

One More Time: How Do You Get Both Equality and Excellence in Education?

Thomas E. Schaefer

University of Texas of the Permian Basin

The tension between egalitarian goals and excellence in education comes to the fore when democratic societies attempt to educate their citizens. Rather than resolving the tension in favor of either side of the polarity, a theory is advanced whereby both equality and excellence may be seen not only as compatible, but as requiring each other. The argument is made that "equal education" achieves real equality only through excellence. At the same time, and particularly in democracies, educational excellence demands equality as its foundation. Finally, the mutually supportive interrelationship between equality and excellence is adumbrated in a framework drawing upon perennial philosophical views of the nature of freedom.

Les mouvements de démocratisation de l'éducation font surgir la tension entre l'idéal d'égalité des chances et celui d'excellence en éducation. Le propos de cet article est de présenter une solution qui, au lieu de prendre parti en faveur de l'un ou de l'autre côté de l'alternative, souligne le fait que, dans un régime qui se veut démocratique, le concept d'égalité des chances contient et exige celui d'excellence en éducation. Pour offrir une esquisse de la relation entre excellence et égalité, cette étude se base sur une philosophie de la liberté.

In this article, I respond to a familiar challenge facing every educator today — how to resolve the tension between egalitarian goals, on the one hand, and excellence on the other. All too often, the tension is resolved in favor of a blandness notable for its absence of clear values (Metz, 1978, p. 78). The aim here is to achieve a resolution notable for the presence of clear values.

Equality and Excellence

Kristol states that it is difficult to argue against equality (1972, p. 108ff). No less difficult, I might add, is an argument against excellence. Excellence was extolled and favored long before equality laid claim to universal respect. When *aratae* (excellence) denoted practical wisdom, equality was no ideal. In classical Greece non-equality was considered a fundamental feature of the human species: women and men, slave and free, commoner and prince were natural and unequal parts of the human race.

Although equality was surely not unknown in classical antiquity — Aristotle's concept of *anthropos* (man) focused on an essence, all members of which were equally human — the modern notion of equality received its impetus from the ideas of the French Revolution. Rousseau, Diderot, and other inspirers of the

Revolution viewed equality as more than a bland abstraction. For them, human equality denoted a reality which had been obscured and ignored during generations of self-aggrandizement by rich and powerful pseudo-sophisticates. The ideal of equality during the French Revolution went further than this, of course. It was a call to remove every social nuance, a cry to root out all of society's artificial divisions, to bring down every social hierarchy. Excellence, in the sense of a rare human quality to which the many (*demos*) might aspire but which precious few could possess, was the enemy.

Must excellence and equality thus clash head-on? While few will fail to see the tensions between them, even fewer will regard them as irreconcilable opposites. The real difficulties surface when we examine how to reconcile them. Many, in ways explicit and subtle, will favor equality, with its connotations of a world without stuffy distinctions where all are endowed with greatness, and where vice lies mainly in suppression of the talents and hopes of the masses. Many, also in ways explicit and subtle, will favor excellence, with its connotations of a world where *noblesse oblige* compensates for a limited supply of true talent and superior virtue. These are, indeed, different worlds. The first embodies the ideal of the Noble Savage, and (to coin a term) the egalitarian will; the second embodies the ideal of contemplation and the imperial intellect. The first discovers the source of human greatness in work, open to all; the second sees leisure as the paradigm of culture, open to a few.

One's preference for either equality or excellence may be constitutional. In those who perceive themselves as victims of unequal treatment we find a strong proclivity toward equality and an inclination to celebrate it as the superior virtue. The Civil Rights movement in the United States, especially at the start, suggested such a mind-set. Achievement of real, not merely token equality was the *raison d'être* of the movement for which not a few suffered and died. On the other hand, for those who may, in George Orwell's phrase, be more equal than others — those well born who cannot feel deprived of equality since respect is theirs from the start — excellence appears the goal of choice. The mind-set most attuned to excellence (like self-actualization in the need hierarchy of Abraham Maslow) suggests a nonchalance about lesser values already possessed, already taken for granted. The many are seen as struggling for an inferior prize which is dependent on the collaboration of external forces, but the few find their purpose within themselves, a prize of a higher order — excellence.

These two views, the one asserting action and creativity as ends in themselves, the other asserting contemplation as the final aim and justification of human striving, express more than intellectual preferences. As *lebensphilosophies*, each is undergirded by emotional depths that determine how the world will be seen. Therefore, the task of reconciling them is herculean. Each is a metaphysics; as William James has said, "metaphysical conclusions are cogent to us only after our personal convictions have already been impressed in favor of those same conclusions" (1909, p. 72). Before framing a discourse on how education must accommodate both action and contemplation, it is important that personal preferences

be declared. When personal metaphysics are brought into the open, genuine dialogue and wise policies for balancing equality and excellence may be forged.

Willie's treatment of the issue is noteworthy for coming clean about preferences. He is explicit: "My choice is to choose equity first" (1987, p. 205). Glazer, on the other hand, chooses excellence over equality, not so much through a declaration of personal preference as on the ground of facts (1987, p. 196). Glazer's metaphysics, of course, favor contemplation. He sees the facts through lenses which are no doubt very good ones, but whose distorting tendencies might not be so apparent to him as they might be to Willie.

Leaving aside the explicitness, or lack of it, in Willie's and Glazer's metaphysical preferences, the challenge of a cogent treatment of the equality-excellence issue is epitomized here. We have two senior Harvard professors, both certifiably expert, both liberal scholars whose visions — alike profound and well argued — will be used to make and sustain distinct, even opposite school policies. Although neither scholar would be likely to disparage excellence, Willie's vision would favor the open door while Glazer's would slam it shut.

