
Presidential Address

A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR ACCOMMODATING PLURALITIES OF
DESIRE, IMAGINATION, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING IN EDUCATION

Sheron Fraser-Burgess
Ball State University

Our current political environment exemplifies the sociopolitical and cultural impediments to forming a democratic community where there is pluralism. As a nation, we are as divided as ever along political lines that represent radical differences in worldview—for instance, about what will be the predominant norms of social institutions such as family, religion, education, and, relatedly, the appropriate balance of individual liberty versus government control in social and economic policy. The rapid growth in telecommunications and expansion in multimedia platforms has contributed to the division of the body politic, as customized media that cater to our interests and values have largely circumvented the messiness of substantive engagement with dissenting views.

These challenges to forming a truly democratic community are also barriers to public space formation. Maxine Greene’s and John Dewey’s ideal of a political realm where we achieve equality, common ground around shared moral causes, and a firm democratic basis for community appears as elusive as ever on a national level.

In K-12 education this great sociopolitical problem of pluralism is quite pronounced, exacerbated, for example, by a second eight-year presidential administration that has implemented accountability regimes. In doing so, both the Republican and Democratic leadership have emboldened social and political conservatives to create in charter schools, tax-funded, parallel school systems that are more friendly to their worldview. In terms of broader aims of schools in a democratic society, the problem of public space formation exhibits itself in challenges such as teacher education that aids the moral agency of the predominantly white teaching force, giving voice to the pluralities of religious, ethnic, and sexual identities, and providing a rigorous and intellectually rich curriculum.

As dire as this prognosis might be for a public space undergirding our democracy, in this paper I would like to offer a prism through which we can view what we have in common and equip our children intellectually to forge dialogue and collaborate for the greater good with those with whom they disagree. I offer first a negative argument. I propose that Maxine Greene’s and John Dewey’s educational stances for the formation of a public space or a democratic community, respectively, are too ethically *thick* in their underlying axiological and epistemological assumptions of what is required to achieve a public sense of our culture that moves us to actions for the collective good.

Positively, I offer Rawls's *ethically thin* political liberalism and its presupposition of existent pluralism about comprehensive conceptions of the good as a more fitting basis in this historical moment for public space formation in spite of differences about tackling social problems.

TWO ETHICALLY THICK CONCEPTIONS AND THEIR SHORTCOMINGS

In this section of the paper, I argue that there are ambiguities about the meaning of group identity as a position from which Greene's participation in the public space and Dewey's formation of the public or democratic community emerge that could limit reasonable expressions of imagination, desire, or human flourishing in general. I will critically invoke the thick/thin distinction in axiology to interpret Maxine Greene's and John Dewey's conceptions of the role of education in the formation of public space.

THE LIMITS OF MAXINE GREENE'S BEATIFIC VISION

Maxine Greene's conception of education in her piece "Public Space and Public Education" lays out a beatific vision of an existentially robust valuing of public space that assumes plural conceptions of the good.¹ As Schutz states, Greene does not provide a *blueprint* but a *perspective* of the "public" from which to weigh education reform.² Greene suggests a substantive set of citizen's axiological and normative commitments that are consistent across her body of work. Although I cannot begin to do justice to Greene's depth and complexity here, focused attention on her account of the individual's part in public space formation is informative.

To begin with the public space, it is quintessentially a *public realm* or metaphorically a "common realm" where "human beings, speaking and acting in their plurality can appear before one another and realize the power they have in simply being together."³ Pluralism, as a given about society prior to public space formation, seemingly involves various kinds of individual diversity or persons coming from different "cultural locations." In her view, figuratively speaking, "Plurality allows for diverse and distinctive ways of seeing and hearing. It allows for the sounds and tones of voices seldom listened to, even today: the voices of women, immigrants, children, minorities, strangers of all kinds."⁴

When individuals come together, the effort to form such a public space is to perform a moral act, which is that of mutuality. Greene's work is

¹ Maxine Greene, "Public Education and the Public Space," *Educational Researcher* 11, no. 6 (1982): 4–9.

