

Response to Mr. Owens' Paper

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IN HIS CELEBRATED WORK *AFTER VIRTUE*, POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER ALASDAIR MacIntyre articulates an Aristotelian ethical framework that he claims makes sense of the incommensurable moral language used in contemporary culture wars. This framework is made up of three elements that are integral to a moral political scheme: an understanding of human nature as it is, a vision of human nature as it is to be, and the means by which men and women pass from one state to the other. The understanding of human-nature-as-it-is is informed by our conception of human origin and value. Human-nature-as-it-is-to-be involves for MacIntyre an enduring commitment to a *teleology*, the belief that there are proper ends to which we are called to aspire. Finally, ethics are those moral rules that help us navigate our way from human nature as we find it to the fulfillment of our human teleology. Only by situating our ethics between what we are and what we are to be can we make sense of moral rules and language.

While MacIntyre wrote *After Virtue* to criticize certain Enlightenment philosophical projects and call for a renewed defense of more traditional ethics, his formulation is sufficiently broad to allow other readings and adaptations. In this first section I will apply MacIntyre's framework to Ray Owens' paper, which, from an African American Christian perspective, offers an articulation of human nature as it is, human nature as it is to be, and the ethics that will help us make the transition from one to the other. However, though I find Mr. Owens' formulation of Martin Luther King's ethical system helpful, I will use the case of vouchers and charter schools to suggest that while Owens is persuasive in his articulation of ends (human nature as it should be), he is not as successful in his ethical pronouncements linking ends to means. Finally, I will briefly address Mr. Owens' argumentative strategy regarding his intended audience and question his framing of the urban public education crisis entirely in terms of racism.¹

¹ On the third page Mr. Owens acknowledges that other factors besides race play

IMAGO DEI AND THE QUESTION OF VALUE

In the paper's articulation of Martin Luther King's concept of the *imago dei* we find a powerful expression of what it is to be human as well as a conception that gives enormous dignity and value to the human person. In a religion that posits an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God, it is difficult to imagine a higher compliment than the creation of humanity in God's image and the event of the Incarnation.

Given this conception of human-nature-as-it-is, Mr. Owens' three conclusions based out of King's thought about human nature follow quite nicely. First, men and women have inestimable value. Second, this value is realized in large part through relationships with each other. We are unified in our common heritage as beings created by God and we can with Aristotle agree that one who lives estranged from community is either a god or a beast. Finally, we find some affinity to God's freedom in our own ability to deliberate, make decisions, and exhibit responsibility in our decision-making. This conception of human nature, with perhaps an implied notion of the sinful nature that makes pathologies like racism possible, provides us with a workable foundation with which to begin thinking about ethics in general and inequalities in education in particular. The question remains as to what sort of telos Mr. Owens' provides us with in his paper.

While not as explicit as his description of King's Christian anthropology, there is definitely an identifiable intermediate telos to be found in Mr. Owens' work. I write intermediate because most Christian thinkers who care to express themselves in teleological terms refer to our ultimate telos in terms of an eventual consummation of our relationship with God. Whether this is described in Catholic terms as the Beatific Vision or as in the Westminster Confession's assertion that the chief end of man is to know God and enjoy Him forever, Christianity has attempted to replace Aristotle's eudemonia with some version of eternal relationship with God as humanity's ultimate telos.

Nevertheless, part of achieving that telos of relationship with God requires the exercising of Mr. Owens' third capacity from our identity as *imago dei*, namely freedom. As Owens and others writing about these subjects have

into the debate on urban education. Despite this caveat, however, he never returns to these other factors and in effect claims that race is the fundamental paradigm from which to approach this issue.

made poignantly and painfully clear, the damage that is done to young persons already facing formidable challenges by denying them a quality education is devastating and often irreversible. Thus we can find in Mr. Owens' paper an articulation that a necessary though not sufficient component of achieving one's telos, whether explicitly Christian or otherwise, includes what he calls the "core characteristics of humanity—equal worth, unity, and freedom" as applied to our system of education.

This application of core principles, together with an understanding of what comprises human nature, is the arena wherein ethical judgments can coherently take place. In the abstract ethics are not impossibly difficult, particularly as in this case when a clear, compelling human anthropology is coupled with a believable and achievable human telos. Nevertheless, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details, and it is in the business of appraising the means of achieving human goods that difficulties most often arise. One useful lens through which to look at this problem is with the teleological language of ends and means.