Toward Building a Complete Theory

The formation of a complete theory on the issue of equality and excellence will require a statement subsuming the preferences of both Glazer and Willie while doing violence to neither. Such a statement will prescribe ways of identifying conditions in which one metaphysics rather than another will mandate policy. This is exactly what Willie attempts to do, albeit in a bare assertion, without prescriptive content, which seeks the elusive rapprochement of equality and excellence in the association of excellence with high standards, and equity (presumably, a near synonym in Willie's context for equality) with diversity. This expedient permits Willie to discover an easy complementarity in the notions of excellence and equity. Why can't a school — Harvard, say — maintain high standards while at the same time cultivating a diverse student body? Harvard, in fact, does so, but the affirmative answer thus easily evoked conceals more than it reveals. Harvard's diversity, it may be surmised, is achieved with no little apprehension over the claims of excellence. Are there not limits to diversity? What are these, and how are the hard cases managed at the margin where a clash with excellence is perceived? Not Willie, but Harvard's Office of Admissions, will have to sweat through this conundrum. As hard admissions decisions are made, the assurance of an ultimate harmony between equality and excellence will give small solace to decision-makers. The agony of deciding, say, whether to make a few additions to the quota for Middle Easterners while reducing the quota for Japanese brings to the fore not complementarity but conflict within the equality-excellence relationship.

A more incisive treatment of the issue will make room for the conflict which the simultaneous pursuit of excellence and equality brings to the fore. Such is the approach of Lightfoot (1987) who sees imperfection and conflict as key ingredients of improvement in schools (p. 204). Lightfoot reaches for a complete theory on

the issue of excellence and equality by proposing a concept of goodness which includes excellence as it is sought in complex and varying circumstances. Goodness allows for the cohabitation of excellence and equality because equality as a critical dimension of the human encounter becomes part of the pursuit of goodness (p. 205). By thus investing goodness with the quality of synthesizing the tensions between excellence and equity, Lightfoot offers an alternative to Willie's formulation. Whereas Willie sees excellence and equality as separate, complementary qualities, Lightfoot recognizes their essential opposition — an opposition which lives within a higher unity, goodness.

Both Lightfoot and Willie illustrate the near universal tendency of commentators to develop a perspective which incorporates at once the claims of excellence and the demands of equality. The desired perspective is subtle. As a theory articulating the essential accommodation of two apparently antithetical ideas, it must make room for the full force and range of meanings accorded these ideas by their most ardent expositors. A complete theory on the issue must do even more: it must accommodate all the legitimate and profound emotion that attends the partisans to the debate. Room must be found no less for those who dream of freedom and a day of equal justice for all than for those who, despising mediocrity and mindless egalitarianism, champion the rare light of genius and the will to win. Such a theory, moreover, would be a touchstone for the erection of educational policies that assert priorities without abandoning flexibility.

In sketching the following frame-work for such a theory, I make no claim to achievement of the miraculous perspective. Finding sincerity and wisdom alike in the champions of excellence and equality, I suggest how one viewpoint may serve to open a way toward the desired marvels discussed earlier.

Because I perceive the truly rich literature on my subject as lacking a center, I try to identify one. As in most intellectual work, my endeavor supplies no new ideas; it merely uses and reshuffles old ones. This enterprise, nevertheless, aspires to build a theory worthy of its complex subject matter. For this reason, while disclaiming any intent to construct an epistemology of education, I hope to produce a prolegomena to such a construction, and a paradigm for it. With the help of the many educators who have considered these matters, I hope to avoid the grosser forms of failure.

Constructing a scientific theory is a process much commented upon (Burt, 1956). Despite a diversity of approaches, an essential unanimity marks the views of most who have addressed this subject since Francis Bacon. One of the best known treatments, that of Durkheim, (1951) will serve here: The phenomena under investigation are scrutinized with the aim of stating empirical generalizations about them. This phase in theory development involves high levels of certitude. Take, for example, the proposition that suicide rates within the population of professionals in European nations are higher than those prevailing within the whole population of those nations. Such a statement generalizes from verifiable data; those disputing the statement can check the facts for themselves. When many such generalizations coalesce around a set of phenomena, it is possible to

construct a hypothesis or a higher-level generalization. A good hypothesis expresses a unity or thread binding several empirical generalizations. The hypothesizing stage calls for more than conformity with data; it calls the creative faculties into play, challenging the gaining of insight into the data, inviting awareness of a hitherto unseen relation among the data. An example of this can be found in the following hypothesis: the proclivity to commit suicide is inversely correlated with the degree of social cohesion characterizing a given population. Such a hypothesis is good; it saves the phenomena, is consistent with valid generalizations drawn from the data, and illuminates a crucial aspect in which all of the data are related.

The data observed by anyone interested in the excellence-equality issue lend themselves easily enough to empirical generalizations (e.g., strong efforts to increase educational opportunity result in lower test scores within the targeted population, or student populations in highly selective institutions score higher on standardized tests than populations within open-door institutions). These and similar empirical statements are perceived as true by those on both sides of the excellence-equality debate. Anyone disputing them can verify their conformity with facts.

Difficulties arise, however, as soon as a higher-level generality is advanced as explanatory of the whole set of such empirical statements about equality and excellence in education. How can we save the phenomena (i.e., offer an explanation) which will incorporate the truths lying on both sides of the excellence-equality question? The facile assertion that excellence and equality are complementary does not preclude the appearance of a strong tension — even a mutual incompatibility — between them, nor does it explain how the two notions complement each other. The opposite claim, that equality and excellence are incompatible, fails either to establish that the two notions repel each other wherever they appear, or to specify how the claim of their incompatibility corresponds with their apparent coexistence in certain instances.

The challenge is to conceptualize the excellence-equality relationship in such a way that the valid meanings of both ideas, denotative as well as emotional, are respected. What is needed is an insight into an essential connection, one which governs the way in which these notions impact on each other. (Lightfoot's expedient of synthesizing both equality and excellence within goodness does not meet the challenge because it does not specify how the goodness of equality relates to the goodness of excellence.)

