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# Democracy & Education

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## Is Reasonableness an Aim of Early Childhood Education?

A Response to *Preschool as a Wellspring of Democracy*

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### Abstract

Erickson and Thompson articulate and defend reasonableness as an important civic educational aim for early childhood education. In this response, I argue that further clarity regarding the nature and scope of “reasonableness” as an educational concept is needed. Is such a concept fundamentally political, or does it capture a broader notion of educational value? My view is that, from an educational point of view, the need for reasonable deliberation in plural societies makes salient that there are *certain situations* that mature moral agents should be prepared to handle (i.e., conflict about basic political matters). But this is merely part of a broader moral education. I explain why I think this is the case, pointing to some sharp differences between the nature of civic deliberation and moral deliberation, more broadly.

### This article is in response to

Erickson, J. D., Thompson, W. (2019). Preschool as a Wellspring for Democracy: Endorsing Traits of Reasonableness in Early Childhood Education. *Democracy & Education*, 27(1), Article 1.

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### Overview

**I**N “PRESCHOOL AS a Wellspring of Democracy: Endorsing Traits of Reasonableness in Early Childhood Education,” Erickson and Thompson (2019) articulate and defend a conception of reasonableness as an educational aim for early childhood. They claim that in a liberal democratic society, citizens must “sufficiently exhibit *traits of reasonableness* in their engagement with their fellows” (p. 1). These traits of reasonableness “encompass adaptive habits, skills, mind-sets, values, norms, and attitudes that guide one’s engagement with other persons as moral and political equals in a process of shared political life” (p. 2). *Reasonableness* is used here in the Rawlsian sense, that is, citizens motivated, and able, to accept/propose terms of social cooperation for the benefit of all (Rawls, 2005). The reasonable citizen, for example, is someone who recognizes that their own idea of what is

good or worthwhile will be different from that of other citizens. Accordingly, reasonable citizens understand that some of the public policies that they see as obviously beneficial will be unacceptable to others. The reasonable citizen accepts this and sees value in political solutions that all similarly reasonable citizens can freely accept without intimidation, coercion, or indoctrination.

Being reasonable is normative. It does not develop naturally or in the home (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, p. 2). Without

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educational intervention, we are apt to be bad at being reasonable. Unreasonable citizens polarize the political culture of society, making it more fragmented and less cooperative. Erickson and Thompson (2019) attribute recent legislative failures in the US to polarization effects made possible by a deficit in reasonableness traits in the public sphere (p. 2). Therefore, the cultivation of reasonableness is a public good and a legitimate<sup>1</sup> civic educational aim. As the authors note, political philosophers have long argued the implications of reasonableness for civic education (Brighouse, 1998; Callan, 1997; De Wijze, 1999). Typically, these arguments have focused on civic education in schools. The authors' novel contribution is to argue that reasonableness as a civic education goal should be extended to preschool, offering two reasons why preschool represents a special opportunity for its cultivation.

The first reason is institutional. Preschool is a significant public space for children taking their first, tentative steps away from the private sphere of the family (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, p. 4). Accordingly, encounters with other children are a powerful opportunity to structure a good 'civic first impression' in a way that makes civic norms of reasonableness explicit. Think, for example, of the teacher's insistence that young children share classroom toys. As the authors put it, "[p]reschool civics standards guiding classroom dealings . . . do not convey the depth with which we believe young children should come to understand rules, such as the directive to share, to be justified by an appeal to the common good" (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, p. 4). That is to say, educators can engage preschool children in pluralistic dialogue—likely among their first experiences of public deliberation—in order to cultivate the reciprocity deemed essential for civic reasonableness.

The second reason is developmental. According to the authors, empirical research suggests that children are naturally more open-minded than older children and adults. Their schemas are less shaped (or biased) by previous experience, and so they are more open to social cooperation. This will "increase the likelihood young children will willingly participate in civic-minded explorations and come to value examining their own views in conjunction with others, which in turn, could serve them in their future political interactions with others" (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, p. 5). Young children are impressionable, and educators should take advantage of this fact in order to prime them to view social cooperation favorably.

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1 In the sense that the liberal state has the political authority to promote reasonableness in public institutions such as schools. Erickson and Thompson (2019) address the problem of political neutrality in order to address the objection that an education for reasonableness in preschool is too politically controversial. I cannot address their argument in full here but can point out that while reasonableness may not be politically controversial it does not follow that preschooling ought to be a state responsibility. The argument that preschools ought to provide civic education requires an account of why the preschool is part of the basic structure of a liberal society and therefore subject to the political authority of the state. Without such authority, which would cover the education of all young children, we risk a system in which some preschool children have the privilege of an education for civic reasonableness and others do not.

