Philosophical Inquiry in Education, **Volume 23 (2016), No. 2, pp. 229-233**

Review of

Civics Beyond Critics: Character Education in a Liberal Democracy

by Ian MacMullen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015

KEVIN MCDONOUGH
McGill University

The long-term survival and flourishing of liberal democratic political values and institutions depends to some extent on a critical mass of individual citizens having certain dispositions, attitudes and qualities of character rather than others. Theorists differ about how the content of liberal civic virtue should be specified. Virtues such as tolerance, patriotic loyalty, and mutual respect are variously defended in scholarly debates about the content of civic virtue, and hence about the content of liberal citizenship education. Despite these differences, however, educational theorists widely agree that liberal democratic citizenship education must be, at least to some extent, a process of character education. Nevertheless, Ian MacMullen believes that most contemporary liberal-democratic philosophers do not go far enough in this regard. In his most recent book, he presents his carefully argued, finely detailed account of the key, and to his mind unfortunately neglected, characteristics of civic virtue that should form the basis of liberal citizenship education.

Civics Beyond Critics contains eight chapters. Chapter One introduces the position MacMullen opposes - what he refers to as "the orthodox view". The orthodox view encompasses the ideas of a wide range of well known authors, including Eamonn Callan, Harry Brighouse, Meira Levinson, Stephen Macedo. It could probably include many others whose views MacMullen does not discuss, such as Rob Reich, Bryan Warnick, Walter Feinberg and myself. MacMullen's primary objection to liberal orthodoxy in citizenship education is its alleged commitment to a certain type of civic minimalism about the character traits that should properly constitute the goals of liberal democratic citizenship education. In this respect, the bottom line of the orthodox view is that "the content of civic character education should be strictly limited to avoid compromising its recipients' ability to think and act as critically autonomous citizens" (p. 3).

Claiming to buck this purported liberal democratic orthodoxy, MacMullen argues that citizenship education should include other "valuable traits" of character, even if these character traits cannot properly be included in the catalogue of "liberal virtues" (p. 29) and, especially, even if promoting such virtues entails curtailing or demoting the aim of promoting capacities of critical autonomy. To be clear, MacMullen does not reject critical autonomy as an aim of citizenship education. His is an avowedly liberal conception of character education, which he distinguishes from conservative versions espoused by conservative theorists like William Galston and Ajume Wingo (p. 30-31). What really bothers MacMullen, it seems, is what he views as the "uncompromising" and "absolutist" stance (p. 2) on the part of orthodoxy's proponents with respect to the centrality of critical autonomy as an aim of citizenship education. It is this rigidness, he argues, that inevitably leads to a regrettably watered down commitment to character-based citizenship education goals.

Chapters Two through Seven form the basis of MacMullen's positive argument for character education. They are divided into three parts comprised of two chapters each. Chapters two and three, which comprise Part I of the book, contain MacMullen's elaboration and defence of the educational goal of compliance with laws. Here, MacMullen argues that liberal citizenship education should cultivate non-autonomous motivations for obeying laws. I shall have more to say about MacMullen's arguments in these chapters below.

In Part II, which comprises chapters four and five, MacMullen defends the goal of fostering civic identification. At the heart of his argument is a distinction between patriotic love and civic identification. MacMullen argues that liberal citizenship education should promote the latter and that doing so avoids characteristic problems associated with former. Broadly speaking, MacMullen argues that promoting civic identification provides motivational resources that enable young people to overcome the pull of self-interest, which would otherwise deprive them of opportunities to participate in fulfilling and worthwhile practices of social cooperation, such as contributing to justice and social stability. MacMullen's argument here also features an interesting and original defense of civic identification as preferable to virtues commonly associated with patriotism. According to MacMullen, civic motivation and affiliation is psychologically robust enough to motivate good citizenship; but at the same time it lacks the judgment-distorting and excessively tribalistic tendencies associated with the promotion of patriotic love.

Chapters Six and Seven make up Part III, the last major section of the book. Here, MacMullen argues that civic education should instill a qualified disposition to support the political status quo. In liberal democratic societies, he argues, it is "usually best to expose children to predominantly to perspectives that support the status quo in their polity" (p. 256). Importantly, MacMullen's defence of status quo bias in citizenship education operates at the level of 'fundamental political arrangements' (such as the parliamentary system of government in the UK, or the presidential system in the US). As such, for MacMullen, citizenship education still has an important role to play in promoting critical thinking about more specific political practices that are subject to reasonable and vigorous dispute among citizens.

