



9-1-1978

The politics of values

P. L. Smith
The Ohio State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Smith, P. L. (1978) "The politics of values," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 6: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1976>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Considerations by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

If present-day dissidents are to reclaim the belief that values are best conceived empirically, they should begin by considering the imposition controversy as a possible dispute over the means to be used in schooling.

The politics of values

by P.L. Smith
The Ohio State University

The period of the 1930s was one of extreme turbulence in American life. Capitalism seemed to be impotent in the face of massive economic collapse. Even democracy was being challenged. It looked to many as if personal freedom were incompatible with the demands of equality. The realities of the twentieth century were forcing the American tradition of liberty to give way to group conceptions of human rights and responsibilities. Matters appeared even worse with the loss of faith in reform. The 1920s had shown the futility of the earlier progressive movement and revealed liberalism as an ally of the status quo. For those who rejected the established order and wished to hasten its passing, radical action was the only acceptable response.¹

Such was the atmosphere in which the founders of progressive education were forced to confront a long-standing anomaly in their thought. Can virtue be taught, or must it somehow be imposed? Progressive educational thinkers were never quite clear or consistent in trying to answer this question. On the one hand, they recognized that values were important and that education must foster the good, but, on the other hand, they did not think that it was ever wise to force others to accept a particular value orientation.

The Normative Thrust of Progressive Education

More precisely, the founders of progressive education revered democracy as a way of life and saw deliberate education as the most effective means for transmitting democratic values in an urban industrial society. When asked why they so revered democracy as a way of life, progressive thinkers had a ready answer. They believed that it supplied the necessary and sufficient conditions for scientific intelligence, or, put in negative terms, for non-formalist thinking. And what was the value of non-formalist thinking? Progressives believed it was twofold, both instrumental and intrinsic. It was instrumental in solving practical problems and thereby contributing to

human survival. It was intrinsic in contributing to human welfare and improving the quality of life. This belief in the inherent value of scientific intelligence is rarely understood or appreciated by the critics of progressive education. But those who conceived the movement were convinced that the ultimate value in non-formalist thinking and, thus, in democracy itself, as a way of life, was found in the fact that it created and developed the capacities to think and to experience human emotions. Without these capacities human beings are essentially the same as other living things. But with them, they are unique; they possess the necessary tools for deliberately converting the hostile forces of nature to human advantage. And of even greater significance, these powers of mind have intrinsic value because they provide the source of human culture and the foundations of human dignity. Progressive thinkers were humanists by inclination and naturalists by philosophy. Given their convictions and their belief that the realization of human mental potential was tied to democratic living by empirical necessity, it is easy to understand the normative thrust of progressive education.

However, accompanying this thrust was abhorrence of indoctrination. Regardless of motivation, progressive thinkers eschewed all forms of imposition. Here, too, they had a reason. Indoctrination or imposition was seen as contrary to democracy. In so being it stifled the growth of scientific intelligence. And this, in turn, had the dual effect of decreasing the chances of survival and detracting from the quality of life. By itself, the rejection of indoctrination or imposition in the educational enterprise of schooling may not seem incompatible with the acceptance of a normative thrust in schooling. But there was a kicker in this mix.

Progressive educational thinkers rejected the Aristotelian idea of development from within. They were unanimous in the belief that the cultivation of human nature was not enough. On the progressive view human nature is virtually created by natural forces; and if it is to be created intelligently, it must be understood and controlled by the only source of intelligence there is, man himself. But if there is no guarantee, if, indeed, it is unlikely that human beings will develop in desirable ways without human control of the process of development; and if the individual or individuals being educated cannot be expected to possess the capacities to understand or control this process, at least at the start, as virtually everyone, including progressive thinkers, will admit, how in the world can indoctrination or imposition be avoided; assuming, of course, we should all develop in desirable ways?

