under the most trying circumstances, the conditions for the development of virtue are present in schools and such development regularly takes place. Furthermore, we argue that these virtues play a vital role in the flourishing of persons and of our democracy.

That the conditions for virtue are present in traditional schools is not surprising given Annas's developmental account that lends itself to the dynamics of the classroom. Teachers provide a rich source of personalities, passions, and expertise united by the standards of the profession but diverse in application. They model, in a variety of ways, virtues that express what Annas calls a "commitment to goodness."¹⁰ Some are dedicated to their respective disciplines, inviting students to share in their passion by exhibiting virtues that cast the world in new light. Others are devoted to students — their students — and the specific challenges each faces in their short time spent together. Still others embrace the vocation itself, embodying for their students the ideals and way of life of a teacher. It is also worth mentioning that these commitments are all in some way interrelated, however different their emphases may be.

The fact that teachers are never paragons of virtue, or that even the best teacher cannot cultivate virtues in all her students, just reinforces the need for a variety of committed teachers and multiple opportunities for authentic interactions to occur. While there are truly inspiring teachers as well as truly uninspiring ones, the vast majority of teachers fall somewhere between the two. And yet we suspect that when

most people look back on their K–12 school experiences, they find no shortage of teachers who enriched their lives.

In addition to a reliable source of teachers, schools provide a separate place for sustained relationships where virtue is practiced in a theater of mimesis and innovation, action and reflection, giving and receiving, watching and being watched. It is an intermediate space described by Hannah Arendt as the place between the closed off, safe, private world of the family and the expansive, unforgiving public world of adults;¹¹ a place where students have time and space to overcome their initial reservations and discomfort and, in the presence of passionate teachers, encounter new and old ideas and aspire to learn and share their understanding in ways that contribute to their own flourishing and the flourishing of those around them.

We suspect that these exercises of virtues do not mainly occur in lessons specifically designed for the moral development of students. Not only is it unnecessary to focus explicitly on the virtues themselves, there are advantages to avoiding the temptation to do so, especially if we consider the artificial way virtue is normally conceptualized in school. In fact, the cultivation of virtue often occurs when we least expect it. Students and teachers become involved in conversations and situations that they ordinarily would not choose, but that end up palpably affecting their lives.

The virtues called for by such occasions are easily overlooked because of the tacit way they implicate themselves in the daily fabric of schooling. Harry Frankfurt argues that when we view the object of our love, we do so with disinterested concern.¹² In a similar vein, when we truly care about something we want to see it for what it is — we want the truth about it, in its proper proportion. We are not satisfied with just the facts, but are committed to attaining a deeper understanding. In a classroom, such an understanding often implicitly demands respect for accuracy, sincerity, the authority of those who may know more (or otherwise), and the effort of those with whom one shares a passion. The school's bulwark against the public dangers expressed by Fallows, then, is not to be found in a new character education program on Truth, Interrelation, Proportion and Sustained Concentration (TIPS CTM!). It is found in the active engagement with something meaningful that, in the process, draws us toward these ideals and their corresponding virtues.

In a clear departure from Aristotle, Annas argues that the “idea that virtue involves a commitment to goodness” can “be fully grasped only by the study of the many diverging ways that lives can be lived,” a point that is especially true in the complex and diverse world of public schooling.¹³ Teachers who take themselves and their craft seriously express this commitment in various ways. We need not insist on the specific scope and nature of this commitment nor prescribe a hierarchy of virtues that is supposed to get us there. In a democracy, there will be tensions, conflicts and the constant need for conversation. What unites most teachers, however, is that they are committed to goodness for its own sake — whatever their conception of it may be — and not for external rewards, or because being committed to goodness helps them meet certain institutional targets.