ENDS AND MEANS

Despite the sordid racial history of our own society, one aspect of Mr. Owens' paper highlights a partial success for racial equality and justice. That is, Mr. Owens' articulation of human nature and his call for racial equality are no longer controversial in its abstract formulation. While this may seem like small comfort, it was not too long ago that academic theories contesting the moral and scientific arguments behind racial equality were commonplace. Books like *The Bell Curve* notwithstanding, it is no longer acceptable in public discourse to promote inequality as such.

Yet from the point of view of those who see themselves fighting an institutional racism, this is a hollow victory. The racism that was formerly overt has merely changed its tactics and is now more difficult to identify. What overall acceptance of racial equality indicates is that in the current racial atmosphere arguments have shifted from debates about ends to debates about means. No one should be considered a legitimate voice in public discourse about education who denies the serious inequalities and injustices reflected by the plight of our urban schools. The problems highlighted by Mr. Owens' paper regarding inner-city school funding, decrepit school fa-

cilities, and difficult urban social factors are not reasonably denied. Nor is Mr. Owens' historically justified linkage between our country's racial history and the economic and education quandary in which many African Americans find themselves.

There are, however, facets of the paper that are much more contestable, and of course one need not be a closeted racist in order to contest them. In the remaining sections of this essay I offer some critical comments in the hopes that by evaluating some of the arguments regarding Mr. Owens' means and argumentative strategy, we can more clearly ascertain how to achieve the ends of racial equality and educational excellence.

A conceptual weakness of the paper is directly related to one of Mr. Owens' strengths. In his well-meaning attempt to make as robust a case as possible for eliminating injustice in inner-city education, it may be that Mr. Owens tries to do too many things. In addition to his laudable exposition of Martin Luther King's theology and anthropology, one finds in Mr. Owens' work sections describing the structural and social ills of urban life, the *historical* roots of racism in education, the *contemporary* manifestation of racism in education, the links between school funding and educational achievement, the continued need for affirmative action programs, the prospects of urban renewal, and not least important, an empirical, ethical, and comparative look at school choice. Mr. Owens' writings on these different subjects are also accompanied by an under-articulated view of an inherently racist America that too easily divides the country into wealthy, white suburbanites interested only in protecting their own children and perpetuating racism, and their inner-city minority victims.

This is not to say that these various sections are unimportant, indeed some of them are integral to Mr. Owens' larger project. However there is so much going on and so many assumptions that have been left undefended in order to move on to the next point that the paper's primary purpose, as I understand it, is obscured amidst a host of issues that are not integral to the goal of achieving educational equality for inner-city youth. This is not the place nor am I the writer to respond to many of Mr. Owens' claims and arguments. Nonetheless, using Mr. Owens' own reasoning, I intend to examine in closer detail what I perceive to be a serious defect in Mr. Owens' treatment of school choice. This defect exposes a potentially significant obstacle to the success of the project Mr. Owens encourages us to make our own.

THE ETHICS OF SCHOOL CHOICE

Mr. Owens rightly identifies vouchers and charter schools as two of the most prominent, and controversial, solutions offered to our nation's educational ills. In his empirical appraisal of whether vouchers and charter schools have been successful in improving student achievement, he makes two very significant admissions.² The first admission is that the jury is still out on whether vouchers and charter schools work in achieving their goals and the second admission is that "across the board" parents of charter school children are happy with the programs their children are in. The next move Mr. Owens makes is important. Because the data are inconclusive empirically, Mr. Owens argues that school choice must be evaluated and ultimately rejected on an ethical basis.

This then implies that there is something morally wrong with the approach of school vouchers and charter schools. How does Mr. Owens support this claim? His argument is that school choice is "inherently" unable to achieve educational equality for all African Americans (18). He supports this argument by noting that because school vouchers are voluntary many schools can and will reject minority applicants. In addition, he notes that state law limits the number of charter schools, thus ensuring that only a few students will enjoy their benefit (18). Mr. Owens also uses a comparative study in New Zealand to argue that competition will not benefit public schools (19).³ Finally, Mr. Owens argues that school choice initiatives reinforce racist ideology because they place a burden on minority families to seek out quality private schools when this is not an issue for wealthy white families (20).

