

CAN EDUCATION CREATE COMMUNITY?

by John E. COONS

University of California, Berkeley

The title question calls for some conceptual apparatus. Only to the extent that we can define community could we hope to show its relation to our conference theme —the private and public practice of the virtue of tolerance. Community is notoriously ambiguous, and only a partial definition may be possible; by contrast tolerance can be made clearer in concept, even if it remains very difficult in application. Along the way we shall also need definitions for both human dignity and human equality. Together these four concepts —dignity, equality, tolerance and community— may allow us to speak coherently of education's capacity to nourish community. They give no comprehensive answer to our question but promise a good start.

Tolerating Real Evil

Let us begin with tolerance, an idea that is given contradictory meanings. Often in contemporary discourse it is said to consist in an attitude of moral «neutrality» that supposedly is required by philosophical skepticism. Tolerance is thought to flow from the Enlightenment premise that no authentic good exists apart from the personal preferences of individuals; therefore, so they say, we should never judge or interfere with personal or group behavior that does not «harm» others in some material way.

Now, were the skeptical premise true, neutrality would not be an inference but a contradiction; no duty to be neutral —nor any other duty— could flow from the proposition that good and evil are arbitrary personal preferences. Neutrality would be simply one

among an infinity of arbitrary preferences. But, even were we to accept neutrality as an authentic good, it could have little weight in the practical order; humans are highly interdependent actors, and neutrality among their conflicting preferences is seldom an option. Whether we interfere in these conflicts or stand aside, necessarily *someone's* preference gets frustrated.

In reality we discover that not even the premise is taken seriously by the champions of neutrality. True philosophical skeptics are rare and practicing neutralists even rarer. Those who like to wear these labels are as quick to recognize and resent misbehavior as are the rest of us. Ironically it is this inconsistency that makes the skeptic bearable; for tolerance does not consist in abstract neutrality but in a well tempered resistance to real evil. The only conceivable ground of tolerance is the belief in a good that binds us independently of our wills. I do not mean that the successful practitioners of tolerance always grasp the terms of the real good in particular cases; all of us make honest mistakes about its objective content. All that the practice of tolerance requires is that correct moral answers truly exist and that we are obliged to seek them. Only because every rational human recognizes this obligation to search for the content of the good can individuals and society ask coherently: when two goods are in conflict which comes first and which ought to be sacrificed.

Tolerance is the diligent inquiry whether it is best to interfere with—or, instead, to allow—a particular evil (as one honestly perceives it) for the sake of preserving some (perceived) higher good that would be threatened by interference. When seriously engaged in that inquiry, persons and societies are by definition being tolerant whatever we think of their answers. For our present purpose perhaps the best example of tolerance in action is the careful application by Western societies of the constitutional presumption against official restraint upon written and oral expression. The state regularly permits the communication of bad ideas in order to preserve the fragile structure of open discourse. The responsible legislator, judge (or citizen) understands that the moral vocation of the human person is best conducted within such a free system; and our common experience tells us that everyone's freedom is gravely imperiled when the state chooses sides in the endless contest of ideas. On occasion its intervention may be necessary, but this is the rare exception. Our judiciaries establish elaborate rules to give the process of decision the proper gravity and restraint, and censorship is imposed only in extremis.

Note that the toleration of evil can be practiced in different forms and degrees. This is exemplified in the world of education. The evil can be simply *forbidden*; no school shall teach racial hatred or anarchy (zero toleration). It can be *allowed*; a private school may be permitted to teach the pernicious idea of double predestination. It can even be *encouraged*; that same school can be subsidized (perhaps because parental freedom is perceived to be a very high order value). Finally, through honest political error, an evil may actually be *prescribed* —i.e. made compulsory; as we shall see, this occurs in state education today in America (the higher good that would justify this compulsion is undiscoverable, making the result —but only *objectively* — an act of *in-tolerance*).