Finally, Chapter Eight provides a brief review of the book's major findings and some tantalizingly brief and suggestive remarks about possible practical implications.

MacMullen's arguments are consistently provocative and controversial; his treatment of opposing arguments is unfailingly fair. While many readers will no doubt disagree with MacMullen's conclusions, the clarity and even-handedness of his analysis is a gift of generosity to the critical and sympathetic reader alike. For this reason, abundant intellectual profits await anyone who engages carefully with the text. Overall, the book makes an invaluable scholarly contribution via its lucid articulation of non-standard, substantive goals of liberal character education, and for its and meticulously reasoned defence of those goals against anticipated objections.

Despite my admiration for this book, I wish to use the remainder of this review to elaborate one concern. Specifically, I remain unconvinced that the gap between the orthodox view and MacMullen's professedly 'unorthodox' conception of liberal character education is as wide as he makes it out to be. In saying this, I in no way backtrack on my earlier praise for the book's contributions. My concern is not that MacMullen has simply dressed up a familiar view of liberal character education in new clothes. To the contrary, I believe the view about the content of the goals of liberal citizenship education it presents is genuinely, not just superficially, original. My worry, though, is that in an effort to persuade his readers of the originality or distinctiveness of his "unorthodox" position, MacMullen exaggerates the contrast with the orthodox view he constructs as his opposition. As a result, MacMullen sometimes overlooks important areas in which his broader concern about the need to specify content of character education in a liberal democracy potentially overlaps and converges with the theoretical aspirations of those he portrays as unsympathetic

"critics" of character education. The result, I fear, might be a missed opportunity to demonstrate that there already exists a broader acceptance about the need for a substantive view of liberal character education, even if MacMullen is correct to insist that alternative theories have failed to provide a sufficiently detailed and nuanced specification of the various and potentially competing goals that properly characterize this view of citizenship education.

To clarify this concern, recall that a key characteristic of the orthodox view is supposed to be its uncompromising and absolutist commitment to critical autonomy as an aim of citizenship education. Contrary to MacMullen's claims, at least some purported members of the orthodoxy seem to defy this description, even if the goal of promoting critical autonomy is central to their educational views. Eamonn Callan, for example, defends a conception of liberal political education grounded in a complex and multidimensional conception of public virtue – in his words, "a constellation of attitudes, habits, and abilities that people acquire as they grow up" (1999, p.3). The concept of personal autonomy is certainly central to Callan's conception of liberal character education, but it is far from clear that Callan's account of the goals of education includes anything like a uniquely 'absolute' status to his particular conception of personal autonomy. Furthermore, it would seem that Callan's conception of personal autonomy is far from "uncompromising" in the sense that his account of both the nature and scope of autonomy is shaped and transformed emergently through a creative engagement with the ideas of philosophers like Michael Sandel and William Galston, who emphasize the educational and political significance of the very same kind of "non-autonomous" sources of motivation that MacMullen adduces in developing his own anti-orthodox conception of character education.

I have just suggested that some philosophers of education who are supposed to stand in as proponents of the orthodox view MacMullen condemns do not in fact fit the orthodox mould he creates for them. This general problem generates more specific difficulties throughout the book, but I will illustrate it by reference to MacMullen's discussion of the disposition to comply with laws in Section I. In this section, MacMullen argues in favor of inculcating "non-autonomous" motivations for compliance with the law in young people. As he notes, "prudential values often favor a particular act of noncompliance over compliance" (p. 81). As such, he suggests, an education based on the aim of promoting skills of critical autonomy provides a poor basis for promoting in young people a disposition to comply with the law. That is because critical reason is unlikely on its own to sufficiently compensate for the motivational deficit created by prudential considerations in particular cases. MacMullen wisely notes that once we acknowledge the inevitability of cases in which it is morally permissible to break the law ("justified non-compliance"), "it should be obvious that there can be no simple answer to the question of how we ought to shape children's motivations for compliance both with the law in general and with particular laws" (p. 48).

However, it is less obvious that this point helps to mark any kind of clear separation between MacMullen's position and that of his chosen intellectual opponents. In order to see why, I need to outline MacMullen's argument for making compliance with the law an important goal of citizenship education. As mentioned earlier, MacMullen argues that promoting such a disposition must entail instilling in young people certain non-autonomous sources of civic motivation. Instilling such motivations requires, on his account, manipulating students' prudential motivations, encouraging a sense of trust in the legitimacy of the law, and "habituation". In other words, it requires inculcating beliefs, commitments and habits in ways that bypass children's capacities for critical reason, so that they take hold in the child's psychic economy before the child has the opportunity to critically evaluate them (see e.g. p. 240). When viewed in isolation, positions like this can make MacMullen's position seem not only unorthodox in liberal terms, but positively illiberal and indoctrinatory. However, a closer look reveals that the emphasis on non-autonomous sources of moral motivation may not be as unorthodox as MacMullen makes them out to be.