² Aaron Schutz, "Creating Local 'Public Spaces' in Schools: Insights from Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene," *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (1999): 77–98.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ Greene, "Public Education," 9.

replete with references to this kind of subject agency, in such terms as “finding one’s own space,” “appearing freely” before the other, and being appeared to and then being moved to act as a result.⁵ Concurring with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Greene believes that responsibility derives in part from acknowledgement of others’ experiences and that it distinctively leads to persons engaging in the speech and action on others’ behalf that constitutes that common world.⁶ It is exemplified by a collective effort to tackle grand moral problems with everyone on an equal basis for the common or social good.

Greene proposes pedagogy that supports the underlying moral commitments that this conception of public space demands. The schooling stance that Greene maintains as most consistent with her vision is one, which should allow the child, in theory, to speak from a given social location of lived experience, but to find commonality in conjunction with the other. In the first case, schools should be nurturing the children’s sense of their own subjectivity exemplified in becoming aware of their voice in a specific matter. In the second case, classroom settings should promote the “life of the conscience” that motivates right thinking and action. Ideally the child is able to achieve a multi-perspectival understanding of an issue through hearing the stories of others. From this description, it should be evident that beliefs to which participants are committed preclude particularly intolerant views, but they also valorize the *intention* of public space formation. Greene states that is clear

that the diverse perspectives that create the reality of the public space cannot include those that reject dialogue, encourage sexism or racism, insist on one-dimensional certainty . . . being together in a public space is for the sake of coming in touch with the common, of making something audible and visible in between.⁷

It follows that Greene’s public space must not only involve the willingness to eschew particular kinds of prejudices, a good and important requirement, but also include an intention to find common ground *for the sake of doing so*. Indeed, being willing to do so follows from the very concept of a public space. I want to be careful to place Greene’s account of intentionality in the right context here; but even while acknowledging that her critique was directed at a trend that she observed in the 1970s and ’80s towards an individualistic moral and social malaise, her account of how individuals live out the moral life applies to how one participates in collective action towards a communal good. Greene believes that “intentional action of some kind”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid.

liberates the self to “understand one’s preferences” and to do so “is to be able to reflect upon them in the light of some value, some norm.”⁸

As a criterion for participation in public space, intentionality can fail to be accommodating of the construction of self inclusive of group identity membership, ways of knowledge construction, and cultural values; thus, it could lead to a less representative or inclusive public space than a healthy democracy requires. In my view, this idea that persons from diverse backgrounds and identity groups converge in the public space for the sake of finding what is common or the highest good of all exemplifies, in axiology, an ethically thick value orientation.

Before elaborating on this categorization of ethical thickness, it is important to note there are various criteria or interpretations distinguishing an ethically thick from an ethically thin value framework.⁹ The general consensus in ethics is that thick concepts place the value burden on the evaluative component of a concept or propositional statement to dictate the traits, experiences, or habits of mind that fulfill the evaluative criteria. For example, the virtue of *courage* both suggests that it is a good-making property and provides guidelines about what it is to be courageous. Payne proposed a clarifying criterion for ethical thickness, which is that it asserts descriptive “meaning by conveying information about agents and their intentions, desires, and motivations.”¹⁰ So, for example, to fulfill the virtue of courage one must not only exhibit certain actions but also the accompanying mindset and intention. I will call this the *beliefs, desire, and intention* requirement. Not only does an axiologically thick interpretation of the public space consider the concept a good-making property but it also demands this *beliefs, desire, and intention* requirement from those in pursuit of it.

In contrast, thin concepts are more general moral ones: for example, goodness, badness, or rudeness. While they may be evaluative, these concepts tell us little about what actions fall under that category since they do not include descriptions of those actions. Using Payne’s additional criteria, thin concepts do not imply an accompanying *beliefs, desire, and intention* requirement.