Tolerance, then, is the diligent effort to grasp and to realize true moral priorities; it is one aspect of the ordinary process of deciding moral issues in the objective order. This makes tolerance close cousin to the virtue of prudence; we cannot make everything exactly right, so we ask which goods come first. By definition tolerance entails the sufferance of evil; it is in this respect a negative aspect of moral judgment.

Community, Dignity and Equality

If tolerance is negative, community is positive. It is good as *such*. In the effort to define it one necessarily begins by asking what sort of beings are capable of community. Apart from a few hard core determinists, the self-proclaimed *Communitarians* agree among themselves to this extent: To constitute a true community, its members —with rare exception— must possess rationality and free will. Clusters of non-rational or non-volitional beings (e.g. fish or lemmings) could be communities only by the most remote analogy. Communitarianism, after all, is a self-conscious ideal; it is a *movement*. Infused with deliberateness and purpose, it pursues a certain state of affairs. It is only because community is a good requiring rational choice that we could be obligated to pursue it. Community is an imperative for free moral beings, hence strictly a human enterprise.

This minimal criterion has been useful to the ongoing debate about community; it has allowed would-be communitarians who represent conflicting philosophies to criticize modern culture with something of a common front. It cannot, however, ground the sort of positive theory for which most of them ultimately hope. What theory would suffice for that purpose, I cannot say; but one necessary (if possibly insufficient) element is a descriptive human equali-

ty. Community entails Jefferson's factual claim of the fundamental equality of persons (at least as a belief shared by and about members within any *particular* community). Community will probably require more, but equality will be one inevitable part.

Thus any definition will also include a descriptive conception of equality; what I will now uncover is the only understanding of descriptive equality in which I have confidence. It begins with the assertion that human equality is both related to and importantly distinct from still another concept -namely, dignity; equality and dignity can be understood only together. Each is an identifying property of free moral beings. Dignity is familiar to us from *Genesis* as the status bestowed upon the *Imago Dei*. By their created structure men and women share finitely in God's infinite intellect and freedom. Our dignity consists specifically in having reason and will. And herein lies a problem. The analogy to the divine nature is naively intended to be ennobling but becomes problematic exactly to the extent that humans vary in their intellectual power; dignity is relativized. I do not mean that Christians actually *talk* this way. No hierarchy of dignity is suggested; the *sensus fidelium* would forbid it. Nonetheless, many theologians have clearly believed that the range of our individual intellect affects the quantum of our individual capacity for the good, a conclusion which necessarily implies relativity.

This moral gnosticism is an ancient misunderstanding. Aquinas was following Aristotle when he taught that self-perfection turns upon finding the correct answers to moral questions; both men supposed that our intelligence, education and sheer luck affect our capacity for moral fulfillment. In this view dignity becomes a nasty paradox; the very human faculties in which it consists generate a gnostic hierarchy based upon accidental traits. Some of us are more dignified than others. Dignity begets indignity.

Happily the escape from this is plain and leads straight to human equality. Socrates, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and Suarez were simply wrong about who qualifies as a good person. They were, of course, correct to conclude (as the present pope emphasizes) that we are bound by natural and revealed orders of authentic goods (or correct moral answers). However, it is not in the successful discovery of these correct answers that a person is morally perfected but, rather, in the act of seeking them. The honest and diligent search that produces moral error may damage the social order, but simultaneously it perfects the fallible seeker who has tried as hard as he could to discover and serve that order. Persons

become good and holy by doing the best they can. A possible example: In supporting the burning of heretics Aquinas did an objectively bad thing; if he truly sought the correct answer he advanced his own moral perfection.