We might sum up the arguments by saying that school choice measures are unethical because they will not work to achieve the goal of a better education for minority children. In other words, school choice *might* work if there were better guarantees that minority children would not be rejected from private schools, and it *might* work if legal limits to the number of char-

² As I have noted in the text, I am not suitably equipped to evaluate Mr. Owens's empirical claims. I leave the evaluation of his empirical data to others.

³ A stronger case needs to be made that New Zealand's racial situation is analogous to our own.

ter schools were not so constrictive. Contrary to the assertion that school choice initiatives are *inherently* unethical, it would seem that their ethical status depends on whether or not they can provide a better education for minority students; their ethical status depends on whether the initiatives work. This question of whether school choice “works” is an empirical question, and it is the same question that Mr. Owens has already admitted is still undecided. We have, it seems to me, a rather strange case in which an empirically undecided question is moved to the realm of ethics, where it is then declared unethical on the basis of questionable empirics. It is entirely unclear as to how school choice is unethical in and of itself apart from evaluating how well it works. As already stated, the jury is still out.

Mr. Owens also contends that because school choice cannot improve education for “all or even most black urban students” it is an ethical failure. Leaving aside the questionable judgment that school choice cannot have a positive impact on more than just a few, this contention invites at least two responses. First, I am not aware of any school choice proponent who argues that charter schools and school vouchers can unilaterally save the mess that is our public school system. The question is not best framed as one between “only public schools” or “only school choice.” The very language of “choice” implies that advocates of school choice see their initiatives as *part* of the solution.

This leads to the second response. If the standard of a successful and ethical program of public education is that it must meet the needs of all students, then it is unclear why Mr. Owens so faithfully sticks with an institution that for its entire existence has grossly failed the African American community. The policy initiatives Mr. Owens points to in the conclusion of his paper, more school funding, continued affirmative action, and aggressive urban renewal, may, or may not, lead to a public system that meets the needs of all of its students. The plain facts are that we will not know how these proposals will fare given Mr. Owens' noble but very high standard, until we have experimented with them for a number of years in various cities and communities.

Why not grant the same experimental latitude to school choice measures? This question becomes especially acute when one considers that while national polls show roughly half of the population supports various sorts of school choice, this percentage rises when the sample is limited to parents of public school children, and rises yet more when reduced to in-

ner-city and minority parents.⁴ It is odd that Mr. Owens does not address the fact that the most fervent support for school choice initiatives comes from minorities. He would strengthen his paper by incorporating this aspect of the issue into his argument, if only to explain why so many parents who have such an important stake in education policy disagree with his positing of school choice as unethical.

Mr. Owens' final and most important objection to school choice is that at heart it reflects a racist perpetuation of a segregated society. This is so because rather than demanding quality public schooling for children everywhere, school choice advocates would force minority urban families to hunt for quality private schools, a burden not faced by wealthy white suburbanites. There is nothing intrinsic to a school choice philosophy that requires its advocates to let public schools off the hook. School choice need not be an either/or dichotomy, and there is nothing incompatible with supporting school choice initiatives while *at the same time* supporting Mr. Owens' own policy initiatives of increased school funding, affirmative action, and urban renewal. In fact, it would not be surprising if a significant majority of urban families did support all of these solutions. Of course, the systemic change that Mr. Owens is calling for will require more than the support of those who will most immediately benefit from it.⁵ Given the breadth of support it will take for a substantial improvement to be made in education, Mr. Owens must appeal to the very constituency of white suburbanites who have perpetuated the problem. It is to this issue that I now turn.

STRUCTURAL RACISM AND PERSUASION

One of the consistent themes of Mr. Owens' paper is that underlying our society's problems of education and race is "a system of structural inequi-

⁴ For national poll information, see the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, May 18–June 11, 1999. For support for school vouchers in Massachusetts among public school and minority parents, see the March 2000 poll conducted by the Pioneer Institute, available on 10/01/2001 at <http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/policy/piodrct8.cfm>. A poll finding similar results in Kansas is available at <http://www.heartland.org/education/juloo/polls.htm>. See Gallup's polls on the issue as well at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indeeducation.asp>.

