

# Political Liberalism and the Interests of Children: A Reply to Timothy Michael Fowler

Emil Andersson

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**Abstract** Timothy Michael Fowler has argued that, as a consequence of their commitment to neutrality in regard to comprehensive doctrines, political liberals face a dilemma. In essence, the dilemma for political liberals is that either they have to give up their commitment to neutrality (which is an indispensable part of their view), or they have to allow harm to children. Fowler's case for this dilemma depends on ascribing to political liberals a view which grants parents a great degree of freedom in deciding on the education of their children. I show that ascribing this view to political liberals rests upon a misinterpretation of political liberalism. Since political liberals have access to reasons based upon the interests of children, they need not yield to parent's wishes about the education of their children. A correct understanding of political liberalism thus shows that political liberals do not face the dilemma envisaged by Fowler.

**Keywords** Political liberalism · Neutrality · Education · The good

## Introduction

In his recent 'The Problems of Liberal Neutrality in Upbringing' (2010) Timothy Michael Fowler argues that a core element of political liberalism makes the view run into trouble when we consider the interests of children. The core element in question is the commitment to *neutrality* between different comprehensive doctrines. According to the political liberalism developed by John Rawls, a liberal political conception of justice ought to be *freestanding* in relation to different comprehensive doctrines by not depending on any of them for its justification and by not evaluating their plausibility or worth. This part of political liberalism, Fowler

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E. Andersson (✉)  
Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University, Box 627, 751 26 Uppsala, Sweden  
e-mail: Emil.Andersson@filosofi.uu.se

claims, leads to a dilemma. The dilemma is this: The kind of neutrality political liberals are committed to will, in certain circumstances, bring with it ‘unpalatable consequences’ for children. Avoiding this result will most likely involve compromising the neutrality political liberals deem indispensable for their position, and hence political liberals face the unhappy choice between sacrificing the interests of children and sacrificing ‘core aspects’ of their project (Fowler 2010, p. 368). In this reply to Fowler, I argue that political liberals do not face this unhappy choice. The dilemma presented by Fowler is based on a mistaken interpretation of political liberalism.<sup>1</sup>

### Fowler on Political Liberalism and the Interests of Children

According to Fowler, a consequence of the commitment to neutrality between comprehensive doctrines is that:

political liberalism, as laid out by Rawls, is committed to the view that parents ought to control all those aspects of their child’s education that are not relevant to the development of the child’s sense of justice (Fowler 2010, p. 368).

Fowler reaches this conclusion by arguing *first*, that there are strong reasons based on the value of stability (for the right reasons) in favor of allowing parents to decide on the education of their children. And *second*, that reasons for intervening based on ‘children’s welfare and development’ or ‘children’s best interests’ are unavailable for the political liberal (Fowler 2010, p. 369, 370, 376). Since this class of reasons is unavailable for the political liberal, the only legitimate reasons in favor of intervening in cases concerning how children are brought up are reasons based on the importance of children growing up to be *politically reasonable*. As long as children acquire a sense of justice that enables them to be politically reasonable citizens, parents are given ‘a virtually free hand’ in the education of their children (Fowler 2010, p. 379). This freedom on the part of parents is likely to lead to children being harmed, since it makes it possible for parents to inculcate any kinds of beliefs and ideals into their children as long as this does not interfere with these children developing a sense of justice. But if Fowler is right, political liberals are unable to counteract this harm, in virtue of their own principles.

While I have serious doubts about Fowler’s claim about the importance of reasons based on stability,<sup>2</sup> the part of his argument that I intend to challenge is the part where he claims that political liberals are precluded from acting on reasons

<sup>1</sup> I focus, as does Fowler, on the political liberalism developed by Rawls. There may be other versions of political liberalism that actually are vulnerable to Fowler’s critique. My only claim is that the Rawlsian version is not.