Progressive Education in the Limelight

The failure of progressive education to provide a clear and decisive answer to this question represents a serious soft-spot in its theoretical posture. So long as progressives were on the offensive, attacking the enemy, "traditional education" or "formalist educational thinking," this soft-spot was hard to detect, and was easy to avoid even when recognized. Supporters believed that the opposition had a strong ideological hold on public thinking, and that this hold had to be broken before the progressive alternative could be completely spelled out. But by the 1920s the victory was pretty much won. Traditional education was in considerable disrepute, at least theoretically. The immediate effect was to produce an intellectual vacuum. Theoretical issues were simply

not seen as important. People were intellectually free to think pretty much what they liked. So long as they were doing something and claimed guidance from some rationale, they were effectively left alone to function as their own philosophical critics.

But the press of events soon brought this period to an end. And the 1930s were to change the role of the progressive tradition in American life. Eyes were no longer solely on the opposition. There were real and serious problems to be faced, problems that threatened the welfare of everyone. If what had been accepted theretofore could not provide solutions to these problems, people were ready to consider alternatives. The mood was at least congenial to the practical examination of new ideas. Where old ways would not work, new ways would be encouraged. What could be better for the type of education that was founded on the philosophy of experimentalism?

But with this newfound status came critical examination, and, more specifically, self-examination by proponents who were at last put on the spot to produce on their promise. If their theory of education was to be finally accepted, it would have to meet the test, theoretically as well as practically, supplied by the realities of the depression. Progressive education was finally on the hot seat. If it had weaknesses, they would soon be apparent. And once apparent they could not be ignored. Progressive educational thinkers began to polish up their idea in order to present a defensible, unified and effective front to a beleaguered and eager, but still demanding, public.

The Official View on Imposition

The progressives were soon to discover that on the question of imposition they could not present the type of front they desired. Indeed, there arose a controversy that revealed the aforementioned soft-spot or anomaly in their thinking. There was, it should be said, an "official position" on this issue, but it could hardly be described as acceptable to everyone, or even acceptable to the majority of those who shaped opinion in progressive education.

The official view was the one given by John Dewey and supported so admirably by Boyd H. Bode and William H. Kilpatrick. Dewey claimed that education need never rely on imposition, even when concerned with life's basic orientation. He agreed that education must work to transmit the values of democracy, and must thereby foster particular dispositions about and towards reality, but he insisted, nonetheless, that school learning could be purely experimental. Teachers could avoid indoctrination and still be effective.

Indeed, indoctrination was seen as an obstacle to effective schooling in a democratic society. In a democratic society effective schooling provides a democratic orientation to life. Indoctrination either fails to give any orientation at all, or else brings about an orientation that is inherently undemocratic. According to this official view, a democratic orientation to life can only be provided by means that are themselves democratic. Indoctrination was believed to be anti-democratic. It was said to hinder personal development and destroy the roots of genuine community. With this position, there was virtually no hope that schooling under indoctrination could effectively foster understanding and acceptance of democratic dispositions.

Why were supporters of this official view so adamant in relating educational means to educational ends? The

answer is not hard to find, although it is amazing how few have found it. In the first place, they justified a democratic orientation because it contributed to mental development. If in the process of acquiring a democratic conception of reality there was no advancement of mental capacities, as there surely would not be under conditions of indoctrination, then supporters of the official view would have been less enthusiastic about democracy as a way of life. But in the second place, and more importantly, they did not believe that a democratic orientation could be acquired save through intelligence. Democratic dispositions were said to be founded on intelligent self-selection. While they may contribute to mental development, they also presuppose intelligence in both their understanding and acceptance. With a democratic orientation we can foster mental growth; but only by reaching a certain point in mental development can we acquire a democratic orientation.

Dissenters from the official view saw this position as paradoxical. But supporters would say that it only appears paradoxical if we assume that things exist prior to relations, that is, only if we presuppose that intelligence and a democratic orientation must exist independently and before they are interconnected. But in fact, supporters would say, this is simply not so. Both come about as a result of an evolutionary process wherein the reality and character of each is a result of its transactions with the other. Here, democratic values and mental capacities are assumed to be mutually dependent. Each is a necessary condition for the other. As we become more intelligent, we are made increasingly aware of democracy as a way of life, and as we come to see democracy as a way of life, we are, by that very fact, made more intelligent. Each is instrumental for the other as well as being an end in itself. A democratic orientation creates an atmosphere essential for mental growth. But mental growth must attain a minimum plateau before a democratic orientation can be had.

