Review of *What Is A Public Education And Why We Need It: A Philosophical Inquiry into Self-Development, Cultural Commitment, and Public Engagement*, Walter Feinberg

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According to Feinberg, public education is needed “to renew a public by providing the young with the skills, dispositions, and perspectives required to engage with strangers about their shared interests and common fate and to contribute to shaping it” (134). The chief obstacles to this that he identifies are parents sending their children “to schools that replicate their own ideas and social class positions” (p.1), these, he contends, are “not good for democracy” (1).[[1]](#footnote-1) For Feinberg, a public is an intergenerational unity made up of strangers who engage with one another about their shared interests and common­­ fate. Part of his book’s purpose is to defend the existence of a public, which ought to be cultivated, rather than allowed to atrophy or fracture.

Feinberg’s book is split into six chapters preceded by an introduction. The introduction takes upon itself the task of rehabilitating philosophy of education in public discussion. This purpose is perhaps better served through a display of cogent, accessible philosophical reasoning than through an extended apology, which only seems to delay proceedings. Although this is easily skipped by those more interested in the substance of the argument than in brief histories and analyses of philosophy and of philosophy of education in particular, it is perhaps not appropriate in a targeted manifesto for particular policy intervention.

The first chapter, ‘Education as Self-development,’ defends a conception of education as self-development. In this chapter, Feinberg contrasts two views of self-development: what he calls ‘the process view’, in which the emphasis is on students taking charge of their own development, and ‘the product view’, in which the emphasis is on the sort of self that ought to come out of an educative process (30 – 35). Feinberg seems to confuse this distinction with a further distinction between the idea that education ought to be a process of unveiling something hidden within us, on the one hand, and the idea that education ought to be matter of achieving some standard external to us on the other. Both the product and the process view can embrace either of these goals. After raising problems with both the product and process view, he suggests that we regard education as relational: “where the engagement with the other is critical in a constitutive but not determinant way” (34). However, Feinberg still regards certain outcomes as the proper aim of education, after all, as we have seen, public education is supposed to provide children with certain “skills, dispositions, and perspectives” (134). Ultimately, Feinberg wants education to aim for the “intentional development of reflective character where growth, a capacity for autonomy, and the competence to address unexpected contingency is the aim of development” (50), and for students to take on responsibility for this task. As with Dewey, from whom the aim of growth is taken, not much is done to explain what kinds of growth are the proper functions of education, and what kinds are not.

The chapter reaches this point through a rather confusing discussion of the self, which slips between the terms ‘character’, ‘identity’, ‘self’ and ‘personhood’ without distinction. Some clearer structure and assertion of the key theses to be defended would certainly aid the reader. For instance, it is not clear why Feinberg should assert that “It is inconceivable that my renewal could not matter to me” (37), and on the very same page seemingly contradict himself by saying that “when a person is aware of their continuity, but does not care whether this continuity persists, we think of it as a depressed self” (37). Unless he wants to deny that depression is conceivable, he would do better to drop the first assertion, but neither seem material to his overall thesis about public schools. Feinberg also asserts that “agency is not a given, but an achievement” (38). But one wonders whose achievement it is if not that of an agent: if agency is an achievement, it would have to be the achievement of an agent and either terminate there or head towards an infinite regress. Much of the discussion seemed to distract from the avowed purpose of the book, and was somewhat difficult to keep track of. For all of that, it certainly makes an interesting and proactive thicket for philosophy students to work through.

The second chapter, ‘Culture, Character and Education,’ explains how “self-development does not take place in isolation, but requires elements of culture to develop it” (45). Feinberg emphasizes that cultures must not allow themselves to ossify, since “ordinary norms and basic algorithms break down and new complexities present themselves” (47), being enculturated ought not to be a *cul de sac*, but a departure point from which one is able seek out new ways of being. Feinberg takes some time to insist that we need a new way of seeing cultures which embraces neither relativism about their value, nor the colonialist’s stance by which “groups were measured by their presumed capacity to model Western ways” (48). These are certainly not the only two options, although it might appear that way to some. For Feinberg, education is unavoidably, and not undesirably normative in character.

One feature of the chapter that should be challenged is Feinberg’s attack on the existence of culture, especially given his commitment to the existence of a public. Feinberg perhaps worries that he needs to deny that culture exists in order to deny that it has any claims over us. He worries that “culture rather than individuals who are connected to one another in certain ways – is treated as having agency while the individual is treated as subsumed completely by membership in a culture” (53). Instead, for Feinberg, “cultural formations are objects of concern not because they have any special status in their own right but because of the role they play in the flourishing of their members” (54). At the same time, he allows that “children are harmed when their parents and their parent’s communities are not respected” (53). We shall come back to the ambiguity of Feinberg’s use of the word ‘respect’ (it features most prominently in chapter six). Feinberg urges that “we need a conception of culture that acknowledges the significance of a primary system of meaning … but that also acknowledges that the function of education is development and growth into agency informed by, but not limited to” that primary system of meaning (52).