<sup>2</sup> On Rawls’ view, one does not look to presently existing comprehensive doctrines when one formulates a political conception of justice. Doing so would make political liberalism ‘political in the wrong way’ (Rawls 2005, p. 40). I believe that Fowler’s way of proceeding when taking account of different views on children’s upbringing is an example of this error (Fowler 2010, p. 369). Lack of space, however, makes me unable to argue for this here.

based on the interests of children. The basic mistake made by Fowler is illustrated by the following passage:

It is illegitimate for the state to foster ideals to govern the whole of life, thus the aims of education are restricted to engendering an effective sense of justice. This implies that the state will be silent with regards to aspects of education which are not related to this civic aim (Fowler 2010, p. 373).

Here Fowler moves from the accurate claim that, in political liberalism, it is ‘illegitimate for the state to foster ideals to govern the whole of life’, to the mistaken claim that ‘the aims of education are restricted to engendering an effective sense of justice’. Fowler apparently believes that since political liberals are committed to being neutral with regard to comprehensive doctrines (which may govern the whole of life), they are debarred from making claims about the interests of children (Fowler 2010, p. 370). But this is not so. The commitment to neutrality does not rule out all judgments about the interests of children. Political liberals may—in harmony with their own principles—act upon reasons based on the interests of children, and need not therefore restrict the aims of education in the way Fowler claims. It is perfectly compatible with political liberalism, I will now argue, to arrange the education of children with the aim of protecting their interests.

### **Political Liberalism and the Good**

If judgments about what is in the best interest of a child presuppose taking a stand on the relative merits of different comprehensive doctrines, then presumably the same would be true about judgments about the interests of persons generally. This indicates that Fowler’s argument rests upon a more fundamental mistaken assumption concerning political liberalism: the assumption that political liberalism cannot make use of any ideas of the good of persons. But while it *is* true that political liberals cannot justify their political actions by reference to ideas of the good tied to a particular comprehensive doctrine, it is *not* true that they cannot justify their political actions by reference to ideas of the good of persons. In this section, I show that political liberalism can include ideas of the good. I then go on, in the next section, to show how this can be applied to children.

When it comes to the inclusion of ideas of the good in a liberal political conception of justice, Rawls is actually quite explicit. He says:

[I]t may be thought [...] that a liberal political conception of justice cannot use any ideas of the good at all, except perhaps those that are purely instrumental [...] This must be incorrect, since the right and the good are complementary: no conception of justice can draw entirely upon one or the other, but must combine both in a definite way (Rawls 2005, p. 173).

There is in political liberalism no thought of excluding ideas of the good altogether. Rather, the important thing is that the ideas of the good included are of the appropriate kind. In order for a political conception to be freestanding (and neutral) the ideas of the good used cannot be dependent on a particular

comprehensive doctrine. What is needed is an ‘idea of citizens’ good appropriate for political purposes’ which is ‘independent of any particular comprehensive doctrine’ (Rawls 2005, p. 180).

Indeed, if a liberal political conception of justice were not allowed to use ideas of the good at all, then Rawls’ own favored conception—justice as fairness—would be deemed faulty in this respect. Rawls specifies the good of persons for political purposes by reference to what he calls a ‘political conception of the person’ (Rawls 2005, p. 29). It is on this idea of the person (or citizen) which the account of primary goods is built:

The main idea is that primary goods are singled out by asking which things are generally necessary as social conditions and all-purpose means to enable persons to pursue their determinate conceptions of the good and to develop and exercise their two moral powers (Rawls 2005, p. 307).<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of justice as fairness, the good of persons is understood as their interest in pursuing their determinate conceptions of the good, and to develop their two moral powers. The two moral powers are the capacity for a sense of justice (the capacity to be reasonable) and the capacity for a conception of the good (the capacity to be rational) (Rawls 2005, p. 19, p. 305).<sup>4</sup>

Of course, this is an entirely expected feature of any view about justice. It is hard to see how a conception of justice could rely solely on society’s legitimate interest in having citizens develop their sense of justice. A theory of justice is necessarily in the business of specifying the legitimate claims and interests of individuals, and hence an account (however limited) of the good of persons is needed.

