education review
a journal of book reviews

Volume 10 Number 13 **October 25, 2007**

The Paradoxes of a Liberal Democratic Education: An Essay Review

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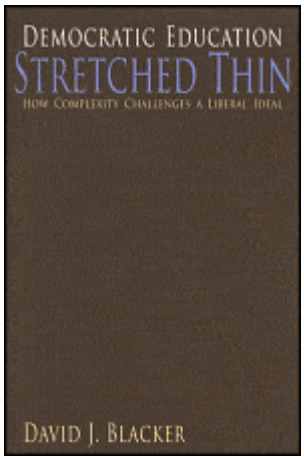
Blacker, David J. (2007). *Democracy Stretched Thin: How Complexity Challenges a Liberal Ideal*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Pp. i + 249. ISBN 978-07914-6966-8

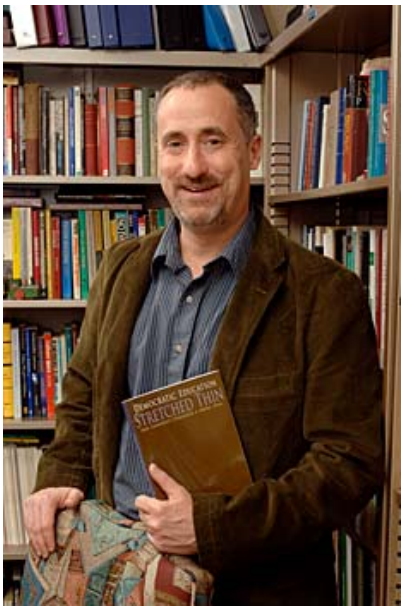
Citation: Covaleskie, John F. (2007, October 25). The paradoxes of a liberal democratic education: An essay review. *Education Review, 10*(13). Retrieved [date] from http://edrev.asu.edu/essays/v10n13index.html

For decades, schools have been ground zero in the culture wars. The stakes are high because both sides recognize it is in schools children are initiated into full membership in a liberal democratic society. To oversimplify, the basic divide over how this should be done has been between the view that schools should teach children right from wrong as it is currently understood by their elders and the view that children, like everyone else, should be free to choose, among other things, their own version of the Good.



Another way of understanding this divide is that it runs between those committed to a secular state accommodating equally all forms of religious beliefs and no belief at all, and those who insist that morality must be based in religion, usually a particular form of Christianity. The conflict has become increasingly heated since the 1962 Supreme Court decision in *Engel v Vitale* that school-sanctioned prayer violated the First Amendment's prohibition against government establishment of religion, followed one year later by the decision in *Abington Township School District v Schempp* that

devotional Bible reading required by the school was also a violation. Of course, this sort of division goes back much further in our history; in the so-called "Bible riots" in Philadelphia in 1844, Catholics and Protestants died over whether the Bible should be read in school and if so, which version (Catholics wanted the Douay version, Protestants the King James). In colonial New England, the founding theocrats, a sort of Christian Taliban, believed killing those who believed differently from theirs was both God's will and good public policy. The currents of theocracy run deep in American culture, a point to which I will return at the end of this essay.



Today some of the same issues roil the civic (if not always civil) conversation about what we should be teaching children. The basic disagreements cut across two dimensions. One dimension of the conflict is the question of the extent to which education of the young should consist primarily of critically considering, rather than wholly accepting, the status quo. The other divisive question is, if education ought to be about acceptance of a set of ideas, practices, and commitments, what and whose specifically ought those to be?

David J. Blacker

In *Democratic Education Stretched Thin: How Complexity Challenges a Liberal Ideal* David Blacker identifies the ways in which and the reasons why he feels democratic education is "stretched thin," that is, how and why it came to be pulled in too many directions by too many constituents having too many different and competing goals. His analysis is careful and complex, and it does a great deal to surface some of the real tensions that schools, school people, policy makers, and citizens face in trying to find common ground on which to rebuild what used to be called the common school. The "liberal ideal" of the subtitle is that government will be neutral with respect to the big questions of the meaning of life; his argument is that this ideal has never been met, and that, furthermore, the extent to which it is not met today is increasingly noticed and challenged. The resulting "culture wars" create grim circumstances for democratic schools in particular and democracy in general. The failure to meet the ideal was hidden for a long time because of the existence of a general consensus around main stream Protestantism as a sort of civic religion; any orthodoxy seems neutral or obvious to those inside its fold. And this is one of the important strands of Blacker's analysis: liberalism is indeed an orthodoxy that competes with religious orthodoxy, at least in one of its guises.