Feinberg seems somewhat inconsistent on the ontological status of cultures. On the one hand “There is no such thing as culture,” on the other hand “there are certainly elements of tight knit human formations (e.g. language, music, tools, practices etc.), that together constitute what we call culture”(54). He wants at the same time to undermine the idea of cultures as existing: they are eliminable from our ontology, replaceable by their constituent parts. But if something is reducible to its constituents, one has not yet eliminated it from one’s ontology, but grounded that thing by means of identity with other things. For instance, it doesn’t follow from the fact water *is* H2O that water does not exist. More importantly, though, plausibly cultures are not to be identified with their constituent parts, just as a statue is not identical with the parts that make it up, since it can survive those parts being exchanged for others.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the same, the statue could not exist without any material composition at all. So too perhaps we might say this of culture and its parts. The reason to deny that a culture can be identified with its parts is that, like the statue, a culture’s parts can change without it thereby going out of existence. Furthermore, it is not clear how Feinberg can deny the existence of cultures, but affirm the existence of a public: they would seem to be quite alike ontologically, and have a shared fate.

In chapter three, ‘The Education of Cultural Stranger: The Idea of a Public Education’, Feinberg sets out to explain what a public is. “It has a reality of its own, but that reality depends on it being acknowledged as such” (63): “bringing a public into being and sustaining it,” requires doing so self-consciously (63). By the end of the chapter it is not entirely clear what a public is, and certainly not how it can exist while cultures cannot. None the less, we were told at the start of the book (among Feinberg’s working definitions) that “a public is a group of strangers committed to preserving the process by which public values are formed” (21) and that “a public value is an evolving standard of behaviour that has been subjected to scrutiny and refinement; it is compatible with core social ideals, and functions to shape civic judgement and guide individual behaviour” (20). A public, it seems, is a social construction, like nationalities. For instance, there is a border between England and Scotland, and if collective amnesia destroyed all memory of it, it would be odd to think that this border would continue to exist. Borders depend on recognition of their existence for their existence – even if we do not need to recognize that dependency. Something similar can be said of the public as the character of relations between people that can survive successive generations (even as that character changes over time), although it could not survive the deaths of all of its members. But here it seems not at all unlike cultures.

They are to be concerned with their shared fate, says Feinberg. However, it seems to me that shared fate likely does not pick out members of a nation state, the insights of Marxism suggest that one’s fate is shared across national boundaries within social class more often than not. The concept of common fate comes up a few times. But one point is worth making: as Feinberg is acutely aware, currently there is little in the way of a shared fate for rich and poor, for educated and uneducated, for black and white. He is very aware of the problems that the poor have graduating and that blacks have with the legal system, and with police forces in the US. But this precisely undermines the notion of shared fate. Indeed, one could suggest that it undermines the idea of common interests: perhaps the privileged have little interest in sacrificing their privilege for a more equitable system. As some might put it; the 1% share one fate, and the 99% share another.

Chapter Four, ‘Public Values and the Civic Good,’ criticizes what Feinberg calls ‘neoliberalism’. This is the name he gives to facilitating “parental choice” through initiatives such as “charter schools and school vouchers”. It contends that “government should not have the monopoly on education” (77). Feinberg says that “the conventional meaning of monopoly is a market where a single firm controls production, distribution and price” (79), and denies that this describes the situation in the US. Firstly private schooling and home schooling are an option, secondly, there are thousands of local government school boards that set policy and establish budgets (and not just one agency), and thirdly, federal requirements are publicly defensible values: “requirements such as gender equality, special education [provision], or religious impartiality” (80). Feinberg argues further that choice is not the same as freedom by suggesting a counterexample in which there is only one option, which happens to be everybody’s preference ahead of a range of counterfactual options. He goes on to describe how by making other options available would come at the cost of the initial option which was everyone’s preference. Suppose everyone loves their local school, which is the only choice. But now several options become available, and it destroys the good of having the single school as the only option – everyone is worse off and has lost the freedom to do what they wanted. Here we are really talking about satisfying preferences. It seems unduly optimistic to imagine that just what people are given in the first instance without any alternative is likely to best satisfy their preferences, and that everyone’s preferences would be satisfied by the same offering.