Is there a set of phenomena or relationships, apparently unconnected with the excellence-equality nexus, such that the terms of these phenomena or relationships are paradigmatic with respect to the excellence-equality nexus itself? By identifying such a governing thread between excellence and equality on the one hand, and the terms of the paradigm on the other, a door will be opened for learning the ways in which equality and excellence affect each other. The assertion of a governing thread must take the form of a hypothesis — a statement delineating how variations in one phenomenon (excellence) will affect another (equality).

Levels of Freedom

A scheme which may fairly accommodate the aspirations for both excellence and equality in education has long been part of the furniture of philosophy. It is discerned in the history of attempts to understand and organize the several meanings of freedom. Out of these efforts — nearly as numerous as philosophers themselves — emerges a consensus which interprets freedom not as an univocal term, one used always in the same sense, but rather as a meaning which shifts between levels that mutually buttress each other. At the first level, freedom means a kind of negativity, a condition of indetermination: the absence of external constraint. At the next level, freedom means a kind of positivity, an actual determination: the presence of self-constraint.

Adler, in a prodigious effort incorporating the work of scores of scholars, traces the history of the notion of freedom (1959, p. 156). Responding to the challenge of Aristotle — “it belongs to the philosopher to order” — Adler discovers the two fundamental, mutually supporting notions of freedom mentioned earlier. From the start of philosophy to the present, Adler shows that multifarious treatments of freedom consign their objects to either a realm of becoming in which human will is not impelled toward any particular end but is open to all ends; or a realm of self-actuation, in which a specific end is chosen, thus closing intentionality (i.e., perfecting the mere tendency toward ends-in-general by focussing upon, and choosing, a particular end; or both). Adler demonstrates how the views of philosophical monists and pluralists, idealists and realists, fit nicely into these categories. He thus develops a perennial view of freedom, an outlook totally or partially affirmed by major Western thinkers through thousands of years.

Perhaps this perennial view is best clarified by one or two thinkers who explicitly assert it. One thinker is the Russian philosopher, Berdiev (1956), who develops the notion of a freedom of sheer openness in which the will confronts a virtual infinity of projects, no one of which may be preferred over another. Berdiev calls this negative freedom. This freedom is the absolute ground of all freedom, the condition *sine qua non* which must prevail before any actual resting in the good (possession of a chosen object) may occur. Negative freedom, since it actually chooses nothing but is poised to choose everything, is incomplete. To complete itself, it must move beyond itself making the actual choice which prefers one thing over another. Thus, when freedom is actually exercised, it leaves behind its indeterminateness and determines itself in the choice of a specific object.

The experience described by the musical composer, Stravinsky (Onnen, 1948, pp. 29, 51-52), illustrates this process (1955, p. 173). The most trying phase of composition, he notes, is that which prevails before any musical notes are actually chosen for inclusion in a given musical passage. Prior to any actual inclusion of notes, a dizzying array of includable notes must be excluded. To include all possible notes, and thus to exclude none, is not to compose at all. However, the free act of composing, once it begins and proceeds to exclude those notes not chosen for the particular composition at hand, must issue out of a prior condition

in which the composer is only poised to compose. This prior condition of openness to all musical notes illustrates Berdiev's negative freedom. It is a freedom from any constraint to prefer one musical note over another. On the other hand, the actual choice of notes, the creation of a musical passage, illustrates positive freedom; it is freedom to include particular notes rather than alternative ones in the composition.

The mutual dependency of these two concepts of freedom is absolute. Without either of the two, the other is meaningless. Negative freedom — sometimes called first freedom (Adler, 1959, p. 17) — literally amounts to nothing if an ascent to positive freedom never occurs, if nothing is ever actually chosen. In Berdiev's philosophy, the case of a free agent capable of exercising choice but failing to do so, illustrates an abdication of spirit: a lethargic condition in which the truly human is submerged in the realm of matter (1956, p. 133). Likewise, positive freedom — sometimes called second freedom — is not a choice, not a freedom at all, unless it is preceded by an openness to choose other alternatives than those actually chosen. In short, there is no free determination which is not preceded by indetermination.

The parsimony, the force, the beauty of this negative-positive analysis of freedom is especially clear in the formulation of St. Augustine in the Fifth Century A.D. Augustine distinguishes *liberum arbitrium* or free will from *libertas* or liberty (1948, p. 11-64). In this formulation, free will turns out to be a state of potentiality with respect to its fruition in the choice of an appropriate good — an object chosen in accord with reason. Liberty (*libertas*) is the perfection of freedom (*liberum arbitrium*), the end sought by a free choice seeking to be the right choice. This understanding of freedom operates, of course, within the edifice of Augustine's whole philosophy in which the human race journeys from time to eternity under the Hand of God. In this context, freedom has no value except as a means of conforming one's actions with the Divine Will. Human free will is a glorious gift. However, this gift may be abused. In this, and in Augustine's related belief in man's fallen nature, free will is a burden. If free will allows for the possibility of virtue and its corollary, eternal life, at the same time it puts humanity at risk, since it puts us in reach of vice and eternal death (Augustine, 1955, p. 35). The movement from free will to liberty is, then, the whole moral life of man. This movement, as conceived by Augustine, is much obstructed by selfishness and sin. Given the frailty of human nature, the power to forge ahead to liberty in the face of these obstacles comes mostly from without through grace.

This perennial view, whether expounded by Berdiev, by Augustine, or by a host of other thinkers, attributes to freedom a dual significance. The first denotes the neutral condition of being unconstrained to choose any particular object: the risk intrinsic to choice by which one becomes responsible for saving or damning oneself. The second denotes the actual selection of a due good, an end conformed to human dignity, conducive to right order (Augustine, 1961). In the first lies the promise of human nobility, in the second lies its achievements (Adler, 1959, p. 17). Free will is the matter of freedom; liberty is its form.