Part One lays out Blacker's understanding of the roots of the problem, and Part Two attempts to apply philosophical insights as resources for vitalizing truly democratic education.

In Chapter One, Blacker sketches out the dimensions of the impasse between what he refers to as liberal proceduralism and Orthodoxy. Liberal proceduralism is a position presuming to allow all points of view equal access to and respect in the public discourse. It is free of any deep commitments about human nature and/or the nature of the Good. In this way liberal proceduralism is differentiated from what Blacker calls liberal orthodoxy, in that the former supposedly has does not have the latter's thick commitments to the liberal ideals of human freedom and dignity.

Orthodoxy more generally refers to any thick conception of the Good. Mostly we think of this in terms of religious beliefs, and in the public discourse this seems to be the case. However, Blacker is importantly correct to remind us that Liberalism is itself a thick set of beliefs about human nature and the Good; this gives a quite different meaning to the "liberal ideal" in the subtitle. For it to be privileged in the public square in this sense, as often seems to be the case, is a violation of the neutrality required by liberal proceduralism.

While this distinction between liberal proceduralism and liberal orthodoxy is a useful heuristic, it seems unlikely to transfer to the rough ground of political life. While liberal proceduralism may indeed be a conceivable point of view, it seems likely that it will be parasitic upon liberal orthodoxy as a lived position. That is, it is difficult to imagine why one should have a real commitment to the deep neutrality of liberal proceduralism unless one had a prior real commitment to liberal orthodoxy. As a tactic, those who hold a minority or unpopular point of view might advocate for liberal proceduralism without also holding the Liberal ideal, but taking a tactical position is not the same as holding the belief.

In any event, Blacker's position on this is insightful: in the conflicting claims that schools should be rooted in the liberal proceduralism and claims that schools should support one or more orthodoxies, both sides are partially correct:

> Schools exist to further both the liberal goal of universal enlightenment via the individual's ability to think and reason for him- or herself, right alongside the orthodox agenda of promoting a particular version of Christianity. (p. 11)

The problem, of course, is that while schools are expected to do both, these missions are in substantial conflict:

> For liberal proceduralism, education is most accurately described as a search for the Good, whereas orthodoxy of whatever type is

> more at home conceiving of education as initiation into some more or less determinate and settled conception of the Good. (p. 13)

Both these points of view present difficulties for democratic education. The problem with religious orthodoxy as a political position is that it clearly violates democratic principles of individual freedom to make choices about moral questions that confront us. The problem with liberal proceduralism is twofold. In the first place, since it seeks to be disconnected from any particular version of the Good it has a difficult time gaining support in the public square; it is too sterile and alienating.

The second problem is, it not as neutral as it claims; it defaults in favor of liberal orthodoxy, which, as much as religious orthodoxy, is rooted in a particular version of the Good: "…these victories, qua constitutional settlements, have by definition a traceable lineage to substantive moral ideals of liberty, equality, and so on, [even if] they are not typically experienced that way" (p. 23). The conflicts of the last several decades make clear that liberal proceduralism appears to be neutral with respect to the Good only if one first accepts liberal proceduralism. That is, to those holding competing orthodoxies, religious or secular, liberal proceduralism precisely *is* "experienced that way," that is, as an application of liberal orthodoxy.

Blacker points out how procedural liberalism has worked to gain ends sought by liberal orthodoxy and opposed by religious orthodoxy especially in the area of students' rights. In a long line of cases, most specifically in *Tinker*, children have been protected by the language of the law from inculcation into specific ways of social life, and the courts, led by the Supreme Court, have protected children's rights to seek their own ideal of the Good free from government, specifically school, interference. Consequently, schools begin to look like they stand for, and can stand for, nothing very much at all.