Feinberg worries that “choice as it is defined by neoliberal theory obscures a basic function of public education – to reproduce a public” (81). It is not clear however how a range of service providers each providing something additional to the goal, and perhaps unique ways of satisfying that goal could not be desirable. The idea that motivates markets is that market conditions improve the performance of schools; this is perhaps perfectly compatible with government regulation and government funding being provided to just those schools which conform with and promote public values. Indeed, Feinberg complains that neo-liberal models are committed to “the rather narrow gauge of standardized test scores” (80), but this is in no way an essential to the conviction that education is best served by the market, even versions which defer entirely to parental preferences. After all, which parents desire that their children succeed by those standards alone? Feinberg recognizes this, and makes a tentative regulative suggestion for state funded private providers (he has several more to make embracing this view at the end, which makes it all the more curious as to why he takes himself to oppose it here):

If a school is to be eligible to receive vouchers and if the most vulnerable students are to be advantaged then its admission procedure should be by lottery with lower income families given priority (81)

Also in this chapter, Feinberg is at pains to distinguish public goods and neighbourhood goods. A neighbourhood good is an incidental benefit to some party other than the one who receives the immediate good (such as my employer’s benefitting from my education), or a case where the beneficiaries are quite diffuse (like those in a public park). So what is a public good, and how does it differ? Feinberg says that “a neighbourhood benefit indicates a value that is share[d] by many [people] but … shared by each of them individually” (8). However, it is very hard to see how this can be contrasted with a more interpersonal notion of shared values. Is the notion it is to be contrasted with one in which people do not each hold the value, but are willing to accept the value when in concert? Or is it just one that has been achieved and shared through discussion? It is hard to know. Perhaps the key difference between public goods and neighbourhood benefits is selfishness, and public mindedness: Whereas neo-liberalism demands that every cent spent on an individual’s behalf must be justifiable by a good it accrues to them, perhaps Feinberg simply wants to break away from that and have his public defend money spent by more community mindedness. Even still however, it seems that a public could in principle agree to endorse neo-liberal principles.

One of Feinberg’s key targets is parental choice in schooling. Rather acutely, he points out that on the neo-liberal model, if we are to pay taxes for other people’s educations we might “legitimately want to exercise considerable control over the character of that education and where it is to take place” thereby undermining parental choice (83). However, Feinberg’s most fundamental objection is that parental preferences of the most vulnerable “serve to reinforce” inequalities, or replicate social class positions because they are not aspirational (81), and because “those who are less informed about the system want as much for their children but have more difficulty engaging this network to the advantage of their children” (1). Feinberg’s ultimate worry about the marketization of education in which parental choice is to be satisfied “is compatible with large inequality and large educational debt. And this in turn has serious implications for the social fabric and diminishes the commitment of individuals as members of a civic public” (91). Certainly it is compatible, but a system of government owned schools is also compatible with large inequality, for after all, children attend schools in areas, and are subject to a postcode lottery. Wealthy families can afford to buy properties in successful school districts, and poorer families cannot. It is not obvious that government schools are the answer; it is not obvious what the answer is at all. In sum, I fear that the chapter does not provide a representation of market-minded education theorists which such theorists would take to have done them justice.

The title of Chapter five, ‘The Construction and Stabilization of Public Values: The Task of Public Schools,’ might give the impression that, for Feinberg, the task of public schools is to construct public values. But instead, he sees that task as being “to recognize and reproduce public values” (96). At the same time he is concerned that public schools should “reproduce public values in a way that does not fossilize them” (96). He acknowledges worries that public values might unjustly favour some groups over others, but provides a convincing account of how counter-public narratives can revise public narratives by drawing on parts of public narratives to revise others, and he cites Martin Luther King’s ‘I have dream speech’ as a paradigmatic example of this manoeuvre (99). Perhaps the finest part of Feinberg’s book is his discussion of the emergence of the concept of racism and his deft distinction between the concept of racism and phenomenon of racism. I would raise just one concern over that discussion. Feinberg distinguishes between racism and prejudice on the ground of choice: racism requires that oppressors regard the oppressed as being deserving of oppression by nature, rather than by choice (107). Additionally, racism is a systemic, shaping of “public responses, institutions, [and] shared practices” (107). The fact that people are persecuted for something that their persecutors take to be non-optional may be definitive attribute of racism, but is perhaps not the definitively awful thing about racism. Consider the chemical castration of Alan Turing for homosexual intercourse in 1952. This is a product of systemic injustice against homosexuals, but what is very important here is that homosexuality is often regarded precisely as a choice, as a wilful perversion.

