
SCHOOL CHOICE AMONG COMPETING “CATHOLIC” PHILOSOPHIES

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Is there an identifiably Catholic position on school choice? As pilot programs proliferate in the United States, serious consideration of some philosophical issues seems in order. This article explores two competing moral philosophies and their relationship to parental sovereignty in the public sector. The authors conclude by articulating a Catholic position on the question.

Philosophies that are contradictory in their premises sometimes collaborate on practical projects; on occasion they even utter joint statements of shared human ideals. In 1948, for example, the Communist bloc joined its Western ideological competitors to draft and ratify the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This famous accord was achieved in part by political luck and in part by the insight and skill of Western intellectuals, notably Jacques Maritain and Richard McKeon. Still, something like it could emerge even today, for instance, from an assembly of Chinese and American theorists given a similar assignment. Nor is this singular impulse to express agreement a thing that we can reduce to political hypocrisy; whether a signatory is Marxist, liberal, or Thomist, he or she understands that the currents of life may carry any broadly stated manifesto to unforeseen consequences. The 1948 Declaration predictably became the jump-start for movements that Stalinists could hardly have found congenial. And yet conventions of the same sort continue to multiply.

We should not be surprised, then, that today's lively political coalition for subsidized school choice comprises such incongruous bedfellows as

Individualists, Kantians, Thomists, Utilitarians, and Theosophists. As a tribe, "choiceniks" constitute a conceptual bearpit, a most uneasy philosophical environment in which to negotiate the precise terms of voucher programs. Nevertheless, after many a false start this congress of discordant minds has in the last decade produced not only abstract declarations of parental sovereignty but practical programs of legislation. The systems now working in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and the state of Florida demonstrate that incompatible moral philosophies can cooperate even in the details of lawmaking.

Their agreement about policy does not imply consensus about the content of the good life that is to be taught in the good school. By definition, choice will secure varieties of education; pedagogies will appear that one supporting philosophy will judge to be meat and another to be poison. Consider the moral polarity between the Individualist and the Christian constituencies for school choice. The Christian affirms a moral order of the real good that is already in place; it consists in correct conduct that we humans are obligated to seek and to teach our children to seek. Individualism, by contrast, dissolves the good into human will; value is created by individual choice. A policy of school choice assures that this ideological dispute over the source and (potentially) the content of moral obligation will reappear in conflicting beliefs that are presented to children by competing schools.

In an important respect, such a pluralist regime of education can satisfy no one completely—not even the Individualists. Though they approve variety, in practice they may find school choice frustrating or, at best, ambivalent. Once families get options, those who select schools with an Individualist curriculum might turn out to be fewer in number than those who today are conscripted for government schools that earnestly teach it; paradoxically, choice could in practice disfavor Individualist versions of morality. (Later we shall claim that this threatening paradox, though real for every belief system, is least acute within the camps of "Catholic" moral philosophy.)

Given this discord and its foreboding disappointments, what drives these competing ideologies to support the movement for family autonomy? No doubt each group supposes (or at least hopes) that in practice choice will produce the group's own desired content of learning more often or more efficiently than does the state monopoly today. The Utilitarian, for example, expects the free market to yield more educational "product" measured in terms, say, of test scores and civic virtue. The Fabian sees that on the whole choice will better serve the poor. The Theosophist is happy that Rudolf Steiner will become more available to ordinary families. In each case, devolution of responsibility and authority to parents promises to enhance the teaching of ideas that are favored by the particular philosophy.

It would be a scholarly contribution to catalogue all the incompatible beliefs of the friends of choice, assessing their diverse policy incentives and locating the special place of each in the debate. Odd couples such as Milton

Friedman and Floyd Flake—or Jeb Bush and Christopher Jencks—inhabit this tent, and it would be good sport to display their ideological incongruity. A comprehensive review of the players, however, is not our object. The modest hope of this essay is to identify and juxtapose two distinctive strains of “realist” moral philosophy, each constituting a distinct strand in the intellectual tradition of orthodox Roman Catholics and each widely supposed to support school choice without reservation. We shall suggest that, though favored by both strands, choice entails tension with fundamental premises of each. However, because of its distinctive interpretation of the way humans acquire personal moral goodness, one of these theories of the moral life is more comfortable with parental sovereignty than is the other. This disjunction has not yet surfaced in the discourse among Catholic educators, and its disclosure may cause some discomfort. We hope so.

Our aim, then, is to assess the compatibility of these two distinct realist theories of moral self-fulfillment with school choice. At the end we will briefly consider the stakes in this philosophic issue for the separate and most central theoretical question for Catholic educators—the means of salvation.