Indeed, with respect to schooling's civic purposes, the attempt to be accountable through curricula narrowly focused on measurable learning objectives and data-driven character education programs may in fact increase the irrelevance of public schooling and encourage teachers to shirk their responsibilities to their students. When a successful school is determined solely by the capability of students to memorize bodies of knowledge and apply generalized skills, or when a successful "Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports" program turns on a reduction of referrals to the principal,¹⁴ then we lose sight of the personal and societal rewards reaped when teachers and students form authentic bonds with the subject matter and each other. In effect, we replace the aim of cultivating flourishing persons and a flourishing society with a concern for the smooth functioning of the system or the fashioning of a preordained end-product, conceived without consideration of specific students and the changing social context.

That public schooling serves this civic role is not to say that it always done well. Sidorkin's claim that the wealthy and poor participate in "two completely different economic systems" — the "consumer market" and "labor taxation," respectively¹⁵ — draws attention to the severe discrepancies between the conditions, experiences, and promises of schooling for wealthy and working class students. Social reproduction theorists are also convincing on this score. However, even in the worst schools, it is possible for teachers committed to goodness to create authentic relationships and embody models of excellence. In fact, the hypocrisy of others only serves to highlight what is lacking but crucial in schooling. Schools cannot perform miracles, but they do provide a place to develop further the conditions of flourishing. As the recent work by Chris Higgins illustrates, this is especially evident in schools that recognize the kinds of good lives teachers lead and how these equip them to perform their vital civic role.¹⁶

V

Skeptics such as Sidorkin might consider our faith in the civic mission of public schooling to be unwarranted or even utopian. But the issue concerns the object of that faith. Is public education an ideal way to deliver the goods of personal and civic virtue? Hardly. That misses the point, however, for virtues are everywhere and always in a state of incomplete development. As Annas suggests, we must learn to focus on the thick of things, the situations in which we are embedded and virtue is in play. The vast web of public sites that education now sustains brings people together whose daily encounters present them with distinctive challenges from which a range of virtues may and sometimes do develop further than would otherwise be the case.

Yet even the most vocal public school advocates are reluctant to discuss this vital aspect of public education. Why? Perhaps some resist appealing to such language because of the taint of past and present experiments that are reactionary in intent or hollow in application. Moreover, under public scrutiny, the messy terrain of human flourishing can hardly compete with the reassuring, though paradoxically abstract, concreteness of a test score.

In addition there is the nature of virtue itself. Like the kind of news that is good for you but you do not want to hear, the practice of virtue is initially unsettling and painful; it obstructs one's short-term goals and the satisfaction of one's immediate desires. Virtue demands, as the occasion calls, that we listen to others, take a stand, feel ashamed, act generously, raise uncomfortable questions, refuse a request, and even be humbled. It is ever a challenge and readily resisted in the best of circumstances.

Nonetheless, Fallows is cautiously optimistic that the new media can overcome the threats to the civic ideals of journalism that he describes, threats centered on the virtues of citizens. Add then the transformation foreshadowed by Sidorkin, decoupling education from the traditional forms schooling, which entails a far more extensive impact on the development of the virtues in question. Can a free-market system in education re-create the conditions for the development of virtue and the flourishing of persons and society, or will something entirely different fill the void left after the demise of the traditional public school?

1. Alexander Sidorkin, *Labor of Learning: Market and the Next Generation of Educational Reform* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 187.

2. *Ibid.*, 188.

3. James Fallows, "Learning to Love the (Shallow, Divisive, Unreliable) New Media," *Atlantic Monthly* (April 2011), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/04/learning-to-love-the-shallow-divisive-unreliable-new-media/8415/>.

4. See David Tyack, *Seeking Common Ground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

5. Fallows, "Learning to Love."

6. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

7. Paul Woodruff, *Reverence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

8. Vivian Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

9. Julie Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 74.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

12. Harry Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

13. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 116.

14. Brandi Simonson, George Sugar, and Madeline Negron, "Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports: Primary Systems and Practices," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 40, no. 6 (2008): 32–40.

15. Alexander Sidorkin, "Is Schooling a Consumer Good? A Case Against School Choice But Not the One You Had in Mind," in *Philosophy of Education 2007*, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007), 80.

16. Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).