## Reasonableness and Early Childhood

Should reasonableness be an aim of education in early childhood? The promise, as I understand it, is that if reasonableness were an expectation from the earliest stages of moral development, citizens would internalize traits of reasonableness durable enough to resist an increasingly divisive public culture.<sup>2</sup> Erickson and Thompson (2019) put forward an appealing case for thinking that reasonableness as an aim of education in early childhood *may* increase political stability in the long term. They supplement their case with thoughtful pedagogical examples that would be endorsed by most any educator committed to the promotion of rationality as an educational aim. The preschool is a neglected area of focus for normative thinking about education, and the authors do a service in directing scholarly attention to important questions regarding the moral and political responsibilities of early childhood education.

The focus of my response will be on the Rawlsian framework that Erickson and Thompson (2019) draw on in order to justify pluralistic dialogue in the preschool classroom. While the authors make a convincing case that the aims of preschooling need to be more carefully theorized, I believe that more needs to be said about what makes these aims specifically *Rawlsian*. The educational value of many of the practices that the authors endorse, especially those centered on pluralistic dialogue, could just as easily (or perhaps even more easily) be captured by other deliberative democratic theories (Gutmann, 1999; Habermas, 1990). This does not mean that the authors *should* appeal to these other theories. My point is that an account detailing what a specifically Rawlsian account reveals about the educational value of preschool deliberation, in contrast to other deliberative theories, would provide a stronger theoretical and practice rationale to Erickson's and Thompson's proposed project.

In this spirit, I make two key points. The first point attempts to clarify how the educational aim of Rawlsian reasonableness is distinctive within a broader picture of preschool moral and civic education. My claim here is that, from an educational point of view, the need for reasonable deliberation in plural societies makes salient *certain situations* that mature moral agents should be prepared to handle (i.e., conflict about basic political matters). Preschools have a potentially important role to play in such preparation, but this role should be framed within a broader moral education. I will do this by pointing to some sharp differences between the nature of civic deliberation and moral deliberation. My efforts at clarification do not aim to change, substantively, anything that Erickson and Thompson (2019) advance in their paper so much as sharpen the distinctive value that a Rawlsian deliberation brings early childhood education.

My second point focuses on potential challenges facing the preschool educator aiming to promote Rawlsian traits of reasonableness. Recall that Rawlsian reasonableness is valuable insofar as it enables citizens to resolve their disagreements through a "freestanding" justification. By this I mean that citizens do not

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2 I leave to the side the question of whether this comes close to civic indoctrination, but see Brighouse (1998).

resolve public moral and political disagreements through appeal to what they believe is “true” or “right”; rather, they propose fair terms that they anticipate other citizens can accept from the standpoint of their own particular conception of the good. This approach to political deliberation is sometimes referred to as “epistemic abstinence” (Raz, 1990). The authors do not explicitly propose that children should be taught to endorse epistemic abstinence i.e. that they stop thinking that the claims they make in a pluralistic dialogue are potentially “true” or “right.” But given that Erickson and Thompson claim that their approach is Rawlsian, and given also that the point of Rawlsian reasonableness traits is to prepare future citizens to deal with basic moral and political disagreements in an epistemically abstentious way, this raises some challenges for how the preschool educator should handle the moral or political disagreements that are bound to arise in the preschool classroom.

### Is Preschool Reasonableness Moral or Civic?

Erickson and Thompson (2019) frame reasonableness as an important civic educational goal. They point to gridlock in the legislative process as a consequence of an unreasonable political culture. Their conjecture is that an emphasis on reasonableness early in life will pay dividends for political stability in the long run. It is plausible to imagine that if young children internalize traits of reasonableness early in life we will get a better political culture in return. However, should we think that these political goods reflect *the reason why* early childhood educators should promote traits such as perspective-taking and a desire for the common good? It seems both more intuitive and more justifiable to view the traits preschools ought to instill as part of a broader *moral* education; one that understands political morality as but one part of the reasonable, appropriately conceived. While I do not think that the authors explicitly reject this latter view, and could even accept such a view without serious change to their proposal, I believe an account of the place of Rawlsian traits of reasonableness within a broader picture of moral and civic education could help preschool teachers better understand why they should support the promotion of the former.