However, Blacker accepts this charge a bit too easily. While it is true that *Tinker* protected some vestigial free speech for students, *Bethel School District v Fraser*, *Hazelwood v Kuhlmeier*, and, most recently, *Morse v Frederick* have each limited such rights. Blacker is more correct to accept the argument that the Courts have kept religious practices out of the public school, and that is the real issue between both liberal proceduralism and liberal orthodoxy on the one hand and religious orthodoxy on the other: can the faithful expect the schools to act on their behalf, at least with respect to their own children? And even here, the standing answer, as given in *Yoder v Wisconsin*, is that the Court will defer to the parents unless there is a compelling state interest to the opposite.

Chapter Two analyzes two ideas Blacker thinks might help us find a way out of the impasse he has just described: spherical plurality and complex equality.

Blacker's discussion of spherical plurality develops Walzer's (1983) insight that life is lived in different contexts and we wear different hats in each of them. Walzer calls these contexts spheres, and he argues that there is a different sense of justice and social

relationship appropriate to each. Since each sphere has its own proper relationships, spherical pluralism (a concept Blacker differentiates from cultural pluralism and psychological pluralism) recognizes and honors the validity of the different spheres and the ways of organizing relevant parts of our lives. The concern here is that the political sphere, the economic sphere, and the educational sphere, for example, should be (1) duly recognized as contributing in their own ways to human thriving, and (2) limited in reach so that, for example, neither the political nor the economic sphere intrudes inappropriately into the educational sphere.

Recognition of this spherical complexity leads Blacker to support what Walzer describes as "complex equality." The complexity lies in the fact that, on the one hand, the law recognizes the equality of each individual person. On the other hand, the law must also recognize the equality of different defensible ways of life within different spheres. That is, in addition to recognizing the equality of individuals, it must protect the equality of spheres, even spheres within which there is inequality between individuals (such as, for example, the inferior status of women within many religious traditions). The task is to find the proper balance among these competing interests, what Blacker refers to as "liberal contextualism." Part of this requirement to protect the equality between spheres is to also protect the integrity of the sphere itself; hence, for example, the acceptance and protection of religious traditions that, within their own sphere, discriminate against women. Individual equality is protected by the right of exit from such a community rather than by external imposition of conditions of broad equality into the tradition. There are ill-defined limits to acceptability here, but, as Blacker has earlier warned us, those who seek elegance in these matters had best look elsewhere than to education policy and practice. He reminds us of the fact that there is something of *educational* value that is the primary proper focus in the sphere of education.

Chapter Three consolidates the argument: "Schools in pluralistic constitutional democracies must serve (1) universal ideal such as individual liberty and social equality, (2) the particularistic goods that are socially recognized as valid, and also (3) their own sense of pursuing a uniquely *educational* mission" (p. 82) (italics in original). The first two tend to draw attention to the domains outside the sphere, and to that extent must be partially resisted to allow some attention to be paid to the internal demands of the sphere.

Blacker's contention is that spherical health is more likely to be maintained by spheres in contact with and in relation to other spheres than by spheres exclusively or excessively concerned with maintaining their own integrity, since part of the integrity of any one sphere lies in its relations with other spheres. What he is pointing us to is the realization that there are few if any "either-or" choices when dealing with education consistent with the needs of democracy; the task is not to make the right choice but to find the correct balance, which changes. Educational policy-making becomes a constant tinkering in order to keep an appropriate, ever-shifting, balance.

Having established the grounds for believing that schools must maintain their spherical integrity as educational institutions while also meeting the legitimate expectations of related spheres (such as, schools will help prepare students to contribute to the economy and participate in the political life of the society), Blacker addresses the question of accountability in Chapter Four. How and to whom should schools be held accountable? His answer is that schools must be interspherically accountable. Specifically, he advances the thesis that schools be held accountable "... not just one or some of the things that 'we the people' care about, but *all* of the things that collectively we care about" (italics in the original) (p. 101).

There are three domains of accountability to which we ought to hold schools. They are what Blacker refers to as (1) right, (2) association, and (3) meaning. By right, he refers to the area sort of individual liberty protected by Enlightenment liberalism: "What they provide is a set of guarantees that enable the operations of liberalism's free choosers" (p 109). Here the expectation is that the schools will contribute to an individual's ability to exercise her or his freedom.