In my view, Greene’s idea of the public space qualifies as ethically thick because she believes normative implications follow from its implied concepts, such as “common” in terms of what holds us together as a society and “freedom” as an aesthetic, dialectic, and intellectual process; one fulfills these

⁸ Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978): 153.

⁹ Jonathan Dancy, “In Defense of Thick Concepts,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (1995): 263. The literature credits Bernard Williams and Jonathan Dancy as points of departure who have authored seminal works clarifying thick concepts and characterize them as holding together both a property and an attitude.

¹⁰ Andrew Payne, “A New Account of Thick Concepts,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 39 (2005): 89–103.

belief states ideally because one both is willing and desirous of doing so. The key role of education in this view is creating learning conditions that encourage this kind of thinking. In Greene's case, these claims are not, of course, a priori but are suggestive of a universal ethos or of moral norms. I argue that there are tensions in Greene's ethically thick view that one could interpret as limiting reasonable expressions of a group identity member's view of desire, imagination, and human flourishing.

One challenge to Greene's public space that presupposes this *beliefs, desire, and intention* requirement and that poses the potential to unwarrantably suppress pluralism is that achieving it arguably involves a willingness to self-blur or self-rupture group membership boundaries, as part of the intention to enter the public space. This view is one that is evident in the suggestion that in the public space one must go beyond one's identity and escape the social positioning effects of one's social group.¹¹ Cultural location is, for Greene, the "taken for granted" aspect of existence that exemplifies the activities of the "normalized self" that is trapped within a predetermined culture. As such, I would argue that her conception of public space gives an incomplete account of how one's group identity could be germane to a public space without surrendering meanings, values, and conceptions of the human good, where they conflict with prevailing views. How does one remain rooted in one's identity, then, if one desires to do so? Greene suggests that persons must self-disrupt their social locations and break out of normalizations to form public spaces with others; but forms of group identities provide rich epistemological and ontological locations for making meaning. Identities can offer their members deep interpretive significance such that a call to a grand commons lacks appeal.¹² This argument is precisely the one Kymlicka made in arguing for group-specific rights in liberal societies.¹³

There is also a critical race point against a public space presupposing normative *beliefs, desires, and intentions*. Critical race theory interprets political, social, and educational policy in light of the dominant discourse of America's racist and colonialist past. On those grounds, great skepticism accompanies any figurative in gathering that does not intersubjectively address white supremacy and more recently what it means to inhabit or construct a reformist white identity. For the critical race view, Dubois's claim that the defining issue of American social justice was that of the color line is a position that challenges both the legitimacy and viability of the public space project. Danielle Allen's *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* characterizes the fear and suspicion of the black versus white divide in public discourse as deep within our social compact, relegating

¹¹ Schutz, "Creating Local 'Public Spaces,'" 94.

¹² Michael Rabinder James, *Deliberative Democracy and the Plural Polity* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 58.

¹³ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 107–172.

the black other to stranger status and as such not trustworthy. Although some would argue for the increasing visibility of the other, there yet remains profound distrust of each other's beliefs, motives, and intentions.¹⁴

A related hurdle for Greene's *beliefs, desire, and intention* account is that it constitutes an existentialist discourse of freedom and as such it assumes ways in which its participants make sense of the world, construct meaning, and offer critiques of ideas. I would argue that we are in a post-discourse age of, for example, post-post-modernism and post-post-structuralism where discourse frames have themselves become normalized and reified binaries, and as such have the potential to be hegemonic whereas a public space should involve a contestation of discourses.¹⁵ The mediating factors of social life simply do not evoke the categorical ethical lines of social injustice. Yet there seems to be no Archimedean point from which we can evaluate these frameworks.

In the dismantling of established, long-standing societal structures and norms of families, religion, community, or the good life, we fail to agree on the frameworks of reconstituting a more fair society, never mind actually doing so. For example in the immigration debate some claim that the rule of law dictating national borders should determine immigration policy, but there is lively discussion in various intellectual and academic quarters questioning the legal versus illegal categorization of immigrants. Another example would be where those of deeply held religious faith that are in a straightforward cultural collision with those who view their beliefs as intolerant, uniformed, or unscientific.