An elegant explanation which goes a long way to illuminate one set of phenomena may turn out to illuminate another set of phenomena. The Second Law of Thermodynamics, which posits a loss of mechanical energy (entropy) in the interaction of physical forces, may be hypothesized as explanatory of certain biological processes. For example, catabolism, Isaac Newton's Second Law (for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction), has been employed to explain psychological phenomena, as in Freud.

My proposed application of the positive-negative analysis of freedom, as expounded by Adler and others, takes the following form. I hypothesize explanatory power in the freedom analysis as capable of illuminating the excellence-equality conundrum in education. As well, I surmise that the complex relationships between excellence and equality are analogous to the complex relationships between second and first freedom. Such a conception, I feel, does a fine job of saving the phenomena of education. However, it does more; it provides new insights into the phenomena and suggests policy treatments consonant with the goal of harmonizing the claims of both equality and excellence.

Taking equality as reflecting first freedom, it becomes necessary to characterize it as a means and not as an end. Equality is surely a hallowed aspiration, but it is essentially an aspiration for something beyond itself. It is a negative condition precedent to the enjoyment of positive values, as where equality gives Black children access to quality teachers heretofore unavailable, thus permitting their greater positive achievement. Being equal, in and of itself, is an empty state; it is a significant one, to be sure, but simply a stopping place along the way toward self-actualization.

Because of its aspect of subordination to positive values, equality is sometimes undervalued. A habitual focus on ends, an undervaluing of means, is, in fact, an identifiable mind set. Dewey was well aware of this perspective, and his instrumentalism was, in large part, an attack against it (1929, p. 102). (Dewey's ire, it must be noted, was not directed so much against a teleological outlook as against a fixation on the *telos* or purpose of things.) An over-valuing of ends suggests a fixation on second freedom (the achievement of freedom's goal: liberty) which devalues first freedom (the neutral freedom of openness). This devaluation is a hallmark of the imperial intellect. Its roots are multiple and, if we may believe William James (1943), lie in the soil of temperament. Such minds are simply impatient with process and wish to get on quickly to the meaning or goal of things. When operating in the context of education, this philosophy prescribes an individualistic, "can do" attitude for the student. The path to excellence is seen as direct and quick; all one needs for achievement is to "go for it." Obstacles to achievement are principally internal, of one's own making, even due to one's own fault. Social structures, seen as external to the student, are not culprits.

By attending to the full force and significance of first freedom, the shortcomings of the imperial intellect may be remedied. While absence of constraint may seem trivial by comparison with achievement (second freedom), it remains the only

platform upon which achievement may stand. The child born to the royal household is surely less constrained in his self-development than the child of poor parents. The pauper, confronted by constraints of all kinds, proceeds with difficulty toward self-development. To disregard these constraints because they pose little problem for the prince is neither visionary nor sensitive.

Such insensitivity is laid aside in meditating upon the nuances of first freedom. Free will, in fact, is part of the essence of human personhood. The rich notion of person, with its lengthy history, is not easily defined, but St. Thomas Aquinas' definition is seminal: "personhood is the individual substance of a rational nature" (1923, p. 97). The dignity of the human self, then, is rooted in rationality, an attribute inseparable from will.

The old conception of people as raised above beasts — as unique, free, and personal beings — makes marvelous the prospects of humankind. Made "from the slime of the earth," they are also created "in the image of God." This dual genesis results in a dual destiny; one may ascend to nobility or descend to vice. The wild adventure of freedom resides in this frightening encounter by which one shapes oneself for evil or for good. And this self-shaping is marked by a paradox: so great is the challenge of freedom, so trying the burden, that one can hardly go it alone. Even self-reliance requires reliance on others. Thus, the freedom of the individual (*liberum arbitrium*) is not enough to ensure liberty (*libertas*). This last is also the work of society, which will, therefore, never fail to affect achievement or its lack. If this final point seems all too clear, let us consider how common is myopia, by which the obvious is ignored.

It is in the virtue of one's personhood, of course, that one possesses rights. Constitutions proclaim it, linking human rights to one's dignity as a creature of God. Equality is a corollary of this human status as bearer of rights, a status whose center is freedom. Being free, one possesses not only the moral power to act as one will but also to discover oneself under law, subject to moral necessity — duty. Thus, from the start, freedom is constrained by limitations. One may break these bonds, of course, acting contrary to one's obligations; in this lies the mystery of freedom by which people, through repudiating the rights of another, may act against themselves.

If equality and freedom are linked as concepts, they are also linked in reality. Where free institutions are absent, as in Nazi Germany, equality is at best a dream. Social stratification, as in France before the Revolution, institutionalizes inequality. Freedom seeks to break the mold of privilege. North Americans need hardly be reminded of these points. But they are more than platitudes. North America's history — well understood as a struggle to implement the promise of equality — exemplifies as no other the drama of freedom. Open borders and advancing frontiers were and are an invitation to all to come and live in dignity. Every immigrant asserts America's unprecedented dedication to equality.

Some will dismiss the above as pious generalities. Lip service paid to the ideals of freedom and equality will not repair a system which still exhibits the flaws noted by Conant over 25 years ago: "The contrast in money available to

the schools in a wealthy suburb and to schools in a large city jolts one's notions of the meaning of equality and opportunity" (1961, p. 7). But flaws must not blind us to what is good in the American system. More Black, Hispanic, and poor children are graduating from high school and going to college than ever before. Also, the reading proficiencies of minority students have gained appreciably in comparison to those of white students since the early 1970s (Howe, 1987, p. 209). Despite disappointments, efforts toward equality have paid off. The dedication to equal opportunity in the United States is alive and well.