Accountability to the domain of association is what is stretching democratic education thin. Here the expectation is that schools will support student's attachment to some communal identity. There are many associational groups, each of which makes its own demands on schools, not all of which are compatible with each other. Even though this does present a serious problem to educational policy makers and school people, it is also a sign of a healthy democratic culture. For Blacker, the greater danger is not that there are too many demands placed on schools but that the society becomes so monolithic that there are not competing demands and expectations: "The crisis [in educational accountability] occurs when those calling the question represent inappropriately narrow interests" (p. 111). Diversity of spheres and visions of the Good, which result in democratic education being stretched so thin, are also signs of democracy's health.

In this he echoes Deborah Meier's (1995) call for support of public schools as places where there is civic discussion about disagreement modeled for our children. Her defense of public education, with all its inherent messy contention, is that both the messiness and contention are part of the preparation students receive for their own participation in democratic disagreement. If they do not see their adult mentors and role models engaging in such discourse, how will they learn to do so themselves?

His appreciation of the value of dissent places him at his most stark disagreement with the anti-democratic voices advocating privatization, who argue that one reason they see public schools as unfixable is that they are democratically governed, and are therefore in constant flux, unable to fix once and for all the one set of goals to which they should be committed. Private schools on this view are at an advantage precisely because they are not democratically governed and need not engage in unseemly disputes about the best form of education; if you don't like what is happening here, go to where you find people like you (Chubb and Moe, 1990, p. 23). Avoid the need to settle among competing

visions of the Good, and you can have smoothly functioning education. But this is not, Blacker reminds us, education for democratic life. Often enough, democratic life does not operate smoothly. However, the analysis here leaves open the possibility of some type of voucher program; Blacker is concerned with plurality and universality of education, not that it necessarily be fully "public." He assumes that in working our way out of the current impasse there may be some surprises.

There also are real threats to democratic education from the realm of meaning. On the one hand, people do live within thick normative communities, and this is part of a good life for most of us, whether those normative communities are service organization, professional organizations, neighborhood associations, political organizations, or religious traditions, to name but a few possibilities. On the other hand, having seen the light and the truth within these communities, it is perhaps natural for many people to want to come back into the cave and tell their story about the sun. On the one hand, schools must support the preparation of children to live a good life and to participate in their thick moral communities; on the other hand and equally, schools must maintain their neutrality between different defensible thick moral communities, not favoring one over the other: "An education system that on the whole neglects the fostering of depth and substance in individuals' development of intimate meanings is a system as unaccountable as one that does not provide satisfactory achievement test scores and employable skills" (p. 118). One might even say more so. His concern, and again he is to be commended for reminding us of this, is that schools may be meticulously just in terms of equal treatment for all people and ways of life but will nevertheless be perceived as failures, and rightly so, if they maintain neutrality only at the price of "a chilling nihilism" (p. 119).

Part Two moves from sketching the nature and dimension of the problem to proposing the philosophical outline of a solution. The task, as Blacker sees it, is to foster in children (and therefore in the citizens they will become) the disposition to Cartesian skepticism about one's own beliefs while at the same time fostering a commitment to the sort of civic friendship rooted in a Humean idea of reasonableness connected to passionate commitments.

Chapter Five explores the nature of the Cartesian experience, where one sets aside one's beliefs to examine them critically. Part of Blacker's commitment here is that a necessary component of democratic citizenship is that citizens freely choose their overall life paths. One can not do that unless one puts one's beliefs in doubt. It is an error to think that Descartes (or Blacker) expects or desires that one live in a constant state of questioning and doubt; he does not. The point of the skeptical examination of one's received beliefs is to arrive at a settled commitment on the nature of the best sort of life and the reasons for so believing. It nevertheless remains true, for us to own our own commitments, for them to be our own, we must freely choose them as ours: "…democracy contains an imperative for a citizen's personal involvement in his or her choice of a conception of the Good" (p. 147). Furthermore, it is insufficient that this be

done just once; while one cannot generally live in skepticism and must choose a set of commitments by which to live, one must also be open to new information and the doubts raised by new information. One must be settled only tentatively on one's idea of the Good.