On the one hand, Erickson and Thompson (2019) claim that their concept of reasonableness is intended to be broad, with the idea that additional traits of reasonableness could be identified and accounted for in further work (p. 2). On the other hand, their *justification* of the reasonable is “in alignment with Rawls” (p. 2). People should be reasonable for the reason that they have different worldviews, and arriving at an overlapping consensus/common good among these different worldviews increases political stability.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, by them aligning with Rawls, I think that

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3 In various places in the text, Erickson and Thompson (2019) argue that reasonable political deliberation should lead to the “common good.” Rawls (2005) explicitly states that reasonable deliberators are not moved by an interest in the “general good” but in fair terms of social cooperation (p. 50). These fair terms amount to an overlapping consensus in which a pluralistic community can endorse the same principles but for different reasons. Because the authors are in alignment with Rawls, I take them to see “common good” as equivalent to an “overlapping consensus” as opposed to a utilitarian “greater good.”

their conception of the reasonable comes across as narrower than intended. This, because Rawlsian reasonableness refers to the political domain specifically, as opposed to a moral sensibility, which can be applied to a number of different domains: political, public, private, civic, and so on.

Therefore, the authors could make their case more persuasive by being explicit in identifying the distinctive value that a Rawlsian framework brings to preschool deliberations apart from other educational theories that emphasize the inclusion of a plurality of views in public discussion. Without such clarification, the would-be educator sympathetic to reasonableness is at risk of going awry. Consider the example of children not wanting to share a toy (Erickson and Thompson, 2019, p. 4). We could reframe this conflict as a political problem in order to promote Rawlsian political morality. The “political community” of the classroom has a valuable, but scarce, resource (toys). Children are in a conflict over who gets to play with that toy and for how long (a distributive justice problem). The early childhood educator sees this conflict as an opportunity to get children to deliberate about the effects and consequences of, say, different distributive approaches. Along the way, children exercise competences related to social cooperation. Some of them make important cognitive achievements, such as realizing that if everyone insisted on what they wanted all the time, everyone would be worse off. Eventually, the class arrives at fair terms that all can accept: a distributive rule that ensures every child has an equal opportunity to play with the toy.

If successful, the teachers will have arguably had a positive effect on children “as future political actors” (Erickson & Thompson, 2005, p. 5) in a liberal pluralist democracy. Yet does the educational value of these and other laudatory interventions depend on the existence of such a political framework? I suspect that educators on board with the authors’ proposed interventions ought not to see them (exclusively) as Rawlsian, or even *political*, aims. First, the cases the authors use in their examples (toys, hatching chicks) may *resemble* political problems in the abstract, but for the people caught up in them (children, teachers), they are first and foremost *moral* problems. By “moral,” I mean interpersonal conflicts pertaining to how individual actors treat one another. In our daily interactions—in the workplace and in the home—a moral point of view calls on us to treat each other with respect and dignity. The fact that I want something, for example, doesn’t make it morally permissible to harm others in order to get it. It is morally impermissible to harm others on such grounds, even where there are no laws against it or no political authority to prevent me from doing so. When educators are working with young children, they ought to instill these norms of treatment in children irrespective of the political goods that such efforts might (or might not) generate in the long run. Or, to put it differently, political morality is not the *only* good served by instilling norms. For example, part of what it means for the early childhood educator to treat children with moral respect is to make sure that appropriate norms of moral respect are recognized and followed by all.

Second, I suspect that on Rawls’s (2005) own account, Rawlsian reasonableness is too narrow as a standalone educational

concept for early childhood. Rawls claims that the reasonable is that part of a moral conception of the person concerned with social cooperation (p. 51). Rawls emphasizes its importance for a political conception of the person. The reasonable is connected to a sense of political justice but it is not *exhausted* by a sense of political justice. Citizens also live as individuals and in associations that are not strictly political. They must be reasonable as is appropriate in those apolitical contexts, and more besides. To be sure, when the Rawlsian citizen enters into deliberations about basic public and political arrangement, they need to be reasonable *in the narrow* sense if we want to successfully “specify the reasons we are to share and publicly recognize before one another as grounding our social relations” (p. 53). But this is simply the public-facing side of a larger moral sensibility that enables us to see other people as distinctive centers of value in their own right. This moral sensibility, which includes reasonableness, is logically prior to a political conception of the person. Therefore, if all of morality is normative (in the sense that we can learn to do it better), and if we ought to educate for *political* morality, it follows that we have reason to educate for morality full stop.