This recognition that there can be disjunction between the moral good of the actor and the good of acts in the external order saves dignity from becoming a gnostic hierarchy and simultaneously provides the definition of human equality. Like every other instance of equality, it is a relation. It is the unique relation that holds among all rational persons in virtue of their uniform capacity to achieve moral self-perfection by seeking the correct treatment of one another in specific cases. This uniform potential for moral self-fulfillment was given its implicit *imprimatur* in Vatican II which repeatedly stressed the primacy of conscience as it seeks the authentic good. The roots of this idea are at least as old as Origen and —until Vatican II— were most evident in the work of St. Alfonso Liguori. Unfortunately, it has yet to be taken seriously either by modern philosophy or natural law. The former denies that good could exist independently of human will; conversely, natural law philosophers typically reject the proposition that a mistaken good intention not only excuses but perfects. Obviously this concept will also trouble those Christians who still hold for predestination and against human freedom. Nonetheless, it is not only orthodox but, in my judgment, the *sensus fidelium*. Shortly I will show that it is also a claim which has importance independent of religious belief.

Equality and Community

In rescuing dignity from the gnostics the doctrine of equality satisfies the fundamental criterion of community noted earlier. So far my grasp of this proposition is largely intuitive; I am confident that it can be defended, but for the time being I will only assert it as follows: If community is to hold, the most marginally rational person —the most wretched and disadvantaged member— must be perceived to have a capacity for moral and/or spiritual self-fulfillment (and, conversely, degradation) that is as plenary as that of the most gifted and fortunate. In other words the belief in human equality is definitional to community. Where, by contrast, humans are perceived to stand in a hierarchial order of moral perfectibility, the brahmin and the outcast may achieve co-existence or even society; but community will elude them.

I will not try to answer once for all the additional question whether community, when properly defined, requires belief in the equality of *outsiders*. The members of some human clusters do in fact see non-members as deficient in moral potential. My present disposition is to include such self-defining moral elites within the definition but to demote them to a second class status in the taxonomy of communities. It will be convenient simply to call them «elites,» so long as that term is understood to be pejorative in our present context. My impression is that the gnostic beliefs that sustain elite groups have been on the decline in this century; few Westerners, at least, suppose that those persons outside their own family, church, race or other cluster are less capable of moral self-fulfillment. Whether this observation is correct, however, it remains true that members of self-perceiving elites are by definition incapable of belonging to any community in which perceived inferiors would be included; in specific practical matters elites may, of course, either cooperate or conflict with communities that contain moral inferiors as members.

By contrast individuals who do accept the equality of all rational humans are capable of membership in an indefinite number of particular communities. And where this belief is shared by all members, a community is entitled to the label «authentic». This does not imply that all such communities share the same ultimate purposes, life styles or rules of right behavior. Quite to the contrary, believers in human equality can cluster on the basis of disparate ideologies, religion, ethnicity, professions or the like —differences that can set them in conflict with one another. Put another way, although they are authentic, communities by definition can be *exclusive* in important dimensions. The important point is that inter-community conflict has a different meaning for those who do and those who do not accept *universal* human equality as a fact.

The world of Roman Catholicism is a useful example of the impact of this belief upon one's attitude toward ideological enemies. I will assume that the population of believing Catholics satisfies whatever other criteria might be thought necessary to constitute an authentic community (the reader may specify them). In that event, precisely as Catholics, their belief in human equality locates these individuals in two communities —one exclusive, one universal. Catholics are, first of all, a community to and among themselves; their church claims authoritative access to correct moral answers, and assent to that ecclesiastical authority is a criterion of membership. Exclusivity is no trivial matter for them. Their ortho-

doxy triggers meaningful obligation. In their own view they are bound —and non-believers are not— to give the teaching authority of their community a presumption of correctness. When engaged in the quest for correct moral answers, observance of this presumption operates as the practical threshold of the good intent that does the work of personal, subjective moral self-perfection; the believer who would meet his moral responsibility for honest inquiry cannot reject an ordinance of the Church merely because he or she has reservations.