Achieving Equality in Education

What light, then, does the notion of first freedom shed on the challenge of achieving equality in education? It serves to underscore precisely the necessity of meeting the challenge. Even those who are partial toward the excellence side of the equality-excellence nexus (such as Glazer) will see that, until a fair level of equality is achieved, excellence is a chimera. Excellence, in fact, must issue from equality, as liberty (second freedom) must issue from freedom (first freedom). To be serious about excellence without first being serious about equality is to expect arrival at the destination without undertaking the journey. Equality will not take care of itself while a few self-annointed purveyors of excellence work their magic in the isolation of rich private schools or favored public ones. Equality is everybody's problem. Whatever diminishes equality diminishes excellence, just as the loss of free choice spells the death of liberty.

Willie's analysis, cited earlier, supports the associating of excellence with the individual and of equality with the group. "Excellence is a property of an individual . . . equality is a property of groups, organizations" (Willie, 1987, p. 206). The distinction is illuminating. The relegating of excellence to persons implies a view of the group, the mass, as the true locus of opportunity. If opportunity is really created for the many, then the numbers of those who excel will ultimately be increased. Thus, while excellence may be all too rare, it may be made less rare. By nurturing the base of liberty, which is freedom, liberty may expand. By nurturing equality, excellence may expand. I use the word *may* deliberately, since excellence cannot be mandated any more than liberty can be forced to issue from freedom. Willie again is helpful here in clarifying this latter point:

Nobody, nor any college, or university, has the right to sacrifice another, or to demand that one engage in self-sacrifice. To sacrifice or not to sacrifice is a decision that one should make for oneself, since the consequence of each action is personally experienced. For this reason, an aspiration toward excellence is personal and should not be conceptualized as a social requirement. (1987, p. 206)

If applying the first-second freedom thesis to the world of education supports a primacy of equality over excellence in the trade-off between these two educational virtues, this happens only with respect to the temporal sequence in which equality and excellence should be accomplished. In philosophical jargon, equality turns

out to be temporally prior to the achievement of excellence, while excellence is metaphysically prior to equality. Or, put another way, equality is prior in the order of time, but excellence is prior in the order of being.

Just as the achievement of freedom's fruits (liberty) is in itself of greater value and significance than the open freedom from which those fruits blossom, so excellence is in itself of greater value and significance than equality. Nevertheless, without impugning the worth of equality, it is clear that equality is perfected only in excellence. The achievement of equality, in and of itself, turns out to be a pyrrhic victory, a triumph without benefit to the winners. Equality for what? This is the question, and its answer is equality for excellence.

Failure to perceive this metaphysical subordination of equality to excellence results in what Silber calls a counterfeit egalitarianism:

The United States has been increasingly bedeviled by a counterfeit egalitarianism that confuses opportunity with performance and demands that all institutions within a democratic society be organized on the basis of one man, one vote, and on the debased assumption that because in a democracy each man has a right to his own opinion, each opinion is equally valid. (1985, p. 31)

If there is no excellence without equality, then equality is not worth having unless it is conducive to the attainment of excellence. When equality is taken as an independent value and is given a metaphysical status above excellence, counterfeit egalitarianism allows the conversion of an instrument into a goal. A similar misperception has marked the history of education since the nineteenth century. "Since the end of the Nineteenth Century," according to Timar and Kirp (1987), "education has not generally been appreciated for its own intrinsic value but rather for what it could do — for its instrumental value" (p. 206). While the connection requires further study, it is my guess that the counterfeit egalitarians are chiefly pragmatists. The error of discounting, even ignoring, the intrinsic value of education is analogically a failure to see liberty as the end and purpose of freedom. This misperception, moreover, values education mostly for the economic benefits it confers. Therefore, egalitarianism has a hidden agenda which promotes reforms "not because education, like virtue, is its own reward, but because the reforms would make the nation economically more productive" (Timar and Kirp, 1987, p. 209). Better economic performance through education is not to be despised, of course, but such improvement must be seen as ancillary to the discovery of truth which remains a primary purpose of schools.

This brings us back to the distinct philosophical visions mentioned earlier which value either work (process) above contemplation, or contemplation above work. Both visions — the egalitarian will and the imperial intellect — have been maligned: the first by association with a counterfeit egalitarianism, the second by association with elitism and social regressiveness. It is now time to repudiate the impression that these two philosophical visions are irreconcilable. On the contrary, these two views require each other for completion, just as freedom and liberty demand each other.

Policy Implications

The public policy implication of the above is clear: do not attempt to legislate excellence. It cannot be done any more than a choice for liberty can be forced. The prime aim of legislation must be to provide the broadest possible opportunity for the many to choose excellence if they will. If few aspire to refinement of intellect, the opportunity for such refinement must nevertheless be supplied. Let all advance as far as talents permit and let public policy and budgets encourage maximum progress. When social structures institutionalize inequality, a condition still tragically present in many school systems (Timar & Kirp, 1987, p. 208), the long-range aspiration to excellence is not served. By being over-tolerant of concentrations of well-to-do students in superior facilities, we maximize achievement in the short-run at the expense of equity. We thus perpetuate injustice while we weaken the base of equality and freedom from which alone liberty and excellence may issue.

If the above recommended priorities for public policy require affirmative action, so be it. In cases where discrimination has operated systematically, justice demands the restoration of a level playing field. The application of affirmative action is known to be difficult and fraught with complexities, but the alternative is intolerable: an exclusivistic excellence for a few achieved at the expense of equity for the many.

Only in the nurturing of real equality first, with a view to excellence in its time, may society achieve the delicate balance called for in the dialectic of equity and excellence. To expect excellence where inequality endures does justice neither to equality nor excellence. Or, as Willie puts it, "excellence without a commitment to equity results in arrogance" (1987, p. 205).