This is all to say that what we take “reasonableness” to mean in the educational domain will make a practical difference for the early childhood educator. I argue that we should want preschool educators to understand reasonableness in the broader sense. In the political sphere, we call on reasonableness in order to propose cooperative principles and policies governing basic matters of justice and fairness. However, while this aspect of civic life is important, it makes for a relatively small dimension of our moral experience. Reasonableness, for example, also applies to *public morality*—to those person-to-person situations when we are called on to treat others (and ourselves) with moral respect despite disagreement or conflict. Accordingly, the reasons that educators have (and the reasons they should give to their students) for promoting reasonableness traits are not limited to the idea that, by acquiring such traits, children will be better citizens—better public reasoners—in the future. Rather, children should acquire an understanding of what it means to treat other persons *as* persons.<sup>4</sup>

Reasonableness understood as a broad moral power that informs political morality expands the range of situations that the early childhood educator can recognize as opportunities for fostering traits of reasonableness. It also expands what *counts* as a reasonableness trait. Consider the child who makes a lying promise to another student in order to get the toy (“I will give it back in just a minute”). Lying does not appear to fall under the kind of situations that the authors have in mind. There is no encounter with “rational views dissimilar from one’s own” (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, p. 2) nor a plurality of interests that require accommodation. Nor is there a burden of judgement in play: any reasonable person would think the lie was wrong. Nonetheless, many of the educational interventions that the authors recommend in their paper

4 Note that another positive feature of the broader approach is that the justification of structured deliberation does not depend on the empirical claim that it will make young children reasonable citizens in the long run.

would be welcome in this case. The educator would be well advised to do more than simply direct the child not to lie or manipulate others. They could take the conflict as an opportunity to encourage the class to deliberate on the reasons why it is wrong to lie and if there are ever circumstances where lying is appropriate, and so on. They could encourage children to share what it feels like to be lied to. Reason-giving, moral sensitivity, and perspective-taking: all are candidate traits of reasonableness under this broader conception. They may not translate fully into the context of political morality, but they more fully capture what it means to educate for reasonable *persons*.

Am I arguing that we should just drop Rawlsian reasonableness and focus on the moral? On the contrary, setting out this broader context prepares the way for a distinctive argument for why Rawlsian traits of reasonableness matter. I suspect that there are several candidate reasons. But here is one: Learning how to show respect for persons when it comes to noncontroversial matters such as sharing a favorite toy can be motivationally challenging for children. Epistemically speaking, it’s not too hard to recognize what the right thing to do involves. Children often know that they ought to share, they just don’t want to. Learning how to show respect for other persons in a diverse society, however, is a more complex matter. Part of what it means to be a moral agent in a diverse society is to realize that other moral agents should be free to disagree with us on things we care deeply about. This means that, especially in pluralistic situations where there may be little common ground, we should strive to keep cooperating. One way to do this is to promote an early awareness of just how diverse in its moral perspectives a flourishing democratic society can be. Not every moral conflict in the classroom needs to be framed in this way, but there will surely be some that fit the bill. An awareness of moral diversity (or “the fact of pluralism/fact of disagreement”) and other Rawlsian reasonableness traits like it are potentially key to the overall moral preparation of person’s living in a democratic community.

### Reasonableness and Epistemic Abstinence

I claimed that one reason why reasonableness is a distinctively valuable educational aim is because engaging in respectful debate with other citizens in a plural society can be epistemically challenging. One way to get around the challenge recommended by a Rawlsian approach—to deflate the deliberative tensions, as it were—is to stop thinking about deliberation as a search for the “right” or “true” answer in the first place.

This is where political reasonableness really comes in. The reasonable citizen values, for its own sake, a society in which all can benefit. Nonetheless, there is an important difference between a reasonable *political* agent and a reasonable moral one. The reasonable political agent will propose that we allocate playtime in accordance with principle X because they anticipate that others (themselves included) will be able to endorse that allocation even if everyone’s reasons for agreeing to that principle are different (for example, some agents want equal time because they were taught at home that equality matters, while some agents want equal time because they know that if they can’t get to

an agreement otherwise, they are likely to get no playtime, while others simply value equality for its own sake). This is what makes political principles “freestanding” for Rawls. Political justification aims to be “reasonable,” not “right” or “correct.” This is sometimes called an “epistemic abstinence” account of public deliberation (Raz, 1990). The reasonable *moral* agent will propose that we allocate playtime in accordance with principle X because they believe that they can justify that allocation to all others in terms of shared reasons that all could recognize and accept. Maybe they are mistaken in their belief. Regardless, they are committed to finding an action/policy/principle that can be *justified to everyone*. That is to say, they believe that their moral judgement has validity and that through reasoned discourse with others, they can redeem that validity.

