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Modern Political Theory

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### Education and Justice: Obligations to Those in the Future

The story of humanity is a continuum. In the present, we learn about people who lived in the past, and we make choices that will affect (hopefully for the better) those living in the future. Those that live in the future will see us as part of the past they learn about, and will make choices for the future and those that will live long after they have passed. As a species, those in the present did not personally know those that existed long before, and we will never know those that come long after us.

Because of humanity's continuous history, we do not exist in a vacuum. Just as we benefit from the innovations of the past and present, we also bear the consequences of those who acted negatively in the past. Even though no one in the present United States has enslaved people to work on plantations, we all must grapple with the nation's history of slavery and its consequences, including those which are noticeable in the present. Germans in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century will learn about the Third Reich, World War II, and the Holocaust with little personal connection to those events, but they must still come to terms with the history of their nation at that time. It is why many in our present have made efforts to rectify the injustices of the past in the present.

These scenarios then pose the question: What obligation, if any, do we in the present political association have to those that come to this political association long after us? To this question, I pose two primary obligations. The first one is we must establish and maintain a robust system of education regarding the natural world and the history of our species. This education, properly funded and accessible to all, should be appropriate for each stage of a person's

development, but unafraid of the discomfort it may pose to those who learn it. The second obligation is we must also maintain a system of justice and equality in political and socioeconomic spheres. This justice must protect individual rights, allow for individual economic mobility, and prevent significant disparities in wealth. I also posit that the second obligation cannot be effective without the establishment of the first obligation, as that education prevents manipulation by bad actors who would want to destroy such system for their own personal benefit.

### **The First Obligation: Robust Education**

The first obligation of those in the present political association for the future one is the establishment of a robust system of education about the natural world and history. What I mean by this is the following: beginning at a young age, people should be taught the natural cycles and makeup of the earth; its position in the solar system; the different environments and biomes and how different organisms survive; the laws of physics; and the methods by which proper experimentation and questioning of known theories and models is possible, among whatever else would be considered important “basic” knowledge by scientists (as I am not a scientist, I cannot properly speak to this).

In addition, starting at a young age, they must be taught the history of humanity: how did we sustain ourselves, migrate to every corner of the globe? How did we develop different languages, different customs, and exchange those customs and other ideas? How did we conceive of our obligations to one another, and establish governments that bound us to one another and looked out for that common interest? How did individual and collective actions shape our past and our present? How did we innovate and improve life up until the present? This education must not shy away from talking about the sins of humanity any less than its

accomplishments: how did we develop notions of superiority and inferiority? How did we exert force and violence over one another? Why were slavery, colonialism, totalitarianism, exploitation, and genocide considered tolerable, and why were we willing to enact these concepts on others, or do unto others what was done unto us?

This education does not have to be in-depth at the beginning. A toddler or infant will have a more difficult time understanding the functioning of the political economy or the history of race-based discrimination compared to high school student and a PhD holder. But as they grow and mature, the teaching of these historical details should be further in-depth, nuanced, and insightful. In these later times, the difficulty of the subject matter and conversation should also increase. Nor do students need to become experts in these areas. The point of such a system of education is to develop knowledge and the skills to think rationally and critically about the world around them, and combat people who would seek to suppress knowledge or openly promote ignorance. Such an education would make a well-informed, innovative, and politically conscious political association, who would apply the lessons of history and the world in their daily lives (for what good would it do if it was only learned not applied?). This association would then pass down their knowledge, innovations, and convictions to the future members of that association.

The system of education should also be well-funded and available to all. There should be very little to no barriers of access for such systems of education, including financial barriers. A student who goes to a public school ought to receive as well of an education and the resources it provides to succeed as a student who attends a private academy. The political associations that are formed are only as strong as the percentage of its members who understand its workings and are to participate and shape it to serve common benefit.

Political philosophers such as Immanuel Kant have argued for the need for humans developing their reason and intellect. Kant argued a similar idea in his 1784 essay, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in which he established that “Nature” gave reason to humanity, which meant it did not need to rely on pure instinct and could “produce everything out of himself.”<sup>1</sup> However, this did not mean humanity could sit idly by with the minimal reason that distinguished him from animals, and “[humanity] was still meant to develop its capacities completely.”<sup>2</sup> One way that humanity developed such capacities, according to Kant, was written his Eighth Proposition, which stated human history is the “realization of a hidden plan of nature” to develop a “perfect political constitution...within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely.”<sup>3</sup> The education and experience we have in the present would be available as taught history to those in the future in order for them to craft and perfect better “political constitutions.” Why would a robust education then, based on Kant’s ideas not be an effective? Kant understood that there are obligations that people in a given time period must fulfill for those living in the future. In his Eighth Proposition he also wrote “human nature is such that it cannot be indifferent even to the most remote epoch which may eventually affect our species, so long as this epoch can be expected with certainty.”<sup>4</sup> If according to Kant we cannot be indifferent, we then must have an obligation to educate ourselves on the past and provide for those in the future a system of education which will challenge and improve them.