MORAL REALISM: ITS AMBIVALENT STRUCTURE

The term *moral realism* identifies the family of philosophies professing in common that there are genuine human goods to be sought; these are achieved through acts that remain good whether or not the actor personally values them (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994). Correlatively the frustration of these goods is a true evil. Thus, for example, the deliberate killing of another human without justification is bad, and remains so even if the killer mistakenly reasons the act to be good—indeed, even if he honestly thinks it his moral obligation. Likewise, knowledge and friendship are to be sought because they are truly good for humans, even humans who reject them. The mark of all moral realists is their judgment that rational humans are obligated by their nature to seek such real goods and to avoid such real evils in correct acts.

On the separate but equally elemental question of *who* is good, however, realists divide into two distinct camps. Their division concerns whether or not correct acts are required for persons themselves to become good. Some say yes, while others insist that moral goodness (or self-perfection) depends simply on how hard one tries to discover and do what is truly good, quite apart from his or her success in finding the correct deed and doing it. If the latter view is adopted, an honest actor would be making himself good even as he makes a hash of the social order.

Those realists who assert that moral self-perfection depends upon correct acts we will call “gnostic”; for them, right knowledge and performance are

crucial. Those philosophers, on the other hand, who deem honest and diligent search for correct conduct to be sufficient for personal moral goodness lack any traditional label; the nearest English root for the activity that they think effective for this purpose is the odd sounding verb “to obtend.” In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, persons who obtend are those who offer a reason in justification of a choice. Expanding further, “to obtend” becomes simply to quest for genuine human goods. Its two syllables suggest the duality of every responsible act of moral choice; choice is subjective (tend), but it has correct acts (ob) as its material object.

Our principal question, then, will be which strand of the realist tradition, the gnostic or the obtensionalist, is the more comfortable as a philosophy of school choice. It may help here if we briefly identify a few of the more famous gnostics and obtensionalists. Among the former, the Socrates of Plato’s *Dialogues* ranks first as the classic source of the doctrine that only correct knowledge and behavior work moral self-perfection. Socrates’ many intellectual offspring on this issue include Aquinas as well as other mainline Catholic philosophers such as Francisco Suarez and Etienne Gilson. Modern secular thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum and Bernard Williams also deny, for very different reasons, that persons who try to do the good but fail nonetheless make themselves good. For all of them, in order to be good the actor must find and perform the right act. The inference is plain that the luck of a clever brain and an education in correct conduct are signal advantages in achieving one’s own moral goodness.

Where the roster of obtensionalist moral philosophers begins is more difficult to say. If, briefly, we depart philosophy for scripture, we find that the Bible sometimes seems to sever personal goodness from correct acts. At other times, however, scripture becomes vaguely gnostic—as when Jesus asks the Father to “forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34) (or, could we suppose somehow that even good persons need forgiveness for their bad acts?) Among the philosophers, the first clear probe toward a pure obtensionalism may have occurred in the twelfth century; it earned its author, Peter Abelard, a papal condemnation. The thesis, nonetheless, gradually gained adherents; notably, both Alphonsus Liguori and Immanuel Kant were to separate moral goodness quite decisively from correct conduct (Coons & Brennan, 1999). In our own time, obtensionalism as a philosophy has appeared cordial to many moralists in the Catholic tradition. Josef Fuchs, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan are rather clear examples. Obviously, acceptance of this “Catholic” position may bear upon the distinctive theological question of salvation that we address in our conclusion.

IS GNOSTIC REALISM A FRIEND OF PARENTAL CHOICE?

Let us stand in the shoes of a consistent gnostic realist as we consider the two distinctive goods of education: transmission of truth and moral perfection of the person. From the gnostic perspective, to the extent that any school teaches false ideas about correct conduct, not only is that particular good imperiled but the child who believes these notions is unable to achieve moral self-perfection, however valiant his efforts. Correct conduct and moral self-perfection occur in tandem, or not at all. Hence, for the gnostic who happens to live in a society in which he and most everyone else agree on what is right behavior, sound educational policy requires that the consensus version of truth be taught everywhere regardless of parental wishes. This was Plato's verdict in the *Republic*, and he has his intellectual descendants.