Finally, in challenge to Greene's appeal to the aesthetic as metaphor for concepts such as freedom and community, I question one of Greene's proposed domains of learning as encouraging "self-formation"¹⁶ and the formation of common-space in various literary and art aesthetics. As Greene explains, the idea is that art and literature can transport someone from his or her current state of being and cultural location to understanding those of another. I would argue, however, that the aesthetic is not always adequate to invoke understanding because one's aesthetic experience is mediated by background knowledge, biases, and allegiances that can make emancipatory interpretation obscure but, as important, can limit the capacity to elicit empathy and understanding. Art, music, and literature can be highly culturally contested and even incommensurable territory.

A more general point about the epistemological limitations of drawing imaginatively upon art, music, and literature as conduits to achieving public space is that it is possible that there are aesthetic norms based on culture and identity that constrain what constitutes legitimate imaginative experiences. In

¹⁴ Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 101.

¹⁵ James, *Deliberative Democracy*, 62.

¹⁶ Greene, *Landscapes of Learning*, 23.

When God Talks Back, T.M. Luhrmann details how evangelical Christians believe that they are able to access God and the divine through imagination.¹⁷ Yet, such a framework would not be welcome in Greene’s public space unless the Christian is willing to eschew belief commitments that include the absolutes and fixity that Greene abhors. Is there a place for those of deeply held religious faith to not only inhabit their religious identity but also to find a shared purpose with others, using their sense of an intimacy with their God as a platform for cultivating shared projects?

Covaleskie argued for a similar disposition in his view that a healthy democratic society presupposes underlying virtues in its citizens. One of those is the desire to promote public goods towards which a society is working. Nonetheless, Covaleskie articulated the liberal democratic justification for vouchers and charter schools in the idea that such public education limits derive appeal from their potential “to form their own ideas about the proper nature of social life.” Covaleskie goes to say, employing Berlin’s complementary notions (a point with which Greene agrees in theory), that the dilemma of schools in a democratic society is how not to interfere with the negative liberty of its members, while at the same time providing educational experiences that develop in its young the discipline necessary to exercise their positive liberty.¹⁸ He ends with the statement that we are failing as a society to impart these virtues.

THE LIMITS OF DEWEY’S PRAGMATISM

John Dewey’s pragmatic conception of the public and democratic community is ethically thick in ways that are similar to Greene’s, particularly in making sense of the techno-industrial movements in the formation of democratic communities. Dewey holds strong normative presuppositions about what constitutes the public, which is one of the central preoccupations of his book *The Public and Its Problems*. In a more limited way than in the discussion of Greene, a similar critique of Dewey’s “public” as an organizing moral concept of democracy can also be made.

For Dewey, the public, by its very identification, constitutes the functional and moral object of democracy. The term expresses a democratic state’s moral relationship with its citizens. In Dewey’s view, the *public* develops when individuals from disparate backgrounds form a community that exemplifies the ideal social life. As Covaleskie explains,

a democratic society must function as a community; at a national level it must be constituted as a *Great Community*. What matters is the working of this public: when a public exists, we are aware of the fact, because we are aware of our

¹⁷ T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2012), 39–71.

¹⁸ John Covaleskie, “Virtue, Liberty, and Discipline: Fostering the Democratic Character,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006): 58–59.

membership in it. Further, the existence of community is the existence of democracy *and vice versa*: “. . . democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion” (Dewey, 1927/1954/1988, p. 184).¹⁹

As is well known, Dewey viewed schools as locations for modeling democracy. Therefore, it was the aim of schools as social institutions to prepare students to preserve the democratic social order. Schools were to be engaged in achieving both a transmissive task of preparing students “for society as it now exists” and a transformative one of “seeking to improve society and foster social change.”²⁰

Dewey believed that students should be able to negotiate the curriculum content through concrete experiences that would be an initiation into various disciplines at an increasing level of complexity.²¹ The focus on positive and constructive experiences would ensure age-appropriate personal development and self-realization. It would also encourage higher order thinking and a growing mastery of more abstract ideas. Throughout the learning process, students as subjects of integrated disciplinary activities achieve understanding of the world. They also take seriously a sense of social responsibility and position themselves as problem solvers engaged in preserving and sustaining democracy.