By the same token, even honest apostasy on a serious moral issue sets the individual outside this exclusive community. The dissenter emigrates from the cluster that upholds the authority of the Church. Because that authority is vaguely defined, there will be practical disputes about who is in and who is out. But the principle is clear enough: The doctrinal emigre asserts that the ecclesiastical authority can be wrong and—in this case— is wrong; in his eyes the exclusive community that accepts that authority is deluded about its reliability. The act of emigration is thus the invitation to a new and more discerning community. It initiates a plurality of exclusive communities (even though each may aspire to the old name).

Finally, the exclusive community that consists of continuing believers also asserts the commission and duty of their Church to teach *all* mankind whatever can be known of moral truth. But does mankind, then, have a reciprocal duty to give priority to these specific moral messages because of their source? I take it that, in the Catholic view, the answer is no. Every human is already obliged to seek the objective moral good wherever he or she can find it. The unbeliever or emigre thus has the duty—the natural duty—to consider Catholicism's moral answers along with the rest; but for him they can carry no special presumption of truth. Rome is for him but one of the world's many representatives of the Tao. If there is some added element of community in this neutral didactic relation between the outsider and the Catholic believer, at first it seems very thin.

Nevertheless, note that in recognizing human equality, the Church has embraced a principle of community which renders its own particular moral answers irrelevant to the *goodness of the person*. Its commitment to equality thus entails the richly communal declaration to the outsider that, if he honestly concludes that the Church is wrong (on whatever issue), he is not only bound in conscience to *reject* her but, by doing so, he achieves the very end sought for

him by the Church itself. Even in the midst of the most intense conflict, real human connection thereby remains possible. To the insider the outsider becomes a full partner in the one essential community that consists of all moral pilgrims. And this occurs precisely when the outsider honestly refuses what purports to be the authoritative message of the exclusive community.

Nothing in this turns upon my using Catholics as my example. This relation between their exclusive community and its ideological competitors is merely one very large and vivid instance of the sub-surface harmony that is everywhere generated and sustained by the assent to universal human equality. At least in the West, this crucial belief is a cultural reality in most communities whether they are families, nations, churches or neighborhoods. The inevitable quarrels among such exclusive communities in their deepest meaning thus reduce to disputes within the human family. These convulsions, however destructive in the external order, never risk either the moral integrity of the individual or the community that is mankind.

Authentic community thus implies deep respect for the members of groups whose beliefs conflict either with accepted public values or with one's own. This is specifically a respect for *persons* and not for their ideas or practices when these are perceived as false or evil. Nevertheless, this very respect for the person is the primary guarantee that unpopular ideas will receive fair weight in the constant calculus of higher good that we call toleration. The common belief in universal human equality sets tolerance its specific mission. In the midst of their inevitable conflicts, exclusive but authentic communities perceive the social order (domestic or international) as one in which persons—all linked in the relation of equality—constantly interact through the political process to determine exactly which concessions to evil will best sustain the highest good. There will always be political losers; but in such a moral culture the losers will be less often selected by raw majoritarian power; and they will themselves be the more willing to respect and to sustain the painful and unending process of judgment that is toleration.

To recapitulate: We now have comprehensive definitions for tolerance, dignity and human equality. For community we have only a split-level and partial definition; in order to restate it clearly let us again assume that whatever group is to be tested satisfies whatever else the reader thinks necessary to the status of community. On that assumption elite communities are those that accept

the equality only of their own members; *authentic* communities are those that perceive all rational persons as equal in the sense that all have the same capacity for moral self-perfection. Conflict among authentic communities thus always prescind from personal moral potential.

Community, Tolerance and State Schools

The public decision to allow particular evils is more often art than science. However, the focus of our present concern is formal education, and here our conceptual framework actually yields some answers. The first of these involves the specific function of tolerance in regard to state schools.

