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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Syllabi and Social Justice

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Abstract

Many academics assert a link between the principles that ought to determine the selection of teaching material in higher education and the principles that ought to govern a just society. This article considers five models of this relationship: (1) *Identification*, in which good syllabus design is part of social justice; (2) *Isomorphism*, in which a good syllabus takes the same form as a just society; (3) *Instrumentalism*, in which a good syllabus is a means for achieving social justice; (4) *Isolationism*, which seeks to protect syllabus design from undue social influence; (5) *Interdependence*, in which the quality of a syllabus and the justice of a society depend on each other in a variety of complex ways. I conclude that *Interdependence* incorporates the most important insights of the other four models while avoiding their individual limitations.

Keywords: syllabus; curriculum; epistemic justice; decolonization; Miranda Fricker; Paulo Freire; Michael Oakeshott; Michael Walzer

Introduction

There is increasing agreement across multiple academic disciplines that processes of knowledge formation can be described as just or unjust. Scholars in Science and Technology Studies had been emphasizing the importance of "cognitive justice" or "epistemic justice" since before the turn of the millennium.[1] Miranda Fricker then introduced the idea into analytic Anglo-American philosophy,[2] leading Elizabeth Anderson to argue that epistemic justice is a virtue, not only of ethically and epistemically responsible individuals, but

[1] See, e.g., Shiv Visvanathan, *A Carnival for Science: Essays on Science, Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[2] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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also of social institutions.[3] Fricker then went a step further, arguing that epistemic justice is a constitutive condition for political freedom, and hence an essential element of social justice.[4] Boaventura de Sousa Santos thus declares that "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice."[5]

As more attention is now being paid to the relationship between epistemology and social justice in general, more attention should also be paid to the relationship between social justice and particular epistemic practices. This article is about one such practice, the determination of what material should be taught to students in higher education. The design of a particular syllabus determines what students will study during the span of a single course, while curriculum design determines what they will learn over their entire university careers. Philosophers of education already recognize that the central question of what principles should govern syllabus and curriculum design—the question of how we justify the value of what we teach—is an important philosophical question.[6] Syllabus design is an especially good example of an epistemic practice that can potentially be described as just or unjust, consisting as it does of a series of authoritatively enforced epistemic inclusions and exclusions.

Curricular design has also long been a focus of student and faculty activism. Calls to "decolonize the curriculum" have dominated in the past decade, spreading from the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement in the University of Cape Town to campuses worldwide.[7] This movement echoes calls by activists decades earlier to change syllabus design in feminist,[8] queer,[9] and other ways. In each case, correcting economic, political, cultural, and other social injustices suffered by various groups was tied to the need to change syllabi accordingly. In the humanities and social sciences, this typically involved both greater material by authors from oppressed groups on reading lists and greater emphasis on relevant injustices when studying material written by members of other groups.

Unfortunately, the language used by scholars, activists, and scholar-activists to connect the principles of social justice with either epistemic principles in general or principles of good syllabus design in particular can be quite vague. Carol Azumah Dennis, for example, asserts that epistemic and social justice are "inextricably linked," unaccompanied by any analysis what precisely this "link"

[3] Elizabeth Andersen, "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions," *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 163–73.

[4] Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Justice as a Condition of Political Freedom?," *Synthese* 190, no. 7 (2013): 1317–32.

[5] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 237.

[6] See, e.g., David Carr, "Curriculum and the Value of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 281–99.

[7] See Anuradha Henriques and Lina Abushouk. "Decolonising Oxford: The Student Movement from Stuart Hall to Skin Deep," in *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness, and Decolonising the Academy*, ed. Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 297–312.

[8] See, e.g., Linda Dittmar, "Inclusionary Practices: The Politics of Syllabus Design," *Journal of Thought* 20, no. 3 (1985): 37–47.

[9] See, e.g., Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell, "Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/Perfect," *Canadian Journal of Education* 18, no. 3 (1993): 285–305.

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involves.[10] This article is structured around five possible models that I have given alliterative labels:

1. *Identification*, under which epistemic justice simply is social justice—not the whole of it, but an integral part of it.
2. *Isomorphism*, under which epistemic principles "look like" principles of social justice, taking fundamentally the same form.
3. *Instrumentalism*, the view that processes of knowledge formation are valuable tools for achieving social justice.
4. *Isolationism*, which maintains that epistemic principles are sufficiently distinct from principles of social justice that the proper relationship between them ensures that one does not unduly influence the other.
5. *Interdependence*, which incorporates aspects of each of the four previous models by maintaining that, while epistemic principles are distinct from principles of social justice (as maintained by isolationism), epistemic and social processes nonetheless may depend on each other in a variety of important ways (several of which are emphasized by the first three models).

