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Sexual Ideology and Schooling by Alexander McKay

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One of the pearls of wisdom I received when a mere boy, was that one should never discuss matters of religion or politics with others since this would inevitably give rise to disagreements as well as mutual ill-will. It was however, deemed unnecessary to give the same sort of advice concerning discussions about sex since in those tight-lipped days one did not, at least in front of the children, acknowledge the existence of such goings-on. In these more talkative days however, the subject matter of sex provides all manner of expert with an endless supply of material. Nevertheless disagreement and ill-will are in no way diminished despite this more liberal outlook. And when it comes to sex education ill-will veers towards the apoplectic. Alexander McKay's *Sexual Ideology and Schooling* recognizes the deeply controversial nature of what he calls sexuality education, but in no way does he accept as wisdom, the idea that human sexuality should be treated as a non-discussable item within the curriculum of public schools. But how can coherent and defensible programmes about human sexuality be provided without taking sides on various conflicting views about the nature and function of sexuality within human life?

One answer to this question has been to adopt what McKay calls the "Bare-Bones Approach"(p.88). This approach, which is the educational administrator's version of "safe sex", avoids any topics which are controversial within the community at large. Programmes which reflect this approach tend to reduce subject content to safe issues such as reproductive biology and virology. While this may avoid controversy, it also has the unfortunate feature of not fostering students' deliberative powers on matters of significance within their lives. As far as McKay is concerned, the Bare-Bones Approach to sexuality education is a non-starter.

If we cannot take the safe road of non-controversiality, does this mean that we must choose between a Restrictive approach to teaching about human sexuality or a Permissive one? These two approaches are based on two different and conflicting evaluations of the role of sexuality within human life. What McKay calls the Restrictive ideology, is historically connected to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and tends to take a rather dim view of any sexual conduct disconnected from marriage and procreation. Besides, sex is a rather nasty business in any case, and is in need of control by rules which are "absolutist", i.e. of the always-do or never-do variety. It is easy to see how this sort of ideology gives rise to sex education

programmes which seek to persuade students to practice sexual abstinence, not only because it conforms to certain ethical norms, but also because it is viewed as the best means of avoiding unwanted pregnancies as well as sexually transmitted diseases. When however, we turn to McKay's version of a Permissive ideology, we see that its evaluation of human sexuality is more favourable. The Permissive outlook regards sex as either benign or a positive force. In the latter case, sex is able to provide pleasure, contribute to self-fulfilment, and foster psychological adjustment.(p.52) Ethically, a Permissive ideology does not stress fixed rules concerning sexual conduct but emphasizes mutual consent, pleasure, and respect. While McKay sees the fit between a Restrictive ideology and its educational programmes as especially close, the effect of a Permissive ideology on sexuality education is more diffuse(p.77) although it does tend to "favour what is commonly referred to as comprehensive sexuality education".(p.64) That is, it tends to favour supporting an education that includes topics that have historically been omitted from the curriculum,e.g.homosexuality. Perhaps then, we could characterize the main difference between the two approaches to sexuality education by saying that a programme based on a Restrictive ideology fosters conformity to certain rules about sexual conduct, while one based on a Permissive ideology fosters a student's ability to make choices concerning sexual conduct.

When McKay considers the question of which of the two approaches to sexuality education we should adopt, he says that one cannot make a choice based upon a conclusive demonstration that one ideology is superior to the other. He takes the view that "sexual ideologies correspond to complex socially derived assumptions rather than a set of value free objective facts which can be easily demonstrated."(p.95) McKay sees this as providing "an initial foundation for moving away from an intellectual and sociosexual framework that pushes us to wage the war of ideological superiority towards a more pluralistic acceptance of diversity."(p.96) But, we may ask, is it necessary, in order to support "a more pluralistic acceptance of diversity" to adopt a sceptical outlook on claims about the nature and function of human sexuality? I think not. For acceptance of diversity only requires, as a bare minimum, tolerance of those others with whom one disagrees. The virtue of tolerance does not require scepticism about achieving some truths about sexual conduct; it only requires that we regard others with whom we differ as being neither knaves nor fools. Firm convictions then do not preclude having a tolerant outlook.

Perhaps a more fundamental reason McKay has for not basing sexuality education on either the Restrictive or the Permissive ideology, is that even if it turns

out that one of them is right we are nevertheless unlikely to achieve a consensus among reasonable people about such matters. If then, we use one approach to the exclusion of the other despite the reasonableness of the excluded outlook, we are violating important principles of a democratic polity. What, according to McKay, we need is a "democratic sexuality education" which embodies both respect for pluralism and freedom of belief, while aiming at getting students to think critically about sexuality. This, claims McKay, is not another sexual ideology for it does not call upon any substantive beliefs about the nature and function of sexuality within human life. Rather it might be viewed as "meta-ideological" since it calls only upon those principles required by a democratic and pluralistic polity.

McKay's solution to the problem of how best to engage in teaching about human sexuality, rests upon viewing sexuality education as part of a student's political education. Thus he writes that "facilitating the ability to deliberate between divergent points of view is a fundamental component of political socialization in a plural democracy".(p.150) In doing this he avoids the accusation that he is making an ideological claim about the good of autonomy; he is only making claims about the sort of capacities needed by citizens in a democratic and pluralistic polity. However, a question does arise as to the range of "divergent points of view" that need to be considered as well as the range of topics. McKay does consider as possible topics such matters as sexual orientation, gender relations, and sexually transmitted diseases. But what about issues such as paedophilia, necrophilia, and bestiality? Are the latter topics to be excluded since no point of view on their behalf can present itself as reasonable? Or is it the case that unlike sexual orientation, such topics do not as yet, have a political significance worth considering? Moreover, even if a topic does have current political significance, which divergent points of view are to be considered? Is there only one way of arguing in defence of, say homosexuality and only one way of arguing against it? And if there are multiple arguments on one side of the fence, does this reflect possible disagreements on a deeper level? Should these also be brought into focus? Although answers to questions like these can have an important impact on the content and manner of sexuality education, it is unfortunate that McKay does not consider them.

There is yet another significant omission in McKay's examination of sexuality education. Given the recent attention that has been given to virtue ethics it is surprising that McKay does not consider the possible bearing that virtues such as temperance and justice can have on the content and manner of sexuality education. Is there any place to be found for the non-reflective elements which Aristotle calls ethical habituation? Or does McKay's emphasis on the fostering of the ability to

deliberate between divergent points of view, mean that early habituation has no significant role to play, except perhaps as an obstacle to be overcome? What is the exact character of this ability to deliberate between divergent points of view? Indeed, can we deliberate at all well about our lives without having undergone, early in our lives, a successful ethical habituation?

In raising these questions I am not at all suggesting that what McKay has done is in any way poorly done. It is not. What he has given us is clear and well argued. He has not committed any sins of commission, only those of omission.

References

Alexander McKay, *Sexual Ideology and Schooling*, London: The Athlone Press, 1998.