Note parenthetically that moral consensus would not automatically require a standardized state-determined pedagogical *method*. Without surrender of principle, Plato himself might have approved a parental option among various plausible methods for teaching basic skills; indeed, in theory, even the Platonic moral curriculum might be transmitted most efficiently by parental choice of method for the individual child. The only question for the gnostic in such a unitary culture is whether conscription or the free market better conveys the agreed message—a purely tactical inquiry. In any case, we do not live in a society that agrees on the content of the good life. Nor are such societies legion in the modern world.

The society we do live in is “pluralist.” Its crazy quilt of values represents an authentic diversity of views about human nature and its possible perfections, individual and social. Speaking practically, beyond a minimum area of agreement, in the USA there is no public gnosis concerning either what conduct is good or who is good. Every positive version of what a child should want to become is, therefore, strictly private in nature. Beyond the scant compass of a general accord about the learning of skills and the inculcation of respect for law, whenever state institutions, including the public schools, promote specific human ends and practices, they are in fact teaching the personal ideology of whoever happens to be in charge. Assuming this pluralism to be the permanent condition of our society, how should the gnostic realist respond to proposals that would encourage parents to assign individual children to specific schools?

To the eye of the gnostic, the *prima facie* effect of parental choice among a menu of conflicting moralities is a disaster for both the individual child and the order of correct conduct. The gnostic cannot stop thinking of all those feckless adult choosers who profess wrong answers about what we are supposed to do. Still, what is the practical alternative? In a society such as ours it is highly unlikely that even a successful state monopoly over moral content

would ever adopt and teach that one specific version of moral truth that happens to be professed by our hypothetical gnostics. Undertaking a rough calculation of probable effects, they thus might conclude that a policy encouraging choice of schools would ensure the teaching of at least some correct conduct (as the specific gnostic defines it), and thus would make some children better off. This grudging prediction would not make gnostic realism the philosophy *of* choice, but it could be a philosophy *for* choice. Much like the utilitarian, the gnostics would concede political allegiance to a parental autonomy that, on the whole, will serve their ends better than the current regime.

It is not clear, however, that choice would want such an ally. Gnostic versions of self-perfection could be an ideological embarrassment. The implication that among human persons there is a moral aristocracy identifiable by brains and correct education would mischaracterize, and render politically vulnerable, the spirit of what is a democratic movement; choice is a populist hope. Indeed, the irony in gnostic adhesion to choice is that few private schools are in fact gnostic in their message. Half of all non-public schools are Catholic; and, at least on the core issue of moral self-perfection, these schools had largely forgotten whatever they once knew of the gnostic elements of Thomism 50 years before Vatican II. The natural educational habitat of the gnostic today is the public sector, with its obsessive perception of the brightest child as being potentially the best; this outlook is abetted by assigning children to schools according to family residence—a policy that effectively separates and clusters children according to social class and sophistication. By contrast, precisely because most of them are religious, schools in the private sector seldom take the gnostic turn.

AN OBTENSIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF SCHOOL CHOICE

As fellow realists, the obtensionalists agree with the gnostics that school choice is an imperfect instrument for the promotion of right conduct. In a pluralist society, private decisions will inevitably deliver some children to schools that teach nonsense about our real responsibilities. The obtensionalist's practical judgment to this extent parallels that of the gnostic; choice is in this respect only a tactical improvement over the poisonous monopoly now in place. It is more efficient at producing those few outcomes on which society does in fact agree; and where it does not, choice gets the content of behavior right more often than those teachers who are empowered by the state.

Even in regard to the learning of conduct, however, there is a difference of perspective between the two brands of realism. For the obtensionalist educator, our imperfect grasp of correct conduct is not, as Kant would have it, a

“reproach,” but merely the human condition. Some of us who look will not find; we are made that way. This fallibility of ours does not cancel the natural imperative to seek the content of social morality and to educate each other; but it does counsel a resigned humility, as we regard the inevitable follies of our good neighbors, and of ourselves. Obtensionalists are thus less likely to wring their hands over the effects of school choice on those occasions when it delivers false ideas about the real good.

Would they even extend a program of parental choice to include those gnostic schools that deliver the message of moral hierarchy—the belief that luck matters and that being bright enhances one’s chance of being best? Their answer is not philosophical but practical, and is a definite yes. Obtensionalists recognize that the present headquarters of gnostic culture in America is the public school. In a curious contradiction, the state has made brains the coin of the moral realm while operating a monopoly unsuited to nourish them. A system of choice would allow the gnostic pedagogy to survive; it would be reduced, however, to the status of a market option that would become available to all just as it is now to those wealthy few who choose it in the public sector and in the occasional gnostic private school. In a general regime of choice the negative effect of such parental decisions would be vastly offset by the general popular escape from the monopoly.