⁵ Though importantly Mr. Owens rightly points out that everyone has a stake in the renewal of our urban neighborhoods.

ties that privilege the narrow interests of white suburbanites” “grounded in a racist view of humanity” (2). He links the racism that led to Jim Crow and segregation following the Civil War to the abhorrent conditions present in many urban school systems (3). It is asserted that “overwhelming white resistance to school desegregation efforts prevented any real progress from taking place” and that “white America” has opposed equality in education for minority children (14–15).⁶ Finally, Mr. Owens writes that “history has taught us that parents and school leaders in predominantly white schools are willing to go to great lengths to ensure that black enrollment is kept at a minimum in their schools” (18).

The solution can be achieved by “dismantling the ideology of racism and the view of humanity that it embodies” (3). This will involve uncovering, uprooting, and replacing racist ideology with a “morally sound perspective,” namely something like King’s view of humanity that I addressed in the beginning of the paper. I conclude this paper by questioning this commitment to framing the issue of inequality in urban education solely in terms of structural and underlying ideological racism.

While I believe there is a strong argument to be made countering Mr. Owens’ characterization of America as a nation still steeped in racist ideology and dividedly facily into white wealthy suburbs and poor black cities, I will not engage in that argument.⁷ For the purposes of my argument I will concede for the sake of argument that there still exists an overwhelming pervasive racism in America. Even if such a description were accurate, I contend that the key to revitalizing the educational opportunities of minorities in urban settings does not lie with uncovering, uprooting, and replacing moralities. What can I possibly mean by this strange statement?

⁶ Mr. Owens goes on after this quotation by describing the reaction of many Southern whites to the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education*. Reprehensible as those reactions were, it is misleading to support a general claim about “white America[s]” purposive resistance to racial equality *now* by describing the regional reactions of Southerners in the 1950s *then*.

⁷ This is for a couple of reasons. First my academic area does not cover race or political psychology. In addition, given today’s racial climate within the academy, it would be awkward, to say the least, for a white, middle-class suburbanite to challenge an African American student’s appraisal of contemporary racism, particularly if that student specializes in issues of race and society.

It is this. Earlier I suggested that the political and racial climate in contemporary America is such that no one could legitimately claim that racial equality was not important (a normative truth), nor could they claim that America's inner cities have adequate school systems (an empirical truth). If I am correct, then the key to persuading middle and upper class citizens of all races, cities, towns, and suburbs is not to frame the issue in terms of a racist society continuing to hold down oppressed minorities. This approach, *even if it represents reality*, will bog down in debates regarding racism and white guilt, complicated by knee-jerk reactions from conservatives who will resist such a characterization. In other words, the intermediate end of persuading the nation to achieve the larger end of better education will be defeated by the means of framing the issue primarily in terms of racism.

The key is to persuade enough citizens that their stated ideals (which may or may not be sincere) do not match up with the realities of inner-city education. Those who are sincere should rally to the cause and those who are not can be shamed into participating, or at least staying out of the way. After all, the gains made through the passage of the Civil War amendments, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and civil rights legislation did not aim primarily at ridding our land of underlying racist ideologies. They sought, first of all, real, measurable, and concrete improvements in the lives of African Americans: freedom from bondage, voting rights, affirmative action, to name a few. Any effect they have had on the racist attitudes of American citizens has followed from the concrete achievements of those movements.

More importantly, the resort to a racism paradigm is unnecessary given the rich moral resources available to ethicists such as Mr. Owens working from African American history and Christianity. Indeed, the most powerful and moving arguments in Mr. Owens' paper are his moral arguments in the beginning and conclusion of his paper. I do not wish my more critical comments to discolor my overall appreciation for Mr. Owens' project. He has rightly identified an issue of paramount moral concern and has offered us a theological framework within which to understand and reason about the injustice that afflicts our inner-city youth. I am heartened to know that scholars of Mr. Owens' caliber are calling on all of us to make good on our moral and religious beliefs. That he has combined an excellent theoretical grounding for such beliefs with an impassioned challenge to examine the means of putting these beliefs in action is reason enough to be encouraged about the future of race relations in general and urban education in particular.