But, at the same time, again in Willie's words, "equity without a commitment to excellence results in mediocrity" (1987, p. 205). Both arrogance and mediocrity may be avoided in affirming at once the prerogatives of freedom with its egalitarian will and the prerogatives of liberty with its imperial intellect. The prerogatives of the egalitarian will demand affirmative action as a pre-condition of excellence. The prerogatives of the imperial intellect demand the encouragement and rewarding of scholarly achievement. That policy which affirms one-sidedly the prerogatives of the first opens wide the door to mediocrity. That policy which affirms one-sidedly the prerogatives of the second nullifies scholarly achievement by building it on a foundation of inequity.

Given a serious, broad, and effective thrust of policy in support of equality, there is not only room for selective schools but also a crying need for them. Harvard or Stanford or King's College, the Boston Latin School or the Bronx High School of Science, by concentrating talented students in one place, develop excellence which "requires the company and competition of the excellent" (Glazer, 1987, p. 196). It is from this company and competition of the excellent that we get our Nobel Prize winners. Given an effective presence across the spectrum of education of policies mandating opportunity for all, elite schools are not merely to be tolerated but are a justification of those very policies. Mandated

equality in education, far from creating a sea of mediocrity, provides the base on which the aspiration to achieve may be made meaningful.

Conclusion

The making of educational policy is a notoriously difficult task. It will remain so. However, as with any task, achievement will be made less difficult where priorities are kept in the right order. Priorities in the pursuit of excellence with equity are subtle. Equality takes precedence over excellence temporally, just as the possession of free will must come before the achievement of liberty. But excellence takes precedence over equality metaphysically, as it is the achievement of liberty which alone gives value to freedom.

It has been said that nothing is more practical than a good theory. I have offered here the first-second freedom thesis as a way of illuminating a fundamental mystery of education: how to reconcile equality and excellence. It remains now for policy makers to put it into practice: equity and excellence are not enemies, but friends.

References

- Adler, M.J. (1959). *The idea of freedom*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Aquinas, St. Thomas. (1912-1936). *Summa theologica* (English Dominicans, Trans.) (2nd ed.) (Vols. 1-22). New York: Benzinger.
- Augustine, Aurelius. Bishop of Hippo. (1948). On free will. *De libero arbitrio*. In R. McKeon (Trans.). *The works of Aurelius Augustinus* (Selections I). New York: Scribners.
- Augustine, Aurelius. Bishop of Hippo. (1955). *Confessions*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Augustine, Aurelius. Bishop of Hippo. (1961). *The city of God*. New York: Image Books.
- Berdiev, N. (1956). *Slavery and freedom*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Burt, E.A. (1956). *Foundations of the metaphysics of science*. New York: Scribners.
- Conant, J.B. (1961). *Slums and suburbs*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Dewey, J. (1929). *The quest for certainty*. New York: Open Court Publishing.
- Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Glazer, N. (1987). Equity and excellence in education: A comment. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(2), 196-199.
- Howe, H. (1987). Remarks on equity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(2), 199-202.
- James, W. (1909). The continuity of experience. In F. Bowers & I. Skrupskelis (Eds). *A pluralistic universe*. New York: Reynolds.
- James, W. (1943). *The will to believe and other essays*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Kristol, I. (1972). Equality. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: Vol. 5/6. New York: MacMillan.
- Lightfoot, S. (1987). On excellence and goodness. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(2), 202-205.
- Metz, M. (1978). *Classrooms and corridors*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Onnen, F. (1948). *Stravinsky*. Stockholm: Continental Book Co. A.B.
- Silber, J.R. (1985). *Higher education in the United States*. Paper presented at Japanese/United States Conference on Higher Education, Drew University, Madison, NJ.
- Timer, T.B. & Kirp, D.L. (1987). Educational reform and institutional competence. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(3), 308-330.
- Willie, C.V. (1987). When excellence and equity complement each other. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(2), 206-208.

Review Essay

Purpel, D.E. (1989). *The moral and spiritual crisis in education: A curriculum for justice and compassion in education*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 174 pp., \$12.95 (paper).

One characteristic of a good book is that it stands up and speaks its piece; it lets the readers know *where* it stands, while engaging us to locate our own positions. In his recent book, David Purpel outlines an educational praxis which originates in an attentiveness to "the pain and anguish of the human condition" (p. 139). One of a growing number of practitioners who have been "shivering from the cold breath of a reality where knowledge is power and power is knowledge" (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. xxix), Purpel proposes that the spiritual lacunae in contemporary American life is the "appropriate and meaningful departure" (p. 2) for an educational (and curricular) transformation. He clearly believes that the dull emptiness plaguing so much of contemporary social reality in the United States — something he feels as "the moral and spiritual crisis in education" — is a struggle with which educators should be involved. With simple and straightforward arguments, the book can be seen as an attempt to *sacralize* the educational process, to imbue it with a spirit of ultimate significance and meaning (p. 78). Anything else, he claims, is a trivialization.

Heralded in a historical context more ominous, more fragile, more cynical than in other hard times, the role of the educator must include "the development of a culture of social justice and compassion" (p. 121). His tone of evangelical piety and ecumenical cooperation towards what is fundamentally a social movement is not dissimilar to an earlier "social gospel" in this country, nor the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. His position is reminiscent as well of the concerns of harsher critics of modernity of the sort Hans Cornelius, mentor to both Horkheimer and Adorno, captured well:

Men have unlearned the ability to recognize the Godly in themselves and in things: nature and art, family and state have only interest for them as sensations. Therefore their lives flow meaninglessly by, and their shared culture is inwardly empty and will collapse because it is worthy of collapse. The new religion, however, which mankind needs, will first emerge from the ruins of this culture. (p. 6)

While the "crisis" of which much theory and practice speak has symptoms problematic for any ideological persuasion, the hue of Purpel's orientation is postmodernist. Until the recent, happy turn of events, the increasing proliferation of nuclear weapons and/or the capacity to wage extended "conventional" wars had exacerbated the tension of the Cold War. The existence endured by vast numbers of people whether it be in East Africa, Afghanistan, Central America, or New York City has become exceedingly impoverished. The ecocidal effects on the planet — meltdowns and runoffs, destruction of rain forests, depletion of

the ozone, increasing desertification, garbage, pollution, smog — have brought up urgent questions about who is in charge and what they're doing. Estrangement, narcissism, self-deception, arrogance, despair, and powerlessness indicate a surrender for many to the hegemonic conditioning of modernity.