Chapter Six explores the importance for a society that takes liberal contextualism seriously to broaden its understanding of reasonableness. Hume is the ground of this exploration, and the goal is that those committed to a secular Enlightenment rationality be not quite so quick to assume that those committed to other worldviews, including religious ones, are not also reasonable. In any event, reason alone is not enough to support either public or individual moral life: "Reason may generate well-formed and universally applicable propositions about moral principles, but what it can never do is by itself motivate an actual human being either to care about those principles or the other human beings toward whom those principles are directed" (p. 154).

On this view, then, the task of democratic education is to link the thin liberal-civic norms of accommodation and reasonableness with the thicker norms and conceptions of the Good that make lives meaningful within normative communities. Blacker refers to this stance as "democratic reasonableness," and considers fostering it one of the primary tasks of education. His very important point is that it is not just the thick normative communities that benefit. Democracy itself can not survive without being rooted in these thick communities: "Democracy…requires deeper moral roots for itself than it alone can not provide" (p. 163).

This is a subtle and important point. Central to Blacker's analysis is that, while it may be true that there are some conceptions of the good that, accepted by too many members of the polity, would seriously threaten democratic life, that is just Scylla; Charybdis would be that democratic citizens would have no deep roots in normative communities that define, nurture, and support individual virtue. This is not unrelated to Macintyre's (1984) thesis that virtue can only develop within a thick vision of the Good. It is also consistent with the sociological work of Putnam (2000) that the weakening of the sort of civic associations that served as "intermediating institutions" has damaged democratic life.

Here again is Blacker's admirable sense of the need for balance and his refusal to allow for simplification of the vexing paradoxes of democratic education. On the one hand, democratic education is designed to make sure that no citizens are held in thrall to a way of life they have not chosen freely, while at the same time it must help root citizens deeply in moral and normative communities from which they will receive the resources to sustain and participate in democratic life.

Blacker's understanding of these requirements leads to what seems an odd policy proposal to finesse the paradox. School's commitment to neutrality between comprehensive conceptions of the good (CCG) means that, even if the school personnel have the knowledge and willingness to present different CCGs in their classes or schools,

they would "be too effectively gagged to fully provide the needed depth dimension (religious *or* secular) to a child's education" (p. 170) [emphasis in original]. So schools are supposed to be places where deep meanings are considered, but school personnel, as government agents, are not allowed to do the considering.

Blacker's solution to this paradox is to outsource this function of democratic education, with schools to become more "porous" to outside normative communities and their members. Schools would become places where a wide variety of deep and rich versions of the Good would be presented to students. However, this would happen in a manner consistent with the presumptive requirement that teachers, as government functionaries, should be silent on such matters, or at least should not say anything of substance on them. The school would become a forum where spokespeople for these different versions of the Good can present those visions to students in all their richness and fullness. The nature of this forum would mean that the school personnel would in effect be bystanders as the advocates of various thick visions of the Good made their pitch to the students.

The final chapter, Chapter Seven, is a defense of liberal contextualism as a model for democratic education. He argues that while liberal contextualism is not strictly neutral, it is neutral with respect to ways of life that are defensibly within a broad democratic consensus:

> Liberal contextualism is… a large-scale conditional that says, "*If* we want a democratic form of political life, *Then* we must embrace"… preconditions for democracy such as "one person, one vote," "state religious neutrality," "constitutional guarantees of basic rights," "universal education," and so on. (p. 185) (Emphasis in original)

Specifically, liberal contextualism is prejudiced toward both (1) a requirement placed on all to have and to give reasons for their preferred policies in the public sphere, and (2) an "aesthetic preference for complexity" (p. 193). A corollary of the first is, we are also committed to listen to each others' reasons; that is, debate over public policy must be undertaken in good faith. Note, however, that the conditional nature of this position, if adhered to, means that democracy can not on its own terms defend itself; all discussions in the public square presume a prior commitment to democracy. That this might present a problem will be considered shortly.

He acknowledges these prejudices are controversial, but argues where there is controversy, it is between those who prefer democratic life and those who do not. Of course, there may be and is vigorous debate about how these preferences should be cashed out, but a commitment to reasoned discussion and to the idea that free

consideration of the various possible good lives will lead free individuals to different conclusions.