In Dewey’s expansive pragmatic vision, the moral conception that includes *beliefs, desire, and intention* is evident in the normative weight of the concept of the public; but its pragmatic theorization, based on anthropological and philosophical assumptions, indicates empirical limiting factors on such philosophical efforts. To rehearse the critiques of Walter Feinberg²² and Frank Margonis, early in the 1900s Dewey’s appeal to both anthropology and convention informed his belief that the life possibilities of African Americans were limited. Although Dewey clearly subscribed to pluralism, there is evidence that he viewed his vision’s full scope as most tenable for the majority.

Margonis argued that Dewey subscribed to the underlying assumptions and racialized understanding of human potential prevalent at the time in presupposing different possibilities according to one’s race for living

¹⁹ John Covalleskie, “Freedom of Conscience and the Wall of Separation,” *Educational Controversy* 5, no. 2 (2010): n.p.

²⁰ Mary-Lou Breitborde and Louise Swinarski, *Teaching on Principle and Promise: The Foundations of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 145.

²¹ See John Dewey, *The School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Originally published as separate volumes in 1900 and 1902.

²² Walter Feinberg, *Reason and Rhetoric: The Intellectual Foundations of Twentieth Century Liberal Educational Policy* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 117.

out the democratic vision.²³ Fallace carefully crafted an argument, in the vein of Feinberg's claims, that Dewey's commitment to the dominant theoretical anthropologically based frame of his time was responsible, up until 1922, for his conclusions about the limited prospects for African Americans in the early and middle period.²⁴ As Feinberg states,

Dewey's active involvement in the formation of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People is evidence that he was neither unaware of nor sympathetic towards the problems of racial discrimination. Like others, however, his sympathies were bounded by what he felt the nation was willing to accept and by the degree of integration that he felt industrial progress could tolerate.²⁵

That prudential considerations informed Dewey's broader liberal project reminds us that these thick value determinations of the public space can be at work both intellectually to reinforce a subaltern status of groups in ways that are often unproblematized and unchallenged.

Subscribing to an ideal of public space that is ethically thick does not, in one sense, preclude highly biased assumptions. At the level of practice, the Black students that Dewey encountered in 1922 faced life choices that were bounded by the very racial identity that was not an available position from which they could evaluate their society. While the fact that they were ethnically Black/African Americans limited their life prospects, they were not being allowed to call on structural racism as a vantage point from which to offer a critique of education because no such framework was present in Dewey's theorization of democracy.

Greene acknowledged that Dewey believed that the "problem of minorities" was solved. She stated, "There is little evidence that he was aware of the diverse languages and the multiple perspectives (or the repressed languages and the hidden perspectives) marking what was coming to be."²⁶ Therein lies one meta-ethical constraint on an ethically thick conception—it can be a closed moral system without an available basis for critique. Dewey's vision of what was possible in the social order was constrained by his own context of choice, suggesting that such prisms of the public space should be so constructed as to critically evaluate positionality as a mediating factor.

Anthony Brown writes of a similar tendency in educational scholarship about African Americans in general and African American males in

²³ Frank Margonis, "The Path of Social Amnesia and Dewey's Democratic Commitments," in *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Aston (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), 296–304.

²⁴ Thomas D. Fallace, *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race: An Intellectual History, 1895–1922*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

²⁵ Feinberg, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 117.