I will not attempt to determine which of these "five I's" best captures the relationship between epistemic principles and social justice in general. Not only is this question too large for a single article, but it also may be posed at too high a level of abstraction. Diverse principles that ought to regulate a variety of epistemic practices might have different relationships with diverse forms of justice across a variety of social contexts. The possibility that a single theory of justice is inadequate to cover all the social arenas that can be evaluated as just or unjust has been a well-known position within political theory since Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice.*[11] Scholars' newfound interest in epistemic justice may therefore require that multiple epistemic spheres be placed alongside the many social spheres that Walzer discusses. The result might be that any general theory of the relationship between epistemology and justice would be a Ptolemaic mess of spheres intersecting with spheres within spheres.

While a general theory of the relationship between epistemology and social justice will have to wait for another occasion, the more manageable question of the relationship between social justice and the specific epistemic practice of syllabus design can also be understood in terms of the "five Is." The connection between distribution of space in a syllabus and the distribution of rights, privileges, power, and goods in a society can potentially be cashed out in terms of identification, isomorphism, instrumentalism, isolationism, or interdependence. My thesis in this article is that, while each of the first four models captures important facets of the proper relationship between good syllabi and just societies, each of these, taken individually, is incomplete and potentially misleading. It is the virtue of the fifth model, that of interdependence, that it avoids

[10] Carol Azumah Dennis, "Decolonising Education: A Pedagogic Intervention," in *Decolonising the University*, ed. Gurinder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebral, and Kerem Nişancioğlu. (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 190–207, 190.

[11] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

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most of the limits of the previous models while incorporating their most important insights.

It is important to note that the question of the proper relationship between a good syllabus and a just society can be distinguished from the question of what is required for each. Yet while distinct in theory, these two questions are inevitably blurred in activist practice. Specific movements calling for curricular reform always demand that syllabi better align with a particular conception of social justice. The call to decolonize the curriculum, for example, rests on the conviction that it is a requirement of social justice to reverse the many inequities produced by centuries of worldwide domination by Europeans and their settler descendants. Even those who agree with this conviction, however, might wonder how anti-colonial demands intersect with other demands of social justice—those related to gender, sexuality, or socio-economic status, for example. While drawing examples and arguments from specific demands for curricular reform made by scholars allied with existing movements, this article abstracts from these demands to consider the best model for connecting syllabi to social justice without taking a substantive stand on the content of either.

Relatedly, it is also important to note that the phrase "social justice" is being used throughout this article in its broadest possible sense, referring to any principles proposed for the proper ordering of societies. Social justice is here used as a general concept, not a particular conception of justice, in Rawls's sense of this distinction.[12] The modifier "social" is necessary to distinguish principles for the proper ordering of entire societies (potentially including global society as a whole) from principles for the proper ordering of other, smaller scale phenomena such as university syllabi. Unfortunately, the modifier "social" has the connotation in everyday discourse of identifying a particular set of progressive conceptions of social justice over others. As I am using the term, even those who decry "social justice warriors"[13] and those (like many but not all Marxists) who have long avoided the concept of "justice" and favor other terms for their social ideals,[14] are operating under a conception of social justice. Right-wing, Marxist, and other political actors who eschew or denounce talk of "social justice" may nonetheless be interested in the connection between their social ideals and proper syllabus design.

My hope is that an analysis of the relationship between syllabi and societies that is abstracted from the specifics of concrete proposals for change in either sphere will prove useful even to those who would reject arguments framed as part of an existing movement for curricular reform inspired by a specified conception of social justice. We must also be open to the possibility that, as our understanding of the proper ordering of society changes, new movements will arise demanding curricular reform of a sort that no one is currently considering, movements that might be better served by consideration of the general principles that we share with them than they would be by something

[12] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 5–6.

[13] See Sean Phelan, "Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the Disparaging of 'Social Justice Warriors,'" *Communication, Culture and Critique* 12, no. 4 (2019): 455–75.

[14] See Norman Geras, "The Controversy about Marx and Justice," *Philosophica* 33, no. 1 (1984): 33–86.

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more grounded in the politics of our moment. While there are undoubtedly losses at this level of abstraction, it is hoped that the gains we can achieve will prove sufficient compensation.

Identification

According to William Richardson, what is at stake when we design a syllabus is "the protection or undoing" of injustice in the world as a whole, "within which the university is a core component."[15] Similarly, Ramón Grosfoguel analyzes the "global epistemic hierarchy" as one of "about fifteen global power structures" maintaining oppression in the world today.[16] This epistemological injustice is not a mere superstructure resting on a material base, but a constitutive and co-equal part of a complicated, interlocking system of hierarchies. Grosfoguel concludes that decolonizing university curricula "would make an extremely important contribution not only to the decolonization of the production of academic knowledge" but also to "liberation" as a "political project."[17]

While many agree with Richardson and Grosfoguel in identifying the reform of syllabi with the reversal of injustice, even those who do so often reject their grand claims about the centrality of curricular reform to socio-political liberation. As Robbie Shilliam points out, academics who see their syllabi as "as an interconnected contribution to global justice" often acknowledge that "the key battles ... are fought in far harsher environments than the academy."[18] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Rafael Vizcaíno, Jasmine Wallace, and Jeong Eun Annabel, for example, see their "epistemic struggle" as part of the struggle to create a more just world but admit that it is "only a small part."[19] Regardless of whether it is a small or a large part of social justice, however, all theories that treat syllabus design as a literal part of this larger whole are versions of what I am calling the *identification* model.