## Political Liberalism and the Good of Children

Turn now to the case of children. On Rawls’s view, a just society is a society which ‘ensures for all citizens the adequate development and full exercise of their two moral powers and a fair share of the all-purpose means essential for advancing their determinate (permissible) conceptions of the good’ (Rawls 2005, p. 187 my emphasis). Now certainly, a child does not have a determinate conception of the good, but the interest in a *capacity* for a conception of the good is distinct from the interest in pursuing a *determinate* conception of the good. In a just society, children are ensured the adequate development of this capacity.

Rawls defines the capacity for a conception of the good as ‘a capacity to form, to revise, and rationally to pursue a determinate conception of the good’ (Rawls 2005, p. 312). As a capacity to form and revise a conception of the good, it is a capacity not only to pursue the conception of the good one happens to have, but also to be

<sup>3</sup> For more on the connection between the political conception of the person and primary goods, see (Rawls 2005, p. 75ff).

<sup>4</sup> It might be objected that I shift here, from talking about political liberalism, to talking about a specific conception of justice. There is, however, no problem in doing so. Justice as fairness, as a liberal political conception, is supposed to be fully compatible with political liberalism. Indeed, if any conception of justice is so compatible, we should expect Rawls’s own conception to be.

able to form ‘other and more rational conceptions of the good and in revising existing ones’ (Rawls 2005, p. 312f). This capacity is thus a capacity of being able to reason in a critical and rational fashion about one’s conception of the good.<sup>5</sup>

Now consider what Fowler believes that political liberals have to allow: ‘Under this scheme [political liberalism], parents could legitimately teach their children any set of bizarre or unjustified beliefs at all, and send them to schools which taught only these doctrines’ (Fowler 2010, p. 380). There is no need for political liberals to accept the kind of indoctrination which is depicted in this quote. It can plausibly be argued that sending children to schools that only teach them a certain comprehensive doctrine (bizarre or not) is damaging to their interest in developing their capacity for a conception of the good. Since children do not have a specific conception of the good, a liberal society needs to protect the ability of children to critically reflect on, and to themselves choose, their future conception of the good. It is hard to see how an education that in essence is indoctrination into a specific comprehensive doctrine can satisfy this part of children’s interests. Surely, their capacity of being able to revise and to form different conceptions of the good will be severely hampered if the state does not intervene.

So, while it is true that a ‘state mandated curriculum promoting certain controversial ideals [...] seem an unlikely solution to the problem’ (Fowler 2010, p. 380) for a political liberal, this is true only if ‘controversial ideals’ is understood as being ideals based on a certain comprehensive doctrine. A likely solution is a state mandated curriculum which does not promote a certain comprehensive doctrine, but protects the development of children’s capacity for a conception of the good. This can be achieved by furthering their powers of reasoning and abilities of critical thinking, and by informing them about the many different comprehensive doctrines that exist in society. Such an education is not based on a particular comprehensive doctrine, but on a political conception of the person which is supposed to be independent of such doctrines.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

My main aim in this reply has not been to argue for any specific policies regarding the education of children. I have merely described a position on these matters that I believe to be fully compatible with political liberalism. The essential thing is that this compatibility with political liberalism shows that political liberals do not face the unhappy choice between protecting the interests of children, and keeping their commitment to neutrality. Their commitment to neutrality is fully compatible with protecting the interests of children, and hence there is no dilemma. We have no reason to think that political liberalism will lead to harm for children.

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<sup>5</sup> Rawls distinguishes between two ways of understanding the capacity for a conception of the good: as a *means* to a person’s good and as *part* of a person’s good (Rawls 2005, p. 312). I focus on the former, since doing so is enough for my purposes here.

<sup>6</sup> Whether it, in the end, is sufficiently independent is of course another question. I believe that it is, but this larger issue is not relevant for my purposes in this reply.

## References

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