Dewey was not at all bothered by this apparent conflict. He saw the process of transmitting a democratic orientation as necessarily rational. In being rational it fosters mental growth. A person is required to engage in practical action, that is, action with a practical purpose, and to undergo the consequences of his own behavior. Experiences are to be more or less unbridled. Imposition or indoctrination of any sort was seen as a retarding agent. Indeed, it was in great measure because of its reliance on the authority of the teacher that progressives were opposed to traditional forms of schooling. Imposition and indoctrination stifled educational aims. They suppressed mental potential and made it impossible to foster democracy as a way of life. Progressives holding the official view were surely not going to allow it in their own educational scheme.

The Dissenting View on Imposition

Other progressives saw it differently, however. They believed the official view was mistaken for the same reasons liberalism in politics was mistaken. It assumed that rationality could be a fundamental force in the world, that progress was directed by the human mind step by step, and that the advancement of individual and social welfare was gradual and required no quantum leap of faith.

Having been thoroughly radicalized by the 1930s, progressives who criticized the official view simply did not

believe that the recognition of goodness, or what was most desirable, was a process that was characterized by rationality. And later in the decade, when they witnessed the rise of fascism, they had further confirmation they were right. There were limits on rationality in the educational enterprise of schooling. Dissenters concluded from this that the normative thrust of the progressive's educational plan cannot always rely on intelligence. In order to achieve his aim the progressive teacher must sometimes employ tactics that are not themselves congenial to rational student choice.

Progressives like George S. Counts and John L. Childs saw the process of understanding and accepting an orientation to life, including a democratic orientation, as requiring something like religious insight. And when the process represented a change from one orientation to another, it required something like religious conversion. But in neither case is intelligence enough by itself. Basic democratic truths, like basic truths generally, can only be seen through faith, at least in the beginning.

Take the propositions that define the democratic outlook. We say, for example, that people are politically equal, that every adult person should have one, but only one vote. And we say this because, among other things, we believe people are equal morally as well, and that the political realm is one wherein moral considerations must bear. Counts and Childs saw these beliefs as much like church dogma. They were true, and every democrat could see why they were true, but they could not be demonstrated or empirically established as formal arguments or scientific judgments, especially to the young or the immature. To be committed to them morally and emotionally, even to understand them intellectually, we must somehow transcend rationality. While it may in fact be rational to accept a democratic orientation and to reject any orientation that is not, the acquisition of democratic dispositions is a complicated extra-rational affair, it is rarely itself rational. The pedagogical distinction between what we accept rationally and what is rational to accept is the same as the distinction some say is part of the philosophy of science, the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of verification. Once we see that a proposition is true or false, we can set about to formulate a rational demonstration. But the recognition or insight itself cannot be explained in procedural or rational terms.

The progressives who dissented from the official view believed that the problem of education was to get students to understand and accept democracy as a way of life, and that this was a process of discovery which went beyond the bounds of intelligence. They valued rationality and thought it important for education to foster mental capacities, but they believed rationality would be valued and mental capacities would be fostered after a democratic orientation was established, not before. Acquisition of the orientation, they said, did not require rationality, and indeed, was sometimes hindered by an overemphasis on reflection and choice. How, then, was education to fulfill its normative thrust? Through imposition, of course. That is, by a process that recognized the complicated extra-rational factors that bear on our conceptions of reality and our acceptance of basic values.

