Public Reason in the Classroom? The Duty of Civility and Citizenship Education

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According to the Rawlsian ideal of public reason (1993, 1997), when government officials and ordinary citizens deliberate with one another on constitutional essentials or matters of basic justice, they have a duty – the duty of civility – to give each other reasons (at least “in due course”) that they believe any reasonable person could accept. Given the importance of this model of public deliberation and good citizenship, it is surprising that the question of its implications for citizenship education has received so little attention. This paper explores the question of whether it is justified to adopt public reason’s norms of civility in schools and, in particular, to impose them in the classroom. More specifically, I argue against the view that public reason implies that it is permissible for teachers to ask students to refrain from giving arguments based on reasonably controversial, i.e. “comprehensive”, worldviews when discussing issues of basic justice in the school context (Neufeld and Davis 2010, Neufeld 2013).

My claim is that one cannot draw conclusions about whether or not it is permissible to adopt public reason’s norms of civility at school from a commitment to the ideal of public reason alone. I argue that this is true for at least two reasons: (I) in certain contexts, adopting the norms of public reason in a classroom debate might be counterproductive from the very point of view of creating good public reasoners; and (II) in certain contexts, it might conflict with other (potentially more) important values/educational goals.

First, there is at least one way in which embracing public reason as an educational practice might disserve the realization of the ideal of public reason. To begin with, consider the distinction between civility and respect. Civility involves a display of respect, but it is not the same as respect. In fact, being civil is compatible with being disrespectful. For instance, I can be very polite with, even very friendly to, someone I deeply dislike, simply because I want her to make me an important favour. Now, my argument is that should be sensitive to a similar distinction when it comes to the ideal of public reason, namely the distinction between having/developing an ability and disposition to deliberate in a “civil manner” (that is in “public terms”, according to Rawls) and having/developing an ability and disposition to actually support (and vote for) legitimate laws; laws that are truly respectful of every reasonable citizens’ conception of the good. It is worth noticing at this point that Rawls does not make this distinction. In fact, he defines the duty of civility in terms of both a disposition and an ability to deliberative reasonably and actually support reasonable laws. By so doing, he fails to acknowledge the potential tension between the two. However, in the context of civic education, there is a risk of creating citizens that, at the same time, are capable and motivated to be “civil” because they come to realise or accept that this is the appropriate way to deliberate with others in public, but that are not motivated to actually support and vote for laws that are reasonable and thus respectful of everyone status as a free and equal citizen. While the questions of when this risk is most salient and how it can best be avoided are empirical questions for which I have no answer, a reasonable hypothesis is that this risk is highly sensitive to the context. Thus, in certain contexts, asking students to comply with the norms of public reason in the classroom might have the effect of silencing them in a way that diserves the goal of developing a disposition to be truly respectful, even though the same method might be successful in teaching them to be civil, i.e. how and when to show a display of respect.

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1 Arguably, this is because this tension arises only in non-ideal contexts. Indeed, in a well-ordered society every citizen has a sense of justice and acts accordingly. In a WOS citizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even “approach mutual understanding” on their comprehensive doctrines. Thus, it is not even clear if educational questions are even relevant to ask without the framework of ideal theory.
Second, there are contexts in which practicing public reason in the classroom might conflict with other values, which could potentially trump the value of creating good public reasoners. Consider the case of Jonah, described in Meira Levinson’s book No Citizen Left Behind (2012). Jonah is a marginalized orthodox Jew attending a public school, who wishes to give an oral presentation on the topic of same-sex marriage, in the context of his eighth grade citizenship project. More specifically, Jonah plans to argue, on Talmudic grounds, that same-sex marriage is sinful and should not be legal. The suggestion that practicing public reason in the classroom is permissible seems to imply that it would be appropriate, in this case, for the teacher to ask Jonah to put aside his religious values (about which people can reasonably disagree) in order to defend his view of this matter. The problem is that even if this suggestion was entirely justified from the point of view of civic education, it may not be all things considered justified. In fact, as a consequence of their duties of care for the wellbeing of every child, it seems that if only one, already marginalized, student (e.g. a deeply religious student like Jonah) feels even more excluded or silenced as a result of the application of such a rule of deliberation, then the teacher has a reason not to adopt it in the classroom. This reason must be balanced against other considerations, including not only the desirability to teach deliberative civility and the need to assure basic respect for other students, but also the quality of the classroom environment, as well the possible consequences on parents’ perceptions and behaviour. In brief, even if practicing public reason in the classroom was the more efficient was to successfully create truly respectful public reasoners, it is not clear that this goal should have priority over other important values in cases of conflict. Once again, this is enough to support my central claim according to which the rawlsian model of public reason should not necessarily be seen, by Rawls’ followers, as an appropriate model of deliberation for schools.

References