Long the bane of progressive educators, the functionalization of schoolwork has provided little purpose, little value, or little preparation for active democratic participation and social empowerment. By radicalizing a progressive theme which regards schools as cultural sites where knowledge and power are immediately present and concretely felt, Purpel believes that socially responsible educators can develop imaginative strategies for interacting between the individual's need of autonomy and the responsibility for the social. According to Purpel, the transformation of educational practice in the public schools is still a possibility. However, the "hope and a faith" (p. 165) sustaining him is much more attuned to the conditions David Nasaw (1979) referred to as being "schooled to order." More than past progressives Purpel realizes that the purification of the well of uninspired, nondirected, functionalistic schooling can take nothing for granted.

While he acknowledges the structural aspects of social crisis and the concomitant deficiencies of the schooling system, the book is not a sociological critique. His main focus is to reilluminate a dimension of human be-ing that he feels has been drained, repressed, and rejected. As the concept of crisis denotes, the historical moment — dire as it may appear — is also "a time of heightened consciousness, a time when more people are more aware than perhaps at any other time in history" (p. 21). It is from this *dialectic* of crisis that he starts.

Educators — and Purpel sketches the creative potency of this polymorphous group well, almost a sense of a revolutionary class — can, indeed, must, have a greater impact during this period of crisis. The implications are profound for this reassessment of teacher autonomy and much stronger than the recent and well publicized recommendations by Ted Sizer, Ernest Boyer, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Purpel explores the Gramscian theme of teachers as intellectuals, people who think, take responsibility, are creative. This has been a theme for other critical thinkers as well (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985; Giroux, 1988). In the tensions of the philosophical — the ways in which individuals view their world — with the political — the ways in which the world has been set up — is the activity of the pedagogical. It is much more than an insightful philosophical glance or a further rendering of social crisis. It is a praxis, or in Roger Simon's terms, an integration in practice of content, strategies, purpose, and methods in the classroom:

a teacher's work within an institutional context specif[y] a particular version of what knowledge is of most worth, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment. (Simon, 1987, p. 370)

The notion of teacher as transformative intellectual includes the Freirean principle of making the pedagogical more *political* and the political more *pedagogical*. Part of this analysis involves, as Purpel explains in a later chapter, reshaping

curriculum design so as to bring light to what is "important" — in this case, the relationship between general goals and specific content of the schooling/educative process. Curriculum transformation aims not only at practices long reified by the schooling ritual, but more significantly confronts and reposes sources of authority, ideological positioning, sites of power, of social relations. Here the concern attends to creating classroom conditions "where people could go to get their questions answered, clarified, and refined" (p. 153), questions of philosophy, of the world, of self, "questions of how we can create a culture of abundance, joy, freedom, justice, and peace" (p. 154). Not easy.

Our social reality — the everyday world — has changed, yet we continue to utilize categories which yield no relief from the morass. As Purpel begins to outline a discourse for American education, he is also proposing a distinctively religious/moral jeremiad "cutting across the score of ethnicities, peoples, cultures, and traditions," resonating "a number of transcendent values" within "a broadly held common heritage" (p. 70). The reader may detect a Deweyan touch here — unification, wholeness, clarification of dualisms, possibility, commonality, compromise — albeit one that has been filtered through a Buberian and/or Marcusean reading rather than through Dewey's democratic idealism and scientific transcendentalism. One reads an almost Hegelian promise of a faith-infused reason unfolding, a progressive realization of "higher truth, higher meaning" (p. 60).

Though Purpel has a deep concern with the moral and spiritual consciousness of American society, he is far from the hackneyed rhetoric of the political and religious Right. Hopefully, I have conveyed enough of the book already to dismiss any associations the reader might be making with religious education. Nor is this book advocating some moralistic infusion of good old-fashioned values, moments of silence, flag-waving, or any other cosmetic gesture. The artificial imaging, the iconography of nostalgia and the retrieval of *that* moral agenda is no longer believable, undermined and discredited by its authoritarian posturing. His roots are more in line with the concerns voiced in Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, or C.A. Bowers' recent *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education* in which he argues that the dichotomies of the social and the individual in American society, what Purpel refers to as the choice "between equality and justice for all and survival for me" (p. 39), share common ground. This is why religious language and values, as he refers to them, which historically have articulated the "mythos of meaning, purpose, and ultimacy" (p. 68), are fundamental to any educative task. Religiosity encompasses notions of community, of bonding, of convergence, recovery. In this sense he might remind the reader of Whitehead's cosmological constructing in *Process and Reality*, of "the many in one" where the essential unity of human be-ing is presumed.

What is more interesting in this account, more refreshing, and considerably more helpful than either New Age spiritualism, logocentric philosophizing, or mainstream liberal reform is his understanding of "spirituality" as a *critical* rather than a functional activity: religion as criticism, a type of higher level

opposition (cf. Dewey 1934). In recognizing this quality one can see the appropriation of Gramsci rather than the harsh renunciatory tradition that agrees with Marx's view that religion is philosophy for the infancy of humanity. One of the real strengths of the book is his analysis of the "prophetic" as a conceptual framework for educators. The prophet, Purpel points out, speaks to issues of justice, compassion, righteousness; the prophet protests oppression, inequity, poverty, hunger; the prophet combines a deep devotion and determination to speak out against all forms of injustice (including the vapidness of public schooling). The prophet is a passionate social critic, one who has grasped the deeper understanding of consequences. The prophet, as Abraham Heschel has described, is angry at the lack of social responsibility and regards the task to be "wrenching one's conscience from the state of suspended animation" (p. 81), and is much closer to the Hebrew notion of *tikkun* — to mend, repair, and transform the world (as a recent journal of culture and politics has termed its own efforts). The notion of the prophetic is a powerfully dialectic concept, greatly underestimated by most on the Left, which also combines a "utopic" quality by which praxis is *redefined* and *regrounded*.