John Locke establishes a similar obligation between parents and their children in his “Second Treatise on Government.” Specifically, Locke said reason is what “God gave us to be

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” The Center for Theoretical Inquiry in the Humanities, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://ctheory.sitehost.iu.edu/img/Kant,%20Immanuel,%20Idea%20for%20a%20Universal%20History.pdf>, 43.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 44.

<sup>3</sup> Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 50.

<sup>4</sup> Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 50.

the rule between man and man, and the common bond whereby mankind is united into one fellowship and society.”<sup>5</sup> If mankind cannot utilize reason, how would that “reason” be taught if not through its education? Locke also believes that parents have an obligation to educate children, saying it is “so much a duty of parents that nothing can absolve them from performing it.”<sup>6</sup> Because reason is the cohesive between people in a society and education is a familial obligation, I would argue that this obligation extends beyond parents and children and is applicable to all who have and need to acquire knowledge.

Another way to examine this obligation is to inquire into the benefits of the opposite condition. Would it be beneficial to leave our immediate offspring, let alone the generations in the distant future, in a state of ignorance? Unless a person sought to exert total power and domination over others, the answer would be no. A person who meanders through life without knowledge is more willing to accept and blindly follow others (usually those who have knowledge and decide to abuse it for personal benefit). If others decide to do harm, they can through those without knowledge because they will not question it. Such harms and ignorance would not be what we would want to provide to future generations, and having a robust education system would prevent ignorance and, as I have developed earlier, would provide progress and innovation to the future members of society.

### **The Second Obligation: Systems of Justice and Equality**

The second obligation of those in the present political association towards those in the future association is the establishment and maintenance of systems that maintain justice and

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<sup>5</sup> John Locke, “Second Treatise of Government,” Early Modern Texts, March 2008, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1689a.pdf>, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Locke, “Second Treatise,” 23.

equality for all who live in the association. This justice and equality should exist not only in the political sphere, but also the socioeconomic sphere.

By justice, I refer to systems which resolve disputes and disagreements, as well as providence recompense against exploitation or against actions taken that unjustly cause harm to others. By equal I mean the distribution of a given item among people is either the same (in political contexts) or extremely similar (in socioeconomic contexts). John Rawls wrote in his “Theory of Justice,” “The choice which rational men would make in [a] hypothetical situation of equal liberty... determines the principles of justice.”<sup>7</sup> This is why the two ideas are combined in the second obligation.

Rawls posited that principles of justice chosen from an “original position” behind the “veil of ignorance” would be fairest and most equitable.<sup>8</sup> The reason for this is that behind the “veil of ignorance,” a person would have no knowledge of “his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, they would make decisions and agreements with others that would benefit each of them equally.<sup>10</sup>

Arguably, those that will live in the future political association currently “exist” behind the veil of ignorance. They will not know where they will be born, as well as their standing and the capabilities they will possess. It should then be incumbent upon those of us in the present to make sure the systems and methods of justice we have in the present are fair and equitable, so when those in the future actually exist, they can rely on those systems (and they know that they can rely on those systems, too). A person who lives in the future in poor circumstances outside of

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<sup>7</sup> John Rawls, “A Theory of Justice,” BlackBoard, January 2025, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Rawls, “A Theory,” 11.

<sup>9</sup> Rawls, “A Theory,” 11.

<sup>10</sup> Rawls, “A Theory,” 11-12.

their control should have access to the same rights in court and aid systems as someone born into privilege and affluence.

This system of justice should also be protective of individual rights, and make sure that everyone who lives in the association are able to exercise them equally and freely. This is similar to the principle of “democratic equality” that Elizabeth Anderson wrote about in her essay “What is the Point of Equality?”. In that essay, she says “Democratic equality guarantees all law-abiding citizens effective access to the social conditions of their freedom at all times.”<sup>11</sup> Democratic equality also strives to establish egalitarianism and abolish oppression in numerous forms (cultural, physical, etc.)<sup>12</sup>