Chapter Six, ‘From Public Education to Public School,’ deals with a wide range of issues from questions of what schools should promote, to questions of which schools the government ought to support, and which they ought to permit. I must admit that I found Feinberg’s discussion of transactional pedagogy and discussions of meaning and meaningfulness rather confusing and hard to follow. Among the more easily intelligible recommendations Feinberg makes in this chapter are ones concerning funding and regulation and curricula aims and content.

Funding and regulation: Feinberg wants schools to provide a public education, and advocates for public financial support being granted to schools just in so far as schools deliver a public education. Non-government schools would be government funded if they support public education. Feinberg allows that “some religious and private schools take the obligation to engage their students publicly very seriously” (128), but worries that this will always be “an added, secondary task” (128), and so expects that government schools will likely serve the purpose better. Schools might be considered public (and warrant public funding), he suggests, to the extent that they:

include open admission, special support for disadvantaged children, a religiously and racially diverse teaching staff, accountability to a group of citizens who are representative of a cross-segment of the community as a whole, the accurate and respectful representation of diverse viewpoints and ways of life. Schools that met these criteria could be supported by tax funds. Schools that did not would be supported by tuition and would possibly be charged a tax that would be directed at the schools at the public end of the scale (128).

These comments are very suggestive and one may follow up with questions about how religiously and racially diverse teaching staff is to be ensured (i.e. whether positive discrimination may be required, or whether a quota system should be implemented), and in what ways schools ought to be accountable to a cross section of society, and for what should they be accountable (i.e. what is it that this cross section of society is supposed to be demand of them). What forms of support for disadvantage students does Feinberg have in mind? Finally, is it an open admission to all that is required? Indeed, earlier, you will recall, Feinberg suggested that:

If a school is to be eligible to receive vouchers and if the most vulnerable students are to be advantaged then its admission procedure should be by lottery with lower income families given priority (81)

Feinberg allows that some schools can “serve very special populations in ways that eventually promote democratic principles such as inclusion” (129). Here he might have in mind Michael Merry’s self-segregated schools of oppressed minorities, but some more concrete indication would be welcome.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In terms of those schools that are *not to* receive public support, Feinberg mentions some specific ways in which schools can fail to provide a public education. Those schools which “may be discontinued” are those which “teach intolerance towards other groups” (129). Others may be tolerated, but should not be supported; those that endorse “gender submissiveness,” “would be allowed to exist” (128), “schools that discriminate by race, gender or religion, or who teach that one group is naturally subservient to another should not be publically supported” (129) but should be permitted, in so far as they promote toleration. But we require more substance to the notion of ‘toleration,’ here. One might tolerate the existence of another group, but demand that they be treated in unjust ways.

Curricula aims and content: Feinberg engages with the question of what can be taught directively, and what cannot. Unfortunately his answer is not very clear here, partly because the matters aren’t considered in those terms. The most general question is this, What beliefs and values should public schools aim to transmit, which should they aim to eliminate, and which should be matters for neither transmission nor elimination? I think the debate between Michael Hand and others concerning rival criteria for directive and non-directive teaching is very helpful here for focussing the issue and bringing out the range of alternative principled answers.[[4]](#footnote-4) Feinberg seems to be using an *epistemic criterion* on matters of empirical fact, but a *political criterion* on matters of values: public values may be promoted, but perhaps none that are not public values. However, consider teachers at the time of the vote on the abolitions of slavery in the US, and of what values constituted the public at that time. It seems reasonable to say that teachers should advocate among their students for abolition. Of course, their opinions were not yet public opinion. However, one can (and should) set limits to the permissible content of public values. Matthew Clayton and David M. Stevens defend an ‘Acceptability Requirement’ for policy, according to which it “must be regulated by principles that are acceptable to reasonable people”.[[5]](#footnote-5) The concept of reasonableness they have in mind is of having a “baseline commitment to treating others as free and equal, and to social unity”. The trouble is that even this principle seems too prohibit the promotion of epistemically settled moral knowledge such as that homosexuality is morally innocent.