The Controversy as a Bogus Dispute

Progressive educational thinkers never fully resolved this dispute. And it remains something of a soft-spot in their theoretical posture. Must it remain a soft-spot

forever? I, for one, do not think so. In the first place, it looks to me as if the dispute were more apparent than real. Those who supported and dissented from the official view can easily be seen as talking past one another. And if they were, they might well have been in agreement and not known it. In the second place, the official view rests on a naturalistic conception of value, such that the official view is correct if and only if this conception is sound. The theoretical posture of progressive education can be freed from vagueness and contradiction so long as its conception of value can be presented as a clear and defensible philosophical doctrine.

On the first point, could we not say that neither party to the dispute fully understood the other? Moreover, might we not account for this failure by the fact that the contending sides did not fully understand their own position, or at least were unable to enunciate it clearly? But, of course, we cannot say either of these things unless we know what it was each side meant to say. From our present vantage point, however, it seems rather obvious. However difficult it was to formulate or express their ideas in the original situation, it looks now as if one side to the dispute, those holding the dissenting view, wished to discuss *what* we should teach and the other side, those who advanced the official position, wanted to talk about *how* we should teach. In most cases the two concerns are quite distinct, although, admittedly, the more one pushes at their differences the harder it is to tell them apart. We all know, for example, that the way we teach affects what we teach; our instructional techniques have consequences too. By teaching in a certain way, we may foster attitudes like tolerance or intolerance, and these are surely legitimate curriculum concerns.

Unquestionably, it was because progressive educational thinkers were reluctant to make a separation between curriculum and instruction that the parties to the imposition controversy continually talked past one another and failed to formulate their particular views in a clear and decisive manner. In refusing to make the distinction absolute, they were making a conceptual point that was far in advance of the thinking in their times. But in sometimes acting as if the distinction could never be made, they fell victim to an internal dispute that cost them dearly in public support. They were unable to present a unified front. Instead of an intellectual perspective that could be linked to educational practice, people saw the extremes of emotional slogans like those they associated with political confrontation.

For this reason it is unfortunate that progressives seem never to admit a distinction between the ideas of curriculum and instruction. Although it may always be relative, it is still quite clear within its limits. What we teach is one thing, how we teach is quite another. We might explain the imposition controversy as an unsuccessful effort to deal with both concerns at once. Dewey and other supporters of the official view usually understood imposition, and always understood indoctrination, as having to do with how we should teach, with instruction or manner of instruction. Dissenters from the official view, like Counts and Childs, understood these ideas in terms of what we should teach, with curriculum, or the aims of education.

Supporters of the official view would sometimes make a distinction between imposition and indoctrination. They would define imposition as the normative thrust of education and indoctrination as a strategy, albeit inef-

fective, one might employ to realize this thrust. Thus, they would admit that the former was unavoidable and consider it desirable when conceived as a curriculum theory aiming to provide a democratic orientation, and they would repudiate the latter as a scientifically unsound and morally undesirable theory of instruction. As a theory of instruction they would say that it cannot transmit a democratic orientation, and, furthermore, that it retards mental growth.

On this analysis Counts was right to say that imposition was unavoidable, but wrong to conclude that the choice of what to impose is the only educational choice to be made. For the conditions of imposition, or how we impose, makes all the difference in the world. Whether it be restricted or generous, authoritarian or free, whether facts and values be instilled dogmatically or explained and submitted to the independent judgment of students makes the difference between what is and is not taught.² This is not to deny that it is often hard to distinguish in practice between what and how we impose, and thus to separate the ends of curriculum from the means of instruction. But still there is a distinction at work here. And the occasional reluctance of some progressive educational thinkers to equate imposition with indoctrination was a recognition this distinction must be made.

Nonetheless, it is true that supporters of the official view generally saw this distinction as Counts saw it, i.e., as a distinction without a difference. Progressives were easy to convince that the point at issue lacked practical significance and was, therefore, unworthy of intellectual support. We can see this reluctance to separate ends from means, curriculum from instruction, as a source of confusion in progressive education. And as a source of confusion it can be seen as an explanation of the imposition controversy. This is not to say that the parties to the imposition controversy were insensitive or unsympathetic to each other's concerns. It is simply to say that the official view on imposition was a view of instruction, and that the dissenting view on imposition was a view of curriculum; and that the means-ends doctrine subscribed to by both parties made it difficult to specify their respective concerns. The confusion that came about made it hard for the two sides in the dispute to communicate clearly, or, for that matter, for each side to fully understand its own position.