When exercised in the public order tolerance produces judgments that are embodied in a set of institutions, subsidies, duties, prohibitions and freedoms. In the arena of education a huge variety of arrangements is possible. Those institutions that teach children may or may not include schools that are owned and operated by the state and tolerance plays a role in deciding that question. Schools necessarily teach *some* set of values. State schools are no exception; and, wherever consensus sustains a unitary culture, the state school has the capacity to deliver its homogeneous message. At the same time, out of respect for still higher values, even a unitary moral culture (Japan is an example) may —up to some point defined by law— *tolerate* contrary ideologies taught by private schools.

Because of the pluralism of their cultures such toleration is not an option for the Western nations today. In these societies a minimal consensus may exist regarding honesty, observance of law, «caring» and (possibly) human equality. But, in respect to ultimate values, various important social practices, and the objective content of the good life there is simply no agreement. By definition, above this minimum consensus, there is no *social* interpretation of the good for the state to teach. State schools that promulgate any set of ultimate values thus are affirming only some private good held by those individuals who happen to operate the machinery of government. This is just as true of those state schools purporting to teach «neutrality». Even in this they do not succeed; but, if they did, they would affirm a good for which there is no supporting consensus.

In modern society the wise political decision to encourage private schools often is paraded as an act of «tolerance», but we now

see that this is an abuse of language. Such a policy could be called tolerance only if there were a consensus identifying some evil being taught by private schools that the state for some higher reason could choose not to suppress. But the modern pluralist state knows no such evil, at least so long as the private school satisfies the narrow and undemanding minimum consensus. Hence any public critique of private teaching is impossible. To put it plainly in our own terms: There is nothing that private schools are doing that needs the state's toleration; there is no evil to be suffered in pursuit of a higher good.

This presents a lovely paradox. The only evil that needs toleration is the *compulsion practiced by the state school*. The very parochial and insular message of these schools—one that is favored by a monopoly of public resources and disseminated with the prestige of public officers to a largely conscripted audience—is a message that represents the values of almost no one at all. At its best the public course of study tries to occupy the empty space between the substantive ideas that thrive in the private sector; vacuous and vanilla, its highest aim is to avoid offense to mutually opposed ideological groups. At its worse it constitutes the political triumph of one of these groups—the scientists, the Fundamentalists, the whites, the homosexuals, the Catholics, the labor unions or the educational establishment itself. In either case—whether it be pap or propaganda—what we are asked to tolerate is the ideological preference of *somebody* (teacher, church, administrators, lobbyists) who by art or luck find themselves wielding the power of the state.

It is, then, the state school that must ask our toleration. Happily there is a justification for this institution; a higher good is at stake—the authority and responsibility of individual families. So long as substantial numbers of parents would freely choose state schools for their children, tolerance would preserve that option.

But that toleration must be nuanced and qualified. At present the most flagrant evil of the state school is its conscription of the ordinary family which cannot afford to emigrate to the private sector. The existence of a state curriculum in a pluralist society is in itself merely absurd and of little consequence. It could easily be tolerated if every family—not merely the rich—could take it or leave it. Under conditions of freedom, in deference to those parents who want to use the state school, that institution could be endured. Unfortunately this criterion of family freedom is not satisfied at present in many societies, most notably my own. The bureaucracies of the fifty states impose their own educational preferences

upon all but the wealthy.

There is no technical reason that this narrow monopoly should continue. Many systems have been designed that would provide choice to the ordinary family. Some are now in operation. I personally prefer a system of family subsidies (vouchers) that are large enough to stimulate the formation of new providers for those families who are unable to add much tuition. In such a system practical freedom would also require private schools to set aside some portion of new admissions for children of low-income families. And any tuition that a private school would charge above the voucher amount would have to be proportioned to the family's ability to pay.

Regarding curriculum, discipline and teacher qualifications, private providers in such a system should remain as free as the private and religious schools are today in America. Racial discrimination and promotion of criminality would be forbidden (i.e. not tolerated); instruction in the national tongue on traditional academic subjects would be required (i.e. super-tolerated). The minimum popular consensus that exists in the West demands both of these policies, and no clear counsel of tolerance suggests otherwise. In all other respects these private institutions should be allowed to be themselves. So long as they propagate no evil that is perceptible to the government of a pluralist democratic society, no issue of public toleration is presented.