²⁶ Greene, "Public Education," 5.

particular, in which “discourses have helped to normalize and fasten in place an unchanging and reworked narrative for discussing or addressing the conditions of Black males.”²⁷ The dominant narrative, grounded in a social justice framework, is that of social inequality and educational underachievement, and it has had a multiplying effect in the schools of education and in multicultural education curricula. While those conditions are indeed endemic in the Black community, alternate stories of African American male resilience simply do not have the profile they should have in our field. Documenting, examining and sharing such counter-narratives have been the work of Shaun Harper’s body of work on African American males who “have made it” into and through predominantly White institutions.²⁸ His giving voice to the subject positions of resilient Black males, originating from his own lived experience, exemplifies the importance of who gets to tell the story or who controls a people’s narrative. The problem is, in a sense, a version of Freire and Greene’s *malefic generosity*.²⁹

To summarize my critique of Greene’s and Dewey’s notions of public space, vis-à-vis proposing a school stance for students that supports the creation of public space, these are all laudable ideals that are achieved on some scale in classrooms across the country. However, at stake in the ethically thick-versus-thin categorization is the long-standing puzzle in ethics of relating the natural to the moral. Greene’s and Dewey’s value-laden conceptions of the public space and the public do not imply without complication the broad inclusiveness to which they aspire. Dancy, as a definitive thickie, holds that the supervenience of the moral and the natural is held in place indirectly by linguistic and definitional features. Indeed, in Greene’s case, it is unclear the basis on which to include or exclude normalizations outside of the existential, stipulative, and admittedly inspiring account of a public space. For Dewey, in pragmatic form, techno-rational and techno-industrial developments differentially inform anthropological inferences about human possibilities for democratic community, but it is not clear how the student can have access to and critique the assumptions of the theorizations shaping policy and practice all the way down to the school level where those assumptions do not explicitly address the benefits and burdens of group identity.

In contrast, a thin ethical interpretation allows for greater latitude in interpreting the relationship between natural states of affairs and moral evaluation that opens the possibility of introducing epistemological and ontological beliefs about group identity. I argue below that the notion of public

²⁷ Anthony Brown, “Same Old Stories: The Black Male in Social Science and Educational Literature, 1930s to the Present,” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 9 (2011): 2047–2079.

²⁸ Shaun Harper, “Niggers No More: A Critical Race Counternarrative on Black Male Student Achievement at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22, no. 6 (2009): 697–712.

²⁹ See Greene, *Landscapes of Learning*.

space should be viewed as being an ethically thin concept and critical positionality as its educational counterpart.

A THIN CONCEPTION OF PUBLIC SPACE AND CRITICAL POSITIONALITY

A THIN CONCEPTION OF THE PUBLIC SPACE

Many moral theorists maintain that interpreting one concept as having both a thick and a thin conception is reasonable, given the fluidity in the use and meaning of many terms over time. For example, Payne refers to Rawls's use of "justice" in *A Theory of Justice* as an example of one term that can be interpreted in both a thick and thin sense.³⁰ In his justification for a politically liberal society, Rawls merely recommends a descriptive criterion of justice as fairness, when he defines it as the willingness of self-interested agents behind the veil of ignorance to select principles that would place them in the best possible social position should they find themselves on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Such principles constitute an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens in society because plural notions of the good motivate definitions of fairness.³¹ As Payne explains, "No implication is made in his [Rawls's] description of justice as fairness about the just intentions or desires of the members of a just society."³² The term "just" describes in the first instance the structure of a society, not the state of character of its members. Justice in this sense is not a thick concept.³³

Similarly, a thin conception of the public space, while clearly a moral and evaluative notion, would contain little or no descriptive content. Applying Payne's reading of the ethically thin concept, the public space can be fulfilled "in such a wide range of different ways" so that "we know next to nothing of what is taking place if we know only that it is a public space."³⁴ Doing so would separate its components so that "its associated features" (being a place of political equality, and finding commonality) are "distinguished from the reasons those provide for acting."³⁵ I would differentiate the notion of a public space as guided by the world as we know it (human beings, their inherent value, the concept of democracy) from its evaluative action-guiding implications. As such, one may use the term without conveying the *beliefs, desire, and intention* requirement while conceding that it is a public good. So the public space would be an organic construct; it would be a working or open

³⁰ Payne, "New Account of Thick Concepts," 92.

³¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 7–22.

³² William Lund, "Politics, Citizens, and the Good Life: Assessing Two Versions of Ethical Liberalism," *Political Research Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1996): 479–504.

³³ Payne, "New Account of Thick Concepts," 96.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

moral concept that agents produce or that is continually being constructed and under critique in ways that it could be fulfilled.

I would argue that Rawls in *Political Liberalism* offers a constructive interpretation of an ethically thin conception of the public space. He begins this work by directly inquiring how it is that persons divided by “reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines” can nonetheless coexist over time as part of a stable society.³⁶ The principles governing the distribution of economic and social goods emerge when self-interested agents in possession of their own conceptions of the good, or the meaning, value and purpose of life, reach overlapping consensus on principles of fairness from a publicly neutral original position.³⁷ Justice as fairness is ethically thin because Rawls views agents as being in possession of comprehensive religious and/or political doctrines, but they achieve overlapping consensus around what constitutes fairness, equality, and liberty without dictating conformity to an agreed-upon sets of goods.

So, as Lund states, Rawls “treats liberalism as a ‘neutral’ and merely ‘political’ response to the presence of plural and incommensurable views of the good amidst an underlying commitment to equality.”³⁸ So, liberalism

strives for an ethically thin conception of justice and rights in which the principles, institutions, and policies required by that conception can “gain the support of any of the reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines” available in a society (Rawls 1993: 10, 15).³⁹

It is important to point out that Rawls’s scheme applies to the basic structure of society and is not intended to “regulate the conduct of individuals in particular circumstances or the internal organization of associations within society.”⁴⁰ A Rawlsian public space that would advance political liberalism is the view that, as Rawls states,

Under the reasonably favorable conditions that make constitutional democracy possible, political institutions satisfying the principles of a liberal conception of justice realize political values and ideals that normally outweigh whatever other values oppose them.⁴¹

³⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 4.

³⁷ John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7, no. 1 (1987): 1–26.

³⁸ Lund, “Politics, Citizens, and the Good Life,” 490.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 482.

⁴⁰ Tommie Shelby, “Race and Ethnicity, Race and Social Justice: Rawlsian Considerations,” *Fordham Law Review* 72 no. 5, (2004): 17.

⁴¹ Rawls, “Idea of Overlapping Consensus,” 26.

Persons under conditions of reasons and in possession of private views achieve reflective equilibrium about that which is publically necessary for a political liberalism. They reach agreement and consensus upon due reflection. Such a public space *is* where citizens dialogue about their critical positions around a given issue with the goal of achieving coherent positions for social cooperation.

What kind of educational stance would exemplify such an ethically thin conception of public space? Rawls's theory of justice implies what I would label citizens' *critical positionality* such that subjectivity is relationally constituted by individuals' identity positions in society and their conceptions of human flourishing while also problematizing select beliefs that constitute their meaning making. Additionally critical positionality recommends procedures for reaching coherent beliefs in solving disagreements.

AN ETHICALLY THIN CONCEPTION AND CRITICAL POSITIONALITY IN EDUCATION

Critical positionality, in my view, is an educational stance that allows for the acknowledgement that persons are in possession of their own comprehensive moral and religious doctrines. It means that through a process of public reason, divergent beliefs can be considered collectively and consensus reached to achieve social cooperation around contentious issues. I am unable to fully flesh out the theory here but I offer below the general outlines of this stance.