While the difference is philosophically subtle, the moral psychology involved is quite different. In the political mode, I check what I believe to be true or right, and I instead propose/endorse principles that I anticipate others (myself included) will also endorse. While I may think these principles are false, I view them as reasonable because they can win the support of others based on their own private reasons, my own included (Rawls, 2005, p. 143). In the moral mode, meanwhile, I believe the principle to be justifiable, and I’m willing to test out that belief, submitting it to critical scrutiny by diverse others.

To be sure, children should be prepared to occasionally bracket what they believe to be true, good, or right in plural contexts. This is desirable both as a political *and* a personal trait. But I think that it would be a mistake to leave children with the impression that *all* political conflicts can or should be solved via social cooperation. As moral agents, we have an intuitive sense that our actions should be justifiable to an audience of our peers—that we act on reasons that all others in a relevantly similar situation could accept, or at the least not reasonably reject (Habermas, 1990; Scanlon, 1998). Learning about the justifiability of our actions requires opportunities for epistemic deliberation with others—a search for truth or rightness. The epistemically abstentious political morality that the early childhood educator is being asked to aim for is based on an *institutional* separation between a citizen’s personally held views on the good life and the public sphere (Habermas, 2006). It is an institutional separation that mature moral agents need to be aware of when they engage in public reason in spaces such as the courts. But we ought to be careful not to *institutionalize* the developing child’s moral conscience. The question that needs to be carefully considered is how appropriate it is, developmentally speaking, to teach young children to view epistemic abstinence as a basic feature of their moral reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

5 “The liberal state must not transform the requisite institutional separation of religion and politics into an undue mental and psychological burden for those of its citizens who follow a faith. It must of course expect of them that they recognize the principle that political authority is exercised with neutrality towards competing world views. Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations” (Habermas, 2006, p. 11).

One might argue that the early childhood educator is in no danger of doing anything like this. We are simply asking that they encourage children to appreciate how people from different backgrounds and experiences will view political issues such as immigration and gender representation differently. But if the educator is supposed to be aiming for genuinely Rawlsian traits of reasonableness it is not enough that children be exposed to, and learn to appreciate, different points of view. There is a plethora of deliberative theories that would endorse the same practices. Success in preparing children for life as reasonable Rawlsian citizens means future citizens who practice epistemic abstinence.

One could again stress that all we are asking the preschool educator to do is foster traits of reasonableness in a very basic sense. It does not require them to get into thorny questions about the epistemic nature and limits of public justification. As the authors are careful to point out, after all, their examples “showcase an awareness of moral complexity and epistemic humility (forwarded as potential, but not here defended as necessary, traits of reasonableness) in *developmentally appropriate ways*” (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, p. 8, emphasis mine). However, given that the preschool educator will be engaging with children on political issues, they are likely to encounter situations where children are sincerely giving the best epistemic reasons they have for their moral and political beliefs. These reasons may be received as plain wrong by other students (perhaps such reasons come across as offensive or controversial). It isn’t clear to me what the preschool educator aiming for Rawlsian reasonableness should do in such situations. Encouraging the classroom to critically assess controversial reasons as a deliberative community seems to be too epistemic a way of framing deliberation to pay the political dividends the authors want. But encouraging children to bracket the concept of truth or rightness and aim for social cooperation seems to introduce the very institutionalization of moral consciousness that I’m concerned about. My view is that the epistemic route is the right way to go (Martin, 2018). But if not, a specifically Rawlsian conception of reasonableness requires saying more about the extent to which, and the ways in which, epistemic abstinence is developmentally appropriate (or not) in the preschool classroom.

## Conclusion

I want to underscore that my points are aimed at further clarity and elaboration, motivated by a promising project. Erickson’s & Thompson’s paper is to be lauded for the moral seriousness it accords to both young children and the professionals responsible for their care. My modest suggestion is that a more detailed account of reasonableness as an educational concept will make this proposal both more convincing to, and more helpful as a guide for, the early childhood educator.

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