One possible exception that could raise the issue is the private school that offends the consensus by rejecting the belief in human equality. If Jefferson's «self-evident» proposition is part of the consensus, the state will have to decide whether to *tolerate* schools that falsely propagate the moral superiority of some elite community. In America the schools of certain Christian and Black Muslim churches that teach doctrines of an «Elect» might be examples (though our constitution would probably forbid a separate legal rule for them).

Whether the state should tolerate such socially definable error is best decided by trying to predict the practical effect that official tolerance would have upon the reciprocal perceptions of all the ideological communities —elite and authentic— that constitute the larger society. If society publicly subsidizes the gnostic elitism of a Mormon school, will this injure or advance the general spirit of civic cooperation? To put the question this way emphasizes that particular definitions of authentic community can demand a good deal more than mere belief in human equality. Some, indeed, would

require as a minimum that the particular cluster seeking community status be one that shows respect for and participates in the democratic process, including active and positive relations with other groups that together constitute some larger order such as the state. Because they identify a positive good or public value, definitions of this sort locate community somewhere in the hierarchy of goods which are to be considered in the decision of what (and how) to tolerate. In the context of schools, the teaching of «bad ideas» might, for example, come to be tolerated on the specifically communitarian ground that protection of free expression on the whole enhances both the belief in human equality and the acceptance of civic responsibility in all its familiar forms. These benign consequences would, in effect, become part of the definition of «community»; and the sufferance of evil would be justified upon the positive values of community now understood as an activity and not merely as a shared belief about human nature and moral perfectibility

Community and Tolerance as the Private Harvest of Public Policy

Very probably most Westerners see community vaguely in this more socially ambitious form. Indeed, they might have expected this sense of community to be my primary focus; they would ask, how might we through publicly regulated education, encourage groups within a pluralist society to tolerate in *private* life most of the errors we all think we see in the thoughts of others, so that society together may better realize all its first-order goods under the banner of community? What system of schools is most likely to inspire an appropriate *private* tolerance of the perceived errors of others who are making decisions about their own children? This remains a burning question in my own country where the tide of «melting-pot» philosophy has crested and seems about to recede. Whatever the individual American states have been doing has utterly failed to nourish community (in any sense); nevertheless, it remains very hard for American public educators to face the obvious alternative solution that I have already noted and will now revisit as my conclusion.

A system of subsidized parental choice would enhance community, first of all by taking human equality seriously. It is precisely because it respects equality that the state would at last put ordinary and disadvantaged families in a position effectively to decide where their own child goes to school. Presumably there would be schools teaching specific and diverse systems of ethnic and religio-

us values; there would also be individual schools —private and public— that succeeded as ideological «melting pots». There would be «home schools» and schools for profit. The social arguments for family choice do not stand or fall upon a prediction of the precise educational preferences of social classes who have never before had a choice. Remember that above the minimum requirements and prohibitions society has no defensible alternative but to trust the parent; this is not a counsel of toleration but of justice, for there is no socially definable evil needing toleration. So far as the state is concerned these forms of education all stand on an equal footing.

Nevertheless, prediction of parental behavior may be thought important in regard to the achievement of community in the broader and positive sense that I just noted. If that is the question, we might start by remembering the actual historical impact of American schools upon intergroup perceptions. In my country the domination of state schools by 19th Century Protestantism and 20th Century secularism has success-ively ensured that only the rich have had choice; the rest have been regularly conscripted for the «neutral» state schools, many of which until recently were legally segregated by race. Just as forced segregation was socially demoralizing, the forced association of racial, religious and ethnic groups in government schools has proved to be nothing but sand in the gears of community. The ordinary family sees clearly that its children are social cannon fodder for those better off whose own children study elsewhere. One could imagine no more effective stimulant to inter-group hostility.