Both Callan and Harry Brighouse provide useful illustrations of what I have in mind here. Like Callan, Brighouse has recently elaborated a conception of the goals of education that assigns prominence to critical autonomy within a 'constellation' of other goals, attitudes, dispositions and beliefs -- including capacities for economic participation, citizenship and personal flourishing (2006). Although critical autonomy plays an important role in each of these areas, Brighouse is at least somewhat sensitive to the fact that education must also involve the cultivation of non-autonomous dispositions. He also recognizes that the goal of promoting capacities of critical autonomy must be shaped in part by the recognition of the important role that non-autonomously formed sources of motivation play in people's deliberations about their personal good and the good of the society in which they live. Thus, for example, Brighouse assigns considerable importance to what he calls the "plurality of personal constitutions", which individuals may find are to some extent "fixed and unadaptable" (2006, 17). He also defends a conception of the goals of citizenship education that include two "dispositions" -- the "disposition to abide by the law" and the "disposition to engage in political participation through legal channels (p. 64). Notably, Brighouse's conception of these goals of liberal citizenship education do not seem to depend for their legitimacy on their being open to rational endorsement; furthermore, they appear to overlap to a considerable extent with MacMullen's aim of promoting a disposition to comply with laws.

Callan's conception of citizenship education also appears to leave substantial room for the kind of 'non-autonomous' motivational resources that MacMullen views as necessary for good liberal citizenship. For example, Callan defends a conception of personal autonomy that is grounded in a revised conception of Sandel's notion of the "encumbered self" - that is, a self whose judgments are grounded in prior commitments that are not themselves the product of or subject to rational choice and not easily revoked or revised on the basis of critical rational evaluation. The comparison with Callan's notion of the autonomous self as "revocably encumbered" (1999, p. 54) suggests that MacMullen's claims about the need for "non-autonomous sources of motivation" as goals of character education may be based on an unrealistically stark contrast between motivational sources that are induced in ways that render them completely and totally insulated from critical reflection, on the one hand, and beliefs that are "absolutely" the products of or subject to rational reflection. I would suggest that a broader and more sympathetic reading of both Callan's and Brighouse's views shows that their defense of personal autonomy as a goal of liberal character education is more open to a significant degree of non-autonomous character formation than MacMullen's account allows.

More generally, I believe that many liberal democratic theorists recognize that although autonomy is a very important political and educational value it is a complex capacity that exists along a spectrum and is not absolute. People possess capacities of personal autonomy to different degrees, and falling short of the upper extreme need not reflect educational failure from the perspective of liberal citizenship education. Accordingly, while liberal theorists must be concerned to ensure that citizenship education promotes a sufficiently robust sense of personal autonomy in young people, this need not imply a commitment to education that never, and in any way, detracts in some way from the development of children's autonomy. To put the point another way, the liberal concern is not, or should not be, that education maximizes personal autonomy at the expense of all other educational values. Rather, the concern should be that education provides students with opportunities to develop a sufficiently robust degree of personal autonomy, and that conditions that might undermine the development of autonomy be resisted. But this liberal commitment to autonomy-promoting citizenship education seems perfectly compatible with recognizing the importance of other educational goals, including those that MacMullen would count as grounded in non-autonomous sources of motivation.

The concern I have raised is a limited one. I have suggested that Callan's conception of personal autonomy, like Brighouse's conception of the dispositions of good citizenship, illustrate the way in which

supposedly 'orthodox' theorists seek to define the goals of liberal character education in ways that seem to defy MacMullen's attribution of an uncompromising commitment to critical rationality. For this reason, I remain unconvinced that MacMullen has successfully identified a deep fissure within liberal political and educational theory between proponents of an orthodox view on the one hand, and his own view on the other. The fact remains, however, that Ian MacMullen has written a fine book, which outlines the conceptual relationships between various complexly related and sometimes competing goals of liberal character education at an unprecedented level of philosophical detail and precision.

References

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Footnote

The author declares the following interest: he anonymously reviewed a prepublication version of the manuscript for this book for Oxford University Press.