We need to be clear here ourselves. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with the means-ends doctrine in progressive thought. Undoubtedly, it is one of the more, if not the most, significant philosophical insight of our times. But the doctrine only claims that the separation of means and ends is relative and not absolute. It does not deny the distinction itself. Participants in the imposition controversy seemed often to forget the difference between a relative distinction and no distinction at all. But is it not obvious from what we know of their work as a whole that these progressive educational thinkers held to a distinction between curriculum and instruction, albeit a relative one? To insist they wanted to abolish the distinction altogether simply does not make sense. To say, as the progressives did, that decisions of the one sort affect decisions of the other sort, or even that decisions of the one type might entail decisions of the other type, is not to assume that the decisions are one.

The imposition controversy was by and large a bogus dispute. Those who argued for the official view did not mean to imply that teachers should be neutral on critical

questions of the day. They recognized that neutrality would deny the normative thrust of progressive education. Surely no one could show they were indifferent towards the inculcation of values, or lacked a commitment to the promotion of a democratic orientation through formal education. It may well be that they saw a democratic orientation, like happiness, as best achieved if not directly pursued. And in this there might have been a genuine difference with their critics. Their critics wanted to do the good by the most direct means. They proceeded immediately to teach democracy and hoped to foster mental capacities indirectly as a by-product of democratic living. But with the official view there was a tendency to begin by fostering mental capacities and then to teach democracy, or even to let democracy teach itself as a result of exercising intelligence. It was as if supporters of the official view believed that doing well, or achieving excellence or perfection in conduct or in practical actions was a more worthy goal than doing the good, at least as a proximate objective. Doing well, or doing a good job, as opposed to doing the good, seemed to be held out as a more reliable guide for achieving moral perfection than that supplied by the motive to do what was morally right.³ But this emphasis on mental capacities does not deny the acceptance of a democratic orientation as a moral ideal. It only indicates the strategy adopted by those who accepted the official position. One is no less committed to democracy as a way of life simply because he believes it is most likely to become a reality if pursued by a roundabout route.

Correspondingly, dissenters from the official view did not want to claim that education was merely a process of shaping beliefs or conditioning behavior. They accepted restrictions on manner of teaching. The normative thrust of education must employ moral means. Although they emphasized teaching a democratic orientation over the development of mental capacities, they accepted the latter as a goal of equal prominence, at least. Their emphasis, too, was one of strategy, not moral priority. They simply did not believe that education could realize mental potential in a decadent society, and that education for a democracy must temporarily precede individual development. But they never meant this to be interpreted as a lack of respect for personal integrity. After all, they accepted the means—ends doctrine too. They acknowledged the intrinsic value of mental life, and knew the manner by which it was fostered could never be ignored altogether. And they agreed with supporters of the official view that in order to be justified, a democratic orientation to life must have instrumental as well as intrinsic value. And, furthermore, they believed that in a just society we must all be able to satisfy our spiritual as well as our material needs. By maintaining this belief, they recognized that the quality of life was as important as life itself. They, as well as supporters of the official view, wanted to foster intelligence. And why was intelligence valued? Not simply because it provided the mechanism for self-direction and control, but because it was a source of enjoyment as well. In the end, both sides to the imposition controversy accepted the same educational goal—to free the mind from the forces of nature that created it.

The Commitment to Ethical Naturalism

There is one last matter to discuss. In many respects it represents the most important issue of all. Undoubtedly, it deserves considerable attention, more than we will give

it here. Still, enough can be said in brief to illustrate the essential point. On its face, it is simple enough. Even if the imposition controversy was more apparent than real, it did demonstrate the commitment of progressive educational thought to ethical naturalism and to the theory of value inherent in ethical naturalism.