If obtensionalists would be merely reassured concerning the net social good—the sum of correct human behaviors—that would be produced by school choice, they would be enthusiastic about the effect of choice upon that other crucial good, the moral self-perfection of the child. There are two reasons for this, both of them thoroughly philosophical. Boethius (1932) himself might have listed the first among the “consolations.” Remember that obtension denies that the teaching of either bad or good conduct can affect the capacity of the child to reach moral self-perfection; unjust societies and false ideas, even if believed, do not make bad persons. The decisive moral property of an individual is his or her capacity to say yes or no to the natural imperative to quest for the real good. That capacity is unaffected by exterior circumstances, even including education that mistakes the real good. Failure to find the correct way is in itself no threat to personal moral achievement, so long as one fulfills the obligation to seek it. The world may be the worse for my works, but I can be morally fulfilled by having tried my best. This belief in the invulnerability of the moral self yields a less mournful interpretation of the fate of those children who are victimized by education. The sole moral tragedy possible to a child is his or her free and deliberate replacement of the real good with personal caprice as the ideal.

If children are morally invulnerable to wrong ideas about behavior, should we stop worrying about the ethical content of their education? Of course not, for again human flourishing is at stake, and we would all like to live among fellow citizens (whatever the state of their personal goodness)

whose education helps them tell the difference between harmful and helpful deeds. In a pluralist society, realists have the responsibility to keep looking for the educational system that will maximize the citizens' grasp of correct behavior; and again, as a tactical judgment of the most efficient means, they are likely to assign that task to school choice.

The second reason that parental choice is the most appropriate instrument of the child's own moral perfection is one that is more strictly philosophical; namely, that it is choice alone that can secure justice to the individual child. Consider the elements of moral self-perfection from the child's point of view. The news from the obtensionalist that he or she is morally invulnerable to misfortune may be consoling, but it does not allow the child to be indifferent to the content of the school's message about correct conduct. To the contrary, along with children's natural capacity to seek the true path through reason comes the duty to do so. The deep structure of this obligation to seek the good implies a strong ethical claim of children to a significant educational right.

To be more specific about the premise of this right, the emergence of rationality makes children aware of two things: (1) I am to inform my conscience and follow it; and (2) my grasp of correct behavior is inchoate and marginal. Children are obligated to obtend; but exactly as moral beginners they see that it is a part of their responsibility in the search for right acts to will for themselves the best adult source of practical advice. Children grasp that, undirected, the beginner is seldom an efficient seeker of the real good that is to be realized through human conduct. It is, therefore, one's responsibility to try to become such a person; every child ought to want an education about the good—an education that both commences in a relation of subordination and affirms the obligation to search for genuine human goods. This involves no paradox. Children, like the rest of us, remain morally invulnerable to any force except their own free abandonment of the quest for the good; but, for the time being, this means only that their all-important authenticity as a seeker requires a willing pupilage to the most reliable authority available, whoever that may be.

Even a pluralistic society grasps this duty of the child to will the most efficient educative dependency available. At least among ordinary people in America, the conviction survives that all of us are obligated to search for those answers that are correct whether we like them or not. Given this starting point, absent some countervailing reason, a right is clearly entailed. Society owes every child a subordination to whichever adult sovereignty is most likely to encourage and assist the child's own search for the content of the behavioral good.

But here we must face up to the consequence of empowering the child's sovereign. Who among the menagerie of American adults is qualified for this role of the moral leader to whom each child has a natural right? The state and its agents obviously are disqualified; precisely to the extent that society lacks

consensus regarding the good life, there can be no governmental candidate for the role of moral tutor. Dissensus has set monopoly schools an incoherent mission; there is no public ideal to transmit to the child.

Taking the obtensional perspective, we see that the sovereignty of parents, though diverse and fallible in their grasp of the true behavioral good, enjoys a peculiar and decisive justification arising out of the child's own need. The child who would be good craves their authority, however misguided their leadership in specific matters. The reason for this is simple enough; it is the parent alone who guarantees to the obtending child the one message that responds precisely to the terms of the beginner's moral impulse. Parents may differ about the content of the real good, but they agree that there is a real good to be sought.