Feinberg contends that “Legally teachers are public officials whose legitimacy depends in part on approval by the community. Ethically, teachers are obligated to respect the authority and beliefs of parents” (114). What does respect entail? It seems that part of the public will be made up of people with racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic views. Ethically, it seems hard to suggest that such views ought to be respected, or quite what ethically respecting such views would look like.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Teachers “cannot just dismiss the concerns of tradition minded parents, but neither can [parents] bend the curriculum to conform to their will, as for example, some who reject evolution or global warming would like” (114). This is because “In addition to respecting community standards and acknowledging the authority of parents, teachers have a professional obligation to enlighten students regarding … scientific consensus” (114). “Yet between the extreme of actively promoting a new social order on the one hand and reproducing questionable beliefs on the other public schools have an important critical role to play” (114). Feinberg holds that “Teachers owe these students the respect that they wish them to learn. In teaching respect they in turn must respect student’s own beliefs and their source in communal or parental beliefs. So teachers cannot compel their students to change their commitments, however desirable they may feel such a change may be. They can however teach them to explain those commitments in ways that do not degrade the commitments of others” (115-6). For Feinberg, teaching respect is the minimum a public education should promote, but, as Blackburn has argued, respect is a vague term:

‘Respect’, of course is a tricky term. I may respect your gardening by just letting you get on with it. Or, I may respect it by admiring it and regarding it as a superior way to garden. The word seems to span a spectrum from simply not interfering, passing by on the other side, through admiration, right up to reverence and deference.[[7]](#footnote-7)

More specificity about what sort of respect is required is required of Feinberg. Feinberg contrasts compulsion and requirement on school courses with enabling and teaching. But what compulsion is supposed to look like is not clear. Moreover, on the topic of directive and non-directive teaching, one can clearly attempt to promote certain beliefs, values and attitudes without indoctrinating students, in so far as one presents compelling reasons and arguments in defence of students’ adopting those beliefs, attitudes and values. It is hard to fathom why promoting such beliefs, attitudes and values that enjoy such support would be objectionable.

Summarising Thoughts

I will mention now two prominent and excellent features of Feinberg’s book: the arresting examples that he draws on and its range of scholarship. Feinberg makes extremely engaging use of examples, from Rupert Murray’s documentary film, *Unknown White Male* (pp. 28–30, & 41) to Ian McEwan’s novel, *On Chesil Beach* (85); he draws a fascinating contrast between Shylock’s “If you prick us with a pin, don’t we bleed” speech from William Shakespeare’s, *The Merchant of Venice* with Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a Dream’ Speech (99), and gives a sensitive discussion of the importance of the buffalo to The Crow Nation. Equally, this is a book written by someone with a command of ancient, modern, and contemporary political and philosophical literature. Some of its finest passages show an impressive digest of a wealth of material drawing interesting comparisons. For instance, Feinberg’s brief discussion of the contrasts and similarities between Plato, Dewey and Rousseau, demonstrates a real command of all three thinkers and is informative, insightful, and concise. This is a rich interesting and fairly comprehensive book. It is not a complete and persuasive policy statement, nor is it a complete and entirely coherent philosophical account of some of the tasks it takes upon itself. None the less, it is the fruit of a long and distinguished career, drawing on a vast array of kinds of literature demonstrating deep and serious thought about profound and profoundly practical questions.

For me, the key lesson of Feinberg’s book has been that education is a cooperative endeavour serving cooperative purposes, not the atomistic enhancement of students. Indeed, I ought to have learned this from Plato or Dewey, as Feinberg points out pretty early in this book. But the lesson was made most explicit for me by Feinberg in this work. I had hitherto been more concerned in my own thinking with individual benefits that accrue to children, not with how societies as a whole might be renewed or generate their next stage. Indeed, for Feinberg, philosophy of education is

primarily about guiding a social identity across different generations so that the present generation draws upon the work of past generations and cares about the well-being of future generations so that they will in turn recognize themselves as connected to and evolving from past generations (4)

1. This is probably a choice more for the affluent, the less wealthy don’t choose to replicate their social class position, but have no other choice – or perhaps no such aspiration in some cases, we ought also to allow that escaping one’s environment is not always the most noble of aims, but raising one’s environment is. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The entity/ composition distinction is drawn by E. Jonathan Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael S. Merry 'Equality, self-respect and voluntary separation,' *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15(1) (2012), pp. 79–100 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Hand, ‘What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defence of the Epistemic Criterion,’ *Educational* Theory 58(2) (2008), pp. 213–228, John Tillson, ‘Towards a Theory of Propositional Curriculum Content,’ *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 48(1) (2014), pp. 137-148 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew Clayton and David M. Stevens, ‘What is the point of religious education?’ *Theory and Research in Education* (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Apart from questions of legitimacy and ethics, there is a pragmatic question about how far one can present children with an education which challenges such views before parents remove their children from public education to seek upbringings more consistent with their values. This pragmatic consideration could council some restraint to avoid a greater evil. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Simon Blackburn, ‘Religion and Respect,’ *Philosophers Without Gods*, (ed.) Louise Antony. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)