

## Extending Rawls to Address Questions about Education and Race

M. Victoria Costa

*College of William and Mary*

The predominant theme in John Rawls's influential philosophy has been the nature of social justice. Because Rawls was an American philosopher who lived in the twentieth century, it is somewhat surprising that he did not write about the legacy of slavery, segregation, and persistent racism as serious obstacles to the realization of just social institutions. Although Rawls did write about the role of education in promoting justice, in the whole of his work he devoted only a few dispersed pages to this topic. Making his philosophy of education explicit requires one to piece together a number of clues, and to fill in some significant gaps. In fact, it might better be described as a process of constrained invention than as a process of discovery. Winston Thompson's essay, which discusses how we might extend Rawls's theory to address topics at the intersection of education and race, is a welcome contribution to the literature on the educational implications of Rawls's work. Leaving aside the distributive focus on equality of opportunity, Thompson proposes that we consider whether and to what extent we can derive specific recommendations for incorporating conversations about race in Rawlsian moral and civic education.

In my view, it is an advantage of Thompson's approach that he explicitly tries to avoid relying on a sharp distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. It is true that Rawls's work has a predominant focus on ideal theory. But this fact alone cannot satisfactorily explain his silence on race-related issues or the seeming minimalism of his educational recommendations. Rawls's few incursions into non-ideal theory notably include his work on civil disobedience, which was originally published in 1969.<sup>1</sup> In non-ideal theory, there is no presumption that everyone is complying with the requirements of justice, and there are historical obstacles to the establishment of fully just social institutions. It seems clear that Rawls's account of civil disobedience was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. and other members of the civil rights movement. Their example provided a model for the kind of civil disobedience that Rawls regarded as justified. However, Rawls's discussion proceeds at a high level of abstraction, without making any direct reference to actual political events or to race relations in the United States. Rawls prefers to frame his examination of civil disobedience in terms of the question of how citizens of a democratic society might respond to serious injustices, which he understands quite abstractly as violations of the principle of equal liberty or the principle of equality of opportunity. That is, he does not ask the more substantive question of how they might respond to injustices due to segregation and racism in the United States.

Turning now to Rawls's remarks on education, I agree with Thompson that Rawls does not subordinate its value to that of social productivity. Rawls explicitly argues that the distribution of educational resources should not depend merely on predictions as to the impact of those resources on the development of the marketable talents of citizens. Rawls thinks that education is central to the development of

citizens' sense of justice and to their capacity to have a fulfilling life. But on another point regarding Rawls's treatment of education, I think that Thompson may not be as correct. He suggests that Rawls leaves formative questions unexplored. But this is too strong. After all, Rawls's account of the development of the sense of justice in *A Theory of Justice* is motivated by formative concerns.<sup>2</sup> Although Rawls does not examine the particular contribution of schools to the process of moral learning, he does focus on the family as an educational institution in which the sense of justice is first nurtured. And finally, Rawls briefly examines the legitimate requirements of civic education in *Political Liberalism*.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Thompson thinks that Rawls does not adequately address all the formative questions we need to consider. Admittedly, the formative tasks that Rawls assigns to schools are rather minimal. Rawls only lays out some very general goals for civic education, claiming that all we need to ensure is that students learn about their rights and duties, and that they develop some political virtues. Such minimal recommendations do not give us much guidance regarding how to address difficult educational tasks in the non-ideal world in which we live. For instance, we might also want to know how to teach students to be genuinely concerned when their fellow citizens are treated unfairly, how to nurture students' sense of self-respect in response to a hostile or oppressive environment, or how to cultivate dispositions to resist injustice and to work for social change.

Thompson offers a thought-provoking method for describing the various ways one might extend the theory of justice as fairness to the topics of education and race. In principle, an abstract general theory of justice like Rawls's could be extended in a number of alternative ways, with differing educational implications. Of course, not all such extensions will be equally successful or attractive. In what remains I would like to go over some of the possibilities Thompson mentions and to offer some different interpretations of the shape those alternatives might take.

The first case that Thompson presents — in which education and race are both viewed as categorically similar to other features of Rawls's project (E-CS, R-CS) — yields a proposal that is exclusively concerned with the fair distribution of educational resources. Someone who endorses this proposal may think that all that Rawls's theory requires is that there be no race-based disadvantages in access to educational goods. A somewhat different proposal would be to keep the distributive focus (and ignore formative questions) while advocating additional measures aimed at the rectification of injustices from a racialized past. This is close to what Thompson says when discussing his third case (which treats education as categorically similar and race as categorically unique [E-CS, R-CU]) because it assumes that race should be considered distinctive when extending the theory. However, I would like to suggest that a view that does not see educational policies as requiring special treatment would result in rectificatory policies in the form of affirmative action, without any specific proposal for moral and civic education.

Another case would be one that acknowledges the need to address formative questions in moral and civic education, while remaining silent about the history and politics of race in the United States. This is the modification of the proposal that Thompson makes regarding his second case (where education is treated as

categorically unique and race as categorically similar [E-CU, R-CS]). One way to implement something like this would be to adopt an abstract philosophical tone and steer away from controversial issues. For instance, one might discuss the ideals of free and equal citizenship, the value of the basic rights and liberties, and the importance of securing equality of opportunity and the satisfaction of citizens' basic needs. Of course, these normative ideals are worth discussing in class, but this strategy has clear educational shortcomings. In order to teach these ideals properly, we would need to consider how their interpretation has changed over time and become more inclusive. We would also need to examine how these ideals have been very imperfectly realized. And we would need to stress how they have figured in social criticism and political activism, among other things. But if we pay attention to the betrayal of these ideals, both in the past and in the present, then we cannot avoid teaching about race. I suspect that Thompson is likely to agree with me on these points, even though he offers different reasons for including the topic of race in moral and civic education. He argues that education about race is important to ensure that racial labels do not prevent the development of a secure sense of self in students, and that they do not work to undermine students' abilities to support just institutions. He also seems to hold that conversations about race in moral and civic education are required by the demands of rectificatory justice.

To conclude, it seems to me that overly simple strategies for responding to concerns about education and race would have limited success, at best. More promising extensions of the theory of justice would have to deal with both distributive and formative issues, as well as demanding normative ideals and messy disappointing realities.

---

1. John Rawls, "The Justification of Civil Disobedience," in his *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 176–189; and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 319–343.

2. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 397–449.

3. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, paperback ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 199–200. He makes similar remarks in John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 156–157. Rawls argues in the latter that when the principles of justice are embodied in public institutions, they can play an educational role. He seems optimistic that the formative goals of justice as fairness might be achieved in nonintentional ways. For some reasons to be less optimistic, see M. Victoria Costa, *Rawls, Citizenship, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 56–71.