Dewey and the supporters of the official view were quite clear on this. They argued that values were objective natural properties and that they could only be known through the intelligent analysis of experience, that is, through reason and empirical investigation. This bears on education in a most crucial manner. For it implies literally that students cannot acquire and/or understand a democratic orientation to life unless they engage in practical action and reflect on their resultant experiences.

At times dissenters from the official view did not seem to recognize this requirement. Where they expressly repudiated it, the only explanation can be that they failed to recognize, or would not accept, the theory of value which underlies ethical naturalism and defines its basic tenets. They sometimes, perhaps inadvertently, took a subjectivist's position. They would say, in effect, that values have no referents at all, that they are a creation of the human will or a function of perception. At other times they would presuppose the first tenet of ethical naturalism, that values are objective natural properties, but deny the second, that they can only be known through the intelligent analysis of experience.

In either case, however, imposition is essential, not only in regards to curriculum, but in regards to instruction as well. Since values are defined as having no source, no referents, other than human will, there is no role for intelligence to play in their detection or justification. They are arbitrary, and if the educator wants to transmit them to students, he must use the means of imposition. Where subjectivity reigns, intelligence has no place. The teaching of subjective reality requires non-rational means of instruction.

Even if subjectivity is denied, even if the first tenet which underlies ethical naturalism is assumed, non-rational means of instruction must still be employed so long as the second tenet is not also accepted. For even if we assume that values are objective natural properties, we severely limit, or even exclude, the role of intelligence in their acquisition if we deny the capacity of the individual to know them through practical action and reflection on resultant experiences. It is necessary to use imposition as the means of education whenever and wherever we wish to teach something to someone who, for any reason whatsoever, cannot grasp or understand what we want to teach through the exercise of intelligence. Values that cannot be understood through intelligence would be like concepts, postulates or axioms that the student was not mature enough to understand. If they are to be taught, they must be imposed by non-rational means and only later, perhaps, be seen by the student as rational or necessary.

On this point the official view on imposition, and any

view implied by it, can only be correct if the theory of value which underlies ethical naturalism is a sound philosophical doctrine. Otherwise the view supporting imposition as a theory of instruction as well as a theory of curriculum would represent a necessary condition for effective teaching. But if the theory of value which underlies ethical naturalism was unsound, it would do more than undermine progressive education. It would pretty much discredit progressive thought generally, because progressive thought itself is based on this theory of value. Progressive education would be inherently defective because progressive educational theory would be inherently defective. And progressive educational theory would be inherently defective because the philosophy on which it was based would presuppose a false conception of value. On the other hand, if this conception of value was sound, progressive education would receive, perhaps, its strongest support.

Suppose we were to look at the imposition controversy as a dispute over the means of education. In fact it was not, but it could have been. And if it had been, it would have represented a genuine and profound disagreement. The controversy would not have been limited to educational or political differences, but would have included a philosophical dispute over the ontological and epistemological features of values. Whether the official view, or any view implied by it, could have won out would have been contingent on the merits of pragmatism itself. Without being fully aware of it, dissenters from the official view issued a challenge to the whole of the progressive movement. During this century ethical naturalism has been constantly on the defensive. If present-day dissidents of the progressive tradition are to reclaim the belief that values generally, and moral values in particular, are best conceived empirically and most readily acquired through experience and intelligent action, they would be well advised to begin by considering the imposition controversy as a possible dispute over the means to be used in schooling. If they can show that progressive education brings out the best in people without relying on imposition, they will reestablish, and not just reaffirm, the faith of their intellectual ancestors.

Footnotes

1. Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973, pp. 1-95.
2. Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publishing Co., 1966 printing, p. 99.
3. This distinction is, of course, an old one, dating back at least to the time of Aristotle. But its application and force in this context was made apparent to me by my friend and colleague John B. Hough; but here again, only after considerable effort on his part. Perhaps, the same could be said of the distinction between curriculum and instruction itself.