While this book is a valuable addition to the conversation about the problems and paradoxes of democratic education, there are some questions about the analysis and suggested solution I would like to raise in closing this review. First of all, as suggested previously, it is possible that the distinction between liberal orthodoxy and liberal proceduralism is not so much real as it is theoretical. More deeply, it is not clear that liberal orthodoxy is the same sort of thing as a religious orthodoxy. That is, while both do have commitments to some version of the Good, it is not clear that they are the same, or even roughly equivalent, in effect. I recently passed a sign outside a local church here in Oklahoma that said, "If you feed your faith, doubt will starve itself." A systematic and principled view of the world devoted to fostering a doubting stance and one committed to eliminating doubt might both be called "orthodoxies," but only because there is rich ambiguity about the meaning of the word; they are lived as quite different experiences.

It is from this angle that the distinction between liberal proceduralism and liberal orthodoxy perhaps dissolves. While there are things that liberal orthodoxy does want to protect and foster, while there are virtues that democratic education must foster if it is to create citizens capable of democratic participation, the scope of the domains open or not open to question are much different for liberal orthodoxy than for religious orthodoxies. And in this imprecise and inelegant world of rough ground, it seems it is the scope of these domains that is significant. At some point, difference in *quantity* becomes a difference in *quality*.

Further, Blacker's analysis does not engage the possibility that spherical integrity has already been shattered, perhaps beyond repair. There is significant evidence that what is presented under the public face of religious orthodoxy is at root and in practice little more than an extension of the economic sphere (deMarrais, 2005; Wallis, 2005; Weaver & Seibert, 2005). Certainly, the political sphere is distorted, at the very least, by the power of money to buy political power (Kuttner, 1996). Similarly, it is beyond question that the educational sphere has become subject to the whims of the business interests, whose power is exercised through its political subsidiaries (Boyles, 2000).

For this reason, the practicality of Blacker's solution is in doubt. The objection religious traditionalists, free-market fundamentalists, and economic imperialists have against a free exchange of ideas in schools is not that it is teachers who expose children to different ideas and ideals. Their objection is that the children are exposed to different ideas and ideals; students thinking for themselves about competing visions of The Good is what they oppose, not that the facilitations are school teachers. Outsourcing the exposure seems unlikely to placate those who believe that children should not be tempted to question given truths. Nor will it alleviate the concern that the schools themselves are sterile and disconnected from thick understandings of the Good; the schools and their employees would remain bystanders to the conversation.

It even seems possible that turning schools into such limited open forums might open schools even more to attack from enemies of public education. On the one hand, the range of guest speakers in the schools would, if the effort were truly made to represent the range of possible comprehensive conceptions of the good, would anger many constituents. At the same time, the teachers and other school personnel would be (rightly) seen as intellectual eunuchs unable to participate in an obviously important conversation. This would arguably make schools less able to foster in children the democratic virtues involved in public discourse, since they would be prohibited from modeling it. Finally, there is the likelihood that some potential guests should be excluded but could not be. Once the school constitutes itself as a limited open forum, which, is what Blacker's proposal arguably entails, it is difficult to exclude even the most offensive points of view, "offensive," of course, being purely in the eye of the beholder.

Indeed, this point raises another question, related to whether there remains anything of spherical integrity to protect, and that is the question of whether what is at stake in the public conversation about different conceptions of the Good is primarily about different ways of understanding something that can legitimately be called "democracy," or if the issue is indeed more fundamentally between those who do and who do not desire to live in a democratic polity. There is substantial evidence that there are powerful connections between extremely wealthy advocates for plutocracy and influential advocates of theocracy, and they have systematically shaped political discourse to undermine democracy itself. This is an uncomfortable question to raise, but one that at some point needs to be asked. Blacker's analysis and proposed response makes perfect sense if public discourse is open and honest, and disagreement is between CCGs that are compatible with some normatively understood form of democratic life. In the real world, however, dictatorships, both fascist and communist, are also possible, as are theocracies.