First, both subjectivity and reality constitute the concept of *positionality*. This term originated from feminist philosophy and, in particular, Martin-Alcoff's effort to discursively resolve the paradox posed by the essentiality versus constructedness debates around gendered identity. Applied generally to gender, race, class, and other aspects of identity it suggests that those identities are markers of relational *positions* rather than being essential qualities. According to Martin-Alcoff,

the concept of positionality includes two points: first, as already stated, that the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context; but, second, that the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be discovered (the meaning of femaleness). The concept of woman as positionality shows how women use their positional perspective as a place from which values are

interpreted and constructed rather than as a locus of an already determined set of values.⁴²

As illustrated here, Martin-Alcoff both draws upon and goes beyond a post-structuralist reading of identity in conceiving *positionality*.

In the idea that gendered identity is both undermined and shaped by history, Martin-Alcoff and other feminist scholars defer to Foucault's denial of a subsisting subject; nonetheless, by appealing to the idea of political activism emerging out of one's lived gendered experience, they are outside of the post-structuralist narrow conceptualization of the person. Martin-Alcoff explains, in a nod to Foucault "that we are constructs—that is, our experience of our very subjectivity is a construct mediated by and/or grounded on a social discourse beyond (way beyond) individual control."⁴³ Yet along with other feminist scholars, she also maintains that there is a clear justification for identity politics because identity is a position that is politically paramount. Martin-Alcoff maintains that "gender identity is both a construction and also a necessary point of departure."⁴⁴ In Rawlsian terms, identities instantiate subjective conceptions of a meaningful life and comprehensive conceptions of the good *qua* group identity; positionality explicitly acknowledges cultural location as salient to public deliberation in ways that are self-reflexive for participants and involve intersubjective engagement.

The *criticality* of critical positionality captures how the feminist analysis of identity can be applied in deliberation to other forms of group identity membership. As a stance, *critical* positionality involves three phases, tiers, or levels of deliberation: The first tier consists of self-reflexively first person beliefs that encapsulate one's stance regarding the issue under discussion. As first order beliefs, these claims are experience-based, testimony-independent, and rooted in one's own cultural context but are supported by first-hand evidence or argument alone.

The second phase consists of identifying the social, political, or historical contexts relevant to the issue under discussion. This phase gives voice to beliefs that are acquired through one's community of choice: for example, knowledge of the American experience as inhabiting contradictions (e.g. the structural conflicts and inequities; the ideological inconsistencies between principles and power, democracy and capitalism). The second tier can draw upon expertise from various sources. It also does acknowledge expertise arising from one's community around the meaning and value of human flourishing as providing good reasons for how one comes to hold beliefs or

⁴² Linda Martin-Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation, and Application*, ed. Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995): 454.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 443.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 457.

positions. However, in seeking to make the agent's epistemic community explicit, second tier beliefs are a tacit acknowledgement of the socio-political factors dictating sanctioned knowledge.

In the third phase, the agent brings to bear the normative rigor of weighing evidence for or against beliefs in discussion together with others from opposing standpoints. This deliberative process is reason-dependent but with broad reflective equilibrium being the goal. Phase three takes a recursive approach to seeking coherence among the beliefs held by participants in the conversation to establish beliefs that everyone can accept.

These three phases show that critical positionality involves triangulation of *subjectivity*, *social context*, and *epistemic standards*. Tier three beliefs seek a reflective equilibrium of coherence to establish claims that everyone can accept as true in light of the airing of different views and the evidence for and against them. In the deliberation there is the possibility for each agent to overcome cultural bias or socially inculcated false beliefs.

In closing, this paper proposes a construct, *critical positionality*, as an ideal stance that fosters an ethically thin public space or a common realm and that should be the aim of education. As critical positionality is structured it can effectively address the sociopolitical and cultural impediments to forming a democratic community where there is pluralism. In forward looking fashion, it aspires to equip all students regardless of their identity commitments to be discerning consumers of their cultures, advocates for social justice, and participants in deliberative democracy. In achieving critical positionality the individual intersubjectively reaches coherent stances with others around social and public policy about which people disagree. It affords critical engagement with the other through public reason. In Rawls's schema, that there is such a process provides equality of opportunity outside of the original position because the underlying assumption of public neutrality demands making one's identity commitments explicit in the move towards reaching coherence for social cooperation.