However community is to be defined, its first operating rule must be this: Any society that would nourish trust in the common enterprise must first show trust in ordinary persons. Disadvantaged parents may not always make the choices that are preferred for them by skeptical educators, but —like the rich— they will at least be acting responsibly in pursuit of a good that is real and not merely a feigned neutrality. What we know historically of those American families who at great personal sacrifice have chosen private schools is that they tend to be strong supporters of the larger community. When children are sent by their families to schools run by adults who share the parents' world-view (whatever that view may be) those children are more likely to read well, vote, tolerate their neighbor's errors and stay out of jail. This holds true independently of social class.

The conclusion that freedom of choice would be an investment

in community—in every sense— seems plain in America to everyone except the operators of the education cartel. If society wants individuals, families and groups to participate in the political process and to live in peace with their neighbors, forced assimilation of the poor is not the best answer. Mutual respect among citizens requires that the state itself show them respect, specifically in a system of choice. Of course, even then every individual would remain free to foment discord or to build social bridges; far from being a static and finished thing, community is an unending and risky adventure shared by equals.

Address of the author: Prof. John E. Coons. School of Law (Boalt Hall). University of California. Berkeley, CA 94720-7200. USA.

Received: 30.VIII.1995

SUMARIO: ¿PUEDE LA EDUCACIÓN CREAR COMUNIDAD?

Cualquier definición coherente de tolerancia asume la realidad de un bien y un mal que son independientes de la voluntad humana. La tolerancia es el juicio honesto, hecho por jueces falibles, de que la supresión de un mal particular dañaría algún bien superior, como la dignidad humana, la libre expresión o la comunidad. Es una virtud personal y pública muy cercana a la prudencia.

La comunidad se define en un sentido mínimo como la creencia compartida en el hecho de la igualdad humana, entendida del siguiente modo: todos los seres humanos, racionales, aunque falibles en diversos grados, son capaces del mismo grado de autoperfección moral. Es decir, la plenitud moral se logra por el compromiso libre de buscar el bien real; quienes al buscarlo diligente y honestamente cometen errores se perfeccionan tanto como cualquier sabio moral. No puede haber auténtica comunidad con —ni tolerancia hacia— quien es considerado inferior en capacidad moral.

En su realidad social (y generalmente en su constitución) el estado pluralista moderno tiene sólo la limitada competencia de identificar las ideas «malas». El consenso público acerca de valores específicos es muy reducido. Pero, por encima de este consenso mínimo —por definición— no hay ideas que susciten la cuestión de la tolerancia. De aquí que la noción de que la sociedad «tolera» las escuelas privadas no tenga sentido. Es, más bien, la moderna escuela estatal la que suscita esta cuestión: su reclutamiento ideológico del pobre y su monopolio sobre los recursos procedentes de los impuestos son males que merecerían ser tolerados sólo si fuesen necesarios para alcanzar algún bien superior.

Tal bien que lo justificara no existe. En consecuencia, mientras que puede ser perfectamente correcto ofertar escuelas estatales para aquellos que libremente las escojan, todas las familias deberían contar con las mismas oportunidades subvencionadas para poder elegir entre aquellas ofertas educativas que cumplan con unos requisitos mínimos establecidos mediante consenso. Semejantes sistemas abiertos se están desarrollando en Europa. Estados Unidos continúa, sin embargo, contradiciendo las exigencias de la tolerancia al no tener en cuenta el hecho del pluralismo, mientras que, por el contrario, se favorece un concreto conjunto de ideas que los profesionales y grupos de presión hacen prevalecer ejerciendo influencia en los foros de decisión. Aunque ninguna de las ideas que son excluidas puede caracterizarse como un mal, quedan eficazmente prohibidas para los hijos de familias pobres y de