Although the political dimensions of such justice and equality are critical, there must also be consideration for the socioeconomic dimensions of these obligations. Both Rawls and Anderson mention this dimension, but do not explore it in-depth. Concerning economic justice and equality, Rawls says, “While the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone’s advantage, and at the same time, positions of authority and responsibility must be accessible to all.”<sup>13</sup> Even then, Rawls says that this relative economic equality (so long as it is beneficial) is secondary to the political equality and the protection of the rights and liberties.<sup>14</sup> As for Anderson, she mentions that functioning in a democratically equal state requires access to “the means of production, access to the education needed to develop one’s talents...the right to receive fair value for one’s labor, and recognition by others of one’s productive contributions.”<sup>15</sup> But while Rawls and Anderson’s ideas attempt to limit the presence

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth S. Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?” March 12, 2008, <https://www.philosophy.rutgers.edu/joomlatools-files/docman-files/4ElizabethAnderson.pdf>, 289.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, “What is the Point,” 315.

<sup>13</sup> Rawls, “A Theory,” 53.

<sup>14</sup> Rawls, “A Theory,” 53.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, “What is the Point,” 318.

of economic inequalities and remove the most profound barriers (those propped up by racism, sexism, nationalism, etc.), it does not account for most, if not all, differences.

G.A. Cohen takes a step closer to resolving this disparity, saying that a *socialist* equality of opportunity “seeks to correct for *all* unchosen disadvantages... for which the agent cannot herself reasonably be held responsible...”<sup>16</sup> The end goal would result in a “*comparable aggregate enjoyment of life*” where any differences in income would boil down to nothing more than individual preferences and tastes.<sup>17</sup> Cohen’s ideas of socialist equality of opportunity build upon the ideas put forth by Rawls, Anderson, and other political theorists; but they also best describe what I mean by socioeconomic justice and equality. If economic inequality exists between two people, it should be because of their individual tastes and preferences; it should not preclude either individual from the individual political rights and liberties they both enjoy and are entitled to; they should still receive protection, aid, and compensation if wronged; and they should still be able to participate in political society (so long as they maintain rational thinking).

Seeing as we in the present are still dealing with disadvantages based off significant differences other than individual preference (and at this point there may begin a [hopefully] temporary regression), we then have an obligation to work on improving our systems so that political and socioeconomic justice and equality is guaranteed to all of those that come in the future. Even if this goal is not completed in our lifetime, the groundwork for future improvement must be laid so that those that come us are able to continue building on our framework and establish that system of justice and equality in all walks of life.

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<sup>16</sup> G.A. Cohen, “Why Not Socialism?” Princeton University, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691143613/why-not-socialism>, 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, “Why Not Socialism?” 19.

### **Why the Second Obligation is Only Effective with the Establishment of the First Obligation**

I must stress that in order for our both of our obligations to the future political association be fulfilled to the greatest possible extent, we cannot have one without the other. But the second obligation is more effective when the first obligation is fulfilled beforehand. In order to attain Cohen's "aggregate enjoyment of life," one would need to develop their skills, which— as has been established— would include their intellect.

It is hypothetically possible for systems of justice to exist in a political association without a robust education system for the populous of that association. But the most feasible circumstances under which that could happen is if a "benevolent lawgiver" promulgated such systems and continuous generations of successors maintained such systems with fairness and without corruption or personal benefit. The people, then assured of such protections, would then go about their lives, and see no need to educate themselves on the world and history. But even with this system, it relies on these lawgivers either innately being educated or creating systems of education to teach their successors. If such a system even then requires education on events and processes, why then should such education not be extended to the populous?

Of course, the premise above also relies on the assumption of the altruism and benevolence of these lawmakers. Without such an education, an uneducated populous would more likely be at the whims of malevolent actors who would attempt to undo systems of justice and equality for their own disproportionate benefit. The uneducated masses would be called to dismantle those systems on the behalf of the malevolent actors because they would not question these ideas (and they were deprived as to how to question them). They would not know that the systems that they "agreed" to dismantle were there to protect and benefit them until it was too late. Even without such a worst-case scenario, a person who meanders through life without

knowledge is more vulnerable to accept and follow others blindly. Could we then say they have the “free will” necessary to benefit from and contribute to the innovations of society? Likely not.

Thus, it must be that in order to fully benefit from systems of justice and equality, an education of the world and its history is critical. Those that have such knowledge would be able to reinforce the systems of justice and equality that they utilize and benefit from. We must use the knowledge we have to teach future generations of mankind of what came before them, what systems of justice and equality exist, and what can be done to further perfect those systems and how to go about doing them. Those in the present must continue working on them to leave better systems of education, justice, and equality for those that come in the future. They will not only benefit from these changes and innovations, but will pick up from where their predecessors left off. Only when this transition is complete have those in the present fulfilled their obligations.

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