

Education and Civil Liberty

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The covid-19 crisis has made clear that there is a great gap in our educational system. A Civil society that can thrive needs the whole community to recognize that the presupposed condition for universal civil liberty is the understanding and acceptance of universal civil responsibility. But this liberty becomes license when the responsibility is ignored or refused. For during this entire world wide pandemic the same negative refusal to accept responsibility for others has arisen in many places, including the older democracies such as France, the United States, Britain and Canada. Happily this is not universal, however, as in Australia and New Zealand and in most of Scandinavia the proper understanding of civil liberty as being tied to equal civil responsibility was firmly in place. But the fact that some democracies have a population that voluntarily engages in the universal struggle against the ravages of the pandemic while other do not suggests that in those that do not engage universally in the struggle there is an important and rather large educational gap. Somehow, in countries like the United States and Canada we have educationally missed the boat. Our citizens have confused civil liberty with civil license. And that suggests that somewhere we have not managed adequately to engage them in our school system in the appropriate philosophical manner so that each and every citizen arrived at an understanding of the importance of universal civil responsibility as a presupposition for the possibility of a universal civil liberty that protects all citizens.

To control a viral pandemic when there is no vaccination or treatment for the disease one has to prevent the spread of the infection. In the case of the covid-19 pandemic the spread is largely through close personal contact and the entry of the virus through the mouth or nose. So the only way that one can prevent the spread is either by keeping a sufficient physical distance from others or by stopping the spread by wearing a mask if one has the infection so that it cannot spread to others and to some degree preventing its spread to oneself by also wearing a mask. Oddly in a number of the older democracies, including Canada, there have been large groups

of people who refused to maintain the necessary social distancing or wear a mask. And in these cases those refusing to avoid closely crowded human gatherings or to wear masks did so by arguing that such actions were an infringement on their personal civil liberty.

Many of us watched this in the most striking instance in the United States where then then president of the United States, Donald Trump, organized over a year many political gatherings where there were large crowds of people in close physical contacts and who did not wear masks. Worse, he encouraged his followers to act in this way, often publicly downplaying the dangers of the covid-19 corona virus in his speeches. The net result was that by the time he had been defeated in a presidential election some five hundred thousand American citizens had died of the virus and millions had suffered devastating effects, often long standing, from its ravages including chronic respiratory distress, brain fog and many other severe internal organ disturbances as well as more minor difficulties like loss of taste and smell.

One of the subsequent developments from this lack of general civil responsibility in relation to general civil liberty is that of the 94 million American who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election something like eighty percent of them still do not take the covid-19 pandemic seriously. The main evidence of this is the refusal of many of this eighty percent to take the necessary vaccine shots in order to immunize the bulk of the population against the corona virus and its rapidly developing variants. This rejection of the vaccines now available is on a spectrum from vaccine hesitancy to vaccine refusal, but either way it means that a significant number of the population of both the United States and Canada bear no immunity and so can both easily contract the virus and pass it on to others. As a consequence any rapid an safe return to the normalcy of our societies as they were before the pandemic is unlikely for some time.

But why do I diagnose the societal problems as essentially an educational one? Certainly many people in both Canada and its southern neighbour do support the necessary public health measures such as physical (social) distancing, the control of large crowded gatherings, the wearing of masks, the regular washing of hands and so on. Why would I not similarly claim that the educational system, though perhaps flawed, nonetheless has properly educated this majority of citizens in the necessary understanding of the importance of universal civil responsibility. And surely this is an important achievement? It would be plausible, surely, to suggest that most of the understanding of universal civil

responsibility as a precondition for universal civil liberty is something that one usually learns at home, not at school. And so the failure of many to grasp the importance of this responsibility, one might conclude, lies generally with parents.

But one should remember that the arguments for a universal public schooling system in Canada as articulated in the nineteenth century (by people like Edgerton Ryerson in Ontario, Kay-Shuttleworth in Britain and Horace Mann in the United States) was that education was too important for the good of society to be left solely in the hands of the parents. Indeed the school was to be a place away from the sometimes dangerous and often difficult situation in many, perhaps most, nineteenth century homes where the may have often been heavy poverty, great ignorance, and sometimes both nastiness and vice. The school was to be a clean and shiny moral and intellectual haven from the sometimes, perhaps all too often, pervasive negative, downgrading and ignorant influence of the home.

One of the most recent measures of the success of such ideals is the rapid rise in our time of voluntary “home schooling” of children of all ages, something that has by necessity become almost universal, though certainly not voluntary, from time to time during this present pandemic. For when the society is willing to return the children to their parents for schooling in many cases in our time it suggests that the educational system has been successful to the degree that parents can be now trusted to educate their children to the best and common standards expected by the society at large. After all it is not long ago that we had “truant officers” who saw that each and every child went to school on pain of breaking the law.

But what do I suspect is still missing in our school systems at the moment such that so many people in countries like Canada and the United States parade publicly in opposition to the necessary health measures such as restricted public assembly, the closing of certain businesses for a time, the restrictions on gatherings like those in churches for purposes of worships, funerals and weddings, and the wearing of masks? My sense here is that it is a failure of our educational system to have never offered myriad chances for each young person during the now practically compulsory twelve years in school for each to have discussed such topics as civil liberty and its necessary presuppositions. And I do not here mean “memorize for the purposes of test”. I mean really think and discuss scenarios after the manner of philosophers from Socrates onwards in the context of regular school work the problems of such things a civil liberty in which the children actually tackle problems for which

we have no ready answers that force them to think deeply and openly with others about our puzzlements.

In my last editorial I raised the possibility of philosophy for children in the schools. I have recently seen it in action with a number of children in the 6-7 and 7-10 age ranges presently being home schooled who met regularly over the last month with a member of the University of Calgary philosophy department (Chris Framarin), who, on a number of Zoom sessions, engaged in approaches to answering puzzling questions that encouraged them to reason logically (for example by offering both their opinions on puzzling topics and their reasons for those opinions). To see six and seven year olds doing this so easily and readily was a revelation to me. I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears that children of this age can easily think well about whether or not it is ever OK to do something that may harm another person and give reasons for their answers. But if a child can think well about this, surely the adults who refuse to social distance or wear masks but who give no good reasons for their stands could should actually be able to reason better had they had the chance earlier in their lives.

Thus I conclude that there is a place for regularly adding such work in our schools as part of the educational process systematically so that we are not caught again in the future by a universal problem that requires an understanding of social responsibility as a condition for civil liberty and the general acceptance of the necessary action by each of us for the good of all.

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