Now this opposition, identifiable in measure with Latin American liberation theology, challenges the fundamental structural fabric of American society, one that has made economic growth (and economic survival for the masses) the number one priority of the state. I agree with Purpel that a moral and spiritual framework for society has never been implemented; it has existed only in its "utopic" vision. Purpel is formulating a concrete everyday educational praxis which begins to build that framework. At those historical moments when the anger and frustration of a people are overwhelming, it is the prophet whose vision of escape and liberation also points us to "an alternative society, one with sacred dimensions" (p. 85). The prophet poses the vitality of the spiritual as "a theory of a life of meaning" (p. 79).

However, when he qualifies "religiosity" as the ideas, principles, and tenets that have to do with our relations with forces beyond the known world (p. 66), he situates the discourse as well in the "new age" holistic movement. He is groping for a language and a grounding for which modernity has little patience. The incorporation of a veritable smorgasbord of ideological positions — Eliade, Durkheim, Nisbet, Harrington — and standard heroes — Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, King, Gandhi, Socrates — drives home his point of one human condition upon which various perspectives are *philosophically* equal. Considerations of power, of structures of domination, of language (his prototypes are all male) are sometimes camouflaged. There is a tendency, which Hegel, Whitehead and Dewey also manifested, to overlook *domination* as the key structural principle of social reality, the tendency to dehistoricize spirituality. While I take issue with Purpel's projecting of certain values upon the human psyche, such as when he claims "we thirst for true community," speaks of "higher truths," refers to "our impulses to our basic commitments," or assumes that "virtually all of us" can distinguish between "natural and unnatural, sacred

and profane, good and bad, etc.” (p. 94), he nevertheless offers an aspect of a social recovery process that is potentially more transformational than the rationalistic scientific method of Dewey and most liberal reformers.

Within the polymorphous realm of postmodernism Purpel implies a new epistemology (even if he sounds, at times, a bit premodern); he writes about examining the foundation and underpinnings of reason (p. 59), of distinguishing wisdom from knowledge. Clearly he is in debt to Paulo Freire, as well, for the similarity of Purpel’s “reason” with “conscientization” is apparent. The reader may wish to check, too, the philosophical work of the *Praxis* School — Mihailo, Markovic, Svetozar Stojanovic, Gajo Petrovic. Though more ideologically transparent, and significantly more secular than Purpel, they have achieved a powerful analysis of *praxis* as ideal human activity (Crocker, 1983). What is glaringly missing is a distinctive feminist viewpoint, someone in the tradition of Nel Noddings, Dale Spender, Sandra Harding. To his credit, however, Purpel does strongly emphasize “care” as a necessary component for *thinking* in the world. And I think the reader can see that the author is concerned with drawing upon a pluralistic counter discourse of pacifism, ecologism, nonviolence, and spirituality to restructure the traditional logic of power.

There are widespread and diverse movements of religious socialism which are the background for his “education in a prophetic voice.” Models already exist and the growing number of educators who find social justice issues to be the basis for educational study and empowerment are being heard. Purpel’s message, however, is clearly directed to the transformation of the public schools and the educational process, a project he shares with the more secular Henry Giroux. Schools indeed are sites of cultural reproduction and as socially viable sources for “growth and learning” (p. 123) require a transformational perspective. It is significant too that Purpel sketches the risks (what I call in my teacher training classes the “intimidation factor”) of the prophetic, not unlike Ira Shor and Freire have done in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, where the risks are put out on the table. There is nothing naive about this book; he is offering a much different vision than typical liberal tendencies towards scientific management. With this recognizable moral perspective, Purpel, I think, is attempting to bridge with those populations and teachers in this country who may find ironic the thrust of much of the school reform in this country. The concrete situation is no longer how more people can be served from the economic pie, but how to serve those with fork in hand a pie diminishing in its capacity to satisfy the country. The issue, however, entails a good deal more than economics.

From this orientation the book becomes accessible to a number of different perspectives — the teacher (certainly), community leaders, parents, activists, students, administrators, politicians. Among an increasing minority in this country a nascent awareness of the pedagogical dimension in the political understanding and organization of social reality exists that as it expands and develops becomes more and more sophisticated. I think that Purpel is riding the crest of this wave. He is trying to situate himself more hopefully in a situation which 70 years ago

Horkheimer had already described pessimistically: if the way to peace is forgiveness, suffering, spirit and love, it is the way of the world to roar eternally past these. As part of a critical perspective among recent educational reformers who take their context (and hope) from the 1960s, Purpel offers a compelling challenge not only to the ideology-is-dead crowd yapping in the administrative halls, but to the despair and cynicism felt by so many.

References

- Aronowitz, S. & Giroux, H. (1985). *Education under siege: The conservative, liberal and radical debate over schooling*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Cocker, D.A. (1983). *Praxis and democratic socialism: The critical social theory of Markovic and Stojanovic*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Cornelius, H. (1923). *Leben und Lehre*. In R. Schmidt (Ed.) *Die philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*. Vol. 11. Leipzig. Quoted in Jay, M. (1973). *The dialectical imagination: A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *A common faith*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Giroux, H. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. Granby, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Nasaw, D. (1979). *Schooled to order: A social history of public schooling in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Simon, Roger. (1987). Empowerment as a pedagogy of possibility. *Language Arts*, 64(4), 370-382.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1987). *Critique of cynical reason* (M. Eldred, trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

William Paringer
Montclair College