Indeed, this trait of affirming the good appears to be virtually universal within the role of parenthood. It may disappear temporarily from the parental ken, say at the office, where economic actors can be driven to believe *pro tem* in a Hobbesian world. It may disappear in the academy; professors, however correct their actual behavior, sometimes get promoted by posturing as moral skeptics. By contrast, even in academic homes the reality of the good is unchallenged. The most nihilistic parents are quite incapable of telling their child that there is no correct (or incorrect) way. Parenthood is the pulpit of moral realism, if only as the instrument of sane survival. Again, the specific content of parental notions about correct behaviors is protean, and many a child hears bad ideas from fathers and mothers. What he or she almost never hears is that the goodness of any deed is one's own invention. And so the child is always invited to obtend—to seek the real good, just as nature requires of each of us as a condition of moral self-perfection. A system of education could do worse for the child than to confirm this personal responsibility to others and to self. Ours presently does. Only monopoly schools with a captive clientele could survive preaching the bogus goods of “moral neutrality” and “values clarification.”

In a pluralist society, obtensional realism is the moral philosophy most nearly congruent with a practical policy of parental choice. Family sovereignty facilitates exercise of the child's natural responsibility to seek the content of the practical good from an adult who is committed unconditionally to teach it.

As a bonus, parental choice plausibly maximizes the transmission of real wisdom about right conduct. Again the reason is not hard to find: Those who play philosopher-king for their own child will be diligent to convey right answers. If rationality counts for anything, in a morally diverse society this parental vocation to the moral quest may optimize the achievement of correct treatments of others.

A CODA FOR CATHOLICS

The Catholic educator might be inclined to slight or even disregard these disputes among realist moral philosophers. The first concern of the Catholic is not, like the philosopher, to nourish a natural perfection; it is, rather, to assist the child's salvation. The bottom line in religious schools is theological, and the terms of access to eternal life could be quite other than those that lead to a natural moral fulfillment. Locating the theological roots of school choice might entail a distinctive methodology and a search for premises that are lodged in scripture and tradition as well as nature and reason. In any case, that question would deserve its own essay.

Nonetheless, we briefly flag this separable issue, largely because Catholic thinkers typically do not make the sharp distinction between the philosophical and religious elements of soteriology. Historically, their criteria for salvation have tended to be nearly as Greek as they are scriptural (Brinton, 1959). Natural law has played a central role, and the importance of moral casuistry has only intensified as the Church gradually has struggled free from the predestinational heritage of Augustine. But with this increasing emphasis upon personal freedom and responsibility, it has become ever more exigent to decide whether man's "cooperation" with God must take the form decreed by gnostic philosophy. Does God insist upon correct conduct, or is he satisfied with diligence in our blundering quest for it?

Recently we have argued at length that the conclusions of Vatican II represent the obtensional position in a nearly plenary form (Coons & Brennan, 1999). Reading the lines, and a bit between them, we learn that salvation comes to believers and nonbelievers alike on the sole condition that the individual strive diligently to discover the truth and, in the case of moral truth, to behave in accord with the answer (right or wrong) that one's intellectual industry discloses. Invincible ignorance is not merely an excuse; the honest blunderer, by his commitment to seek and honor the real good, accepts the terms of God's gracious invitation and is thereby justified and saved. Though the Council didn't say this in so many words, we find the implication unmistakable. We discern the same in the *sensus fidelium*.

The deep conflict that exists between this Conciliar position and surviving gnostic versions of justification is not yet fully appreciated in Catholic circles. It seems bound eventually to surface among the educators, however, simply because of the unsettling implication of a natural moral hierarchy that is entailed in the gnostic interpretation; presumably, in our schools this implication must be either taught, rejected, or made a belief option. If the individual capacity to accept God's invitation varies in degree according to one's access to right answers, the human race is a ladder of superior and inferior persons arrayed according to their natural gifts and the correctness of their moral education. Individuals who make identical commitments to search for

the real good can be predestined to unequal opportunities for salvation. If that is the creed, the Catholic schools presumably should say so. At the same time they must abandon the Council's hard-won recognition of human equality with all its communitarian implications.

Earlier we concluded that, given a pluralist society such as ours, a purely philosophical gnosticism would only grudgingly accept parental choice as the least of evils. The same presumably would hold for a theological gnosticism—one which reserves salvation to those who manage to get correct answers to questions of faith or morals. Thus school choice with its inevitable diversity may evoke genuine theological enthusiasm only among those who worship an equal-opportunity God. When the sole event that saves is the free acceptance of the divine invitation to seek the true and the good, rule by the parent will still give us many schools of which we disapprove; but it will at the same time encourage every child to affirm and participate in the reality of justification. It is this obtusional insight which most fully justifies the public empowerment of ordinary adults. In choosing a school, parents confirm that there is a real good and that their own child is bound to honor it—with salvation as the prize. We take this to be the Catholic position.

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