What, for example, are we to make of John McCain's recent admission that he would not "be comfortable" with a non-Christian president? How do we as people reconcile that aspect of his candidacy with Section Six of the United States Constitution, which specifically forbids a religious test for holding office? How do we engage in serious civil discourse when one of the major political parties, through which political discourse is inevitably channeled, exists primarily as a coalition of economic conservatives and religious conservative? In the context of the book under review, the concern is that the religious conservatives, acting as a political party, seek to enact their understanding of Christianity in civil law.

Finally, there is the question of the Cartesian moment of doubt. This is a subtle point, but central to Blacker's argument. In order to meet the criterion of democratic citizenship, one must choose freely the way one is to live one's life. This is a matter of holding in doubt one's received beliefs and critically examining them, and then choosing whether to maintain one's commitments or to find new ones. It is critical here to see that

Blacker is tying beliefs and actions together; how one lives is a function of the things that one believes go into making a good life. This may be an oversimplification, but it is certainly not completely wrong. There will, for most of us, be a connection between what we take to be the Good and the choices we make about how we should live our lives. Fostering this process of choosing is central to the educational mission for democratic life as Blacker and others envision it; it is the broadly liberal position on educational purpose.

Nevertheless, the notion of choosing one's beliefs seems curious. I do not choose what to believe or what not to believe so much as discover what it is that I do or do not believe, preferably after evaluating the evidence. In some cases that seems clear: I do not "choose" to believe (or not) that 2+2=4 , nor do I choose to believe (or not) in evolution, though the latter case is less clear in some way than the former. Finally, I do not *choose* to believe in the (non)existence of a divinity or metaphysical reality. I might discover about myself that I do (not) so believe, and then consider whether the (dis)beliefs are reasonable and consistent with my other commitments. I suspect it is this that Blacker is urging for democratic education, but the language of "choice" seems suspect and misleading; something more subtle is going on. In the end, when I affirm or disavow my moral and/or metaphysical commitments relative to the Good, it will be more discovery than choice.

And yet, there is certainly something in the argument Blacker is making: there is no democratic life unless it is freely chosen, so this might just be the sort of verbal quibble only a philosopher could love. Perhaps what is at stake is no more than this, but no less: the individual must be free to consider and reflect on her or his beliefs, and schools should foster the tendency to do so and support (help? guide? encourage? provide opportunity for?) the student as s/he does so. The individual must then be free to act on those beliefs, which is where choice seems to be more likely to be located. That is, I might *discover* I believe I would be happier doing X rather than Y for a living, but *choose* to pursue Y anyway because it is the family tradition or I have almost completed the requirements for that field; I might *discover* I do not believe in the doctrine of Papal infallibility, but choose to remain in the Roman Church because of a love of ritual and tradition. In any event, what comes out of this sort of Cartesian moment is not perhaps different from what Blacker describes, though the understanding of where the choice is located might perhaps make a difference in how a pedagogy is developed.

More to the point, it is precisely this commitment to questioning received wisdom that is at the heart of the dispute between religious orthodoxy on the one hand and both liberal orthodoxy and liberal proceduralism. In theory, the combination of Cartesian introspection and Hume's broader interpretation of what counts as rational is indeed a defensible vision of democratic education, combining as it does both skepticism and commitment, both individuality and membership, and both mind and heart. And it is entirely possible that it is not too late for this approach to gain traction in the public

conversation. However, in considering such an approach, it would be well to take into account that such is exactly what institutions such as the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institute, the Council for National Policy, and the Institute for Religion and Democracy among many others are committed to preventing. The difficulty we are in may be even worse than Blacker presents, as bad as he recognizes things are.

Such quibbles notwithstanding, Blacker has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the problem and the paradoxes of education in, for, and proper to a liberal democratic polity. That the solutions posed themselves raise some questions seems less important than that he has something serious and quite insightful to say about the roots of the serious dangers to democratic education in particular and democratic life in general. His reminder that the conflicts around democratic education neither can nor should be avoided, and his reminder that there is an *educational* value to education are things too often ignored in the public conversation. Those who hope one day to see a revitalized commitment to the ideal of public education owe Blacker a debt of thanks for his contribution to understanding the depth and dimensions of the challenges we face.

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