In the anti-colonial literature, there is widespread agreement that Europe's military invasion of the rest of the globe was accompanied by what Paulo Freire calls "cultural invasion," in which "those who are invaded come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders rather than their own."[20] The result is both external and internal (socio-political and epistemological) forms of colonialism. Internal, epistemological colonialism may then remain long after

[15] William Jamal Richardson, "Understanding Eurocentrism as a Structural Problem of Undone Science," in *Decolonising the University*, ed. Bhambra et al., 231–48, 243.

[16] Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Dilemmas of Ethnic Studies in the United States: Between Liberal Multiculturalism, Identity Politics, Disciplinary Colonization, and Decolonial Epistemologies," in *Decolonizing the Westernized University: Interventions in Philosophy of Education from Within and Without*, ed. Ramón Grosfoguel, Roberto Hernández, and Ernesto Rosen Velásquez (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 27–38, 29.

[17] Ibid., 36.

[18] Robbie Shilliam, "Black/Academia," in *Decolonising the University*, ed. Bhambra et al., 53–63, 60.

[19] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Rafael Vizcaíno, Jasmine Wallace, and Jeong Eun Annabel We, "Decolonising Philosophy," in *Decolonising the University*, ed. Bhambra et al., 64–92, 79.

[20] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Begman Ramos (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), 126.

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colonies gain their official independence. Analogous claims can be made about sexist, classist, or any other candidate forms of unjust ideology persisting independent of the material injustices that relevant groups have suffered. In all these cases, external, material injustices would not have been possible except through internal, mental processes that justified them in the minds of oppressors and oppressed alike.

Yet oppressive ideologies are objectionable not merely as aids to external social injustice, but also as intrinsic injustices of their own. When oppressive ideologies succeed in wiping out alternative worldviews that would undermine them, the result is what Santos calls "epistemicide, the murder of knowledge,"[21] something that is inherently unjust regardless of its external effects. Yet there is also a different kind of intrinsic injustice when ideologies do not entirely succeed in wiping out their challengers in this way. Those who resist internal colonization or other forms of oppressive ideology by keeping dissenting forms of knowledge alive may find themselves ignored, vilified, or otherwise marginalized because of their counter-hegemonic epistemological position. They may become victims of what Fricker calls "systematic testimonial injustice," in which individuals are morally wronged by being denied the credibility they deserve on epistemic grounds due to pervasive negative stereotypes about the groups to which they belong.[22] Tendayi Sithole describes all these forms of inherently objectionable epistemic injustice as "epistemic violence."[23]

Universities have undoubtedly played a part in the perpetuation of all these injustices over the course of their history. It is not just that they are the material beneficiaries of wealth acquired via unjust exploitation of all kinds. Universities have also been one of the agents of unjust, oppressive ideologies. Since they were among the institutional actors in perpetuating this injustice, it seems plausible that they should also be among the institutional actors to undo it. One might reasonably conclude that, just as the exclusion of certain forms of knowledge from the curriculum was an integral part of historical injustice, so too is a curriculum focused on the inclusion of these forms of knowledge an integral part of achieving justice today.

The identification model deserves credit for highlighting the ways in which university curricula have played a part in injustice. Yet the logic of parts and wholes is complicated, and we must not be too quick to assume that reversing a part of something bad will necessarily do good for the whole.

The logic of parts and wholes becomes particularly complicated when it is combined with the asymmetry of justice and injustice. As Judith Shklar argues, justice and injustice "are not perfectly matching opposites or negations of each other."[24] Shklar focuses on how, since injustice and justice are not symmetrical, even a complete theoretical understanding of justice cannot capture our experience of particular injustices. My concern here is the reverse of Shklar's own.

[21] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 92.

[22] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 27.

[23] Tendayi Sithole, "Decolonizing Humanities: The Presence of the Humanitas and the Absence of the Anthropos," in *Decolonizing the Westernized University*, ed. Grosfoguel et al., 115–34, 121–23.

[24] Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 110.

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Just as the asymmetry of justice and injustice implies that a full understanding of holistic justice does not tell us everything we need to know about particular injustices, so too does this asymmetry imply that a full understanding of a particular injustice may not tell us how to achieve justice holistically.

Taken in isolation, the identification model cannot tell us what curricular reforms, if any, would genuinely advance the cause of social justice overall. There are at least two ways in which reversing a part of a larger injustice can backfire—either by creating a comforting illusion that more of the injustice has been reversed than actually has been, or by creating new injustices that set back the cause of justice taken as a whole.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang warn us about the first of these two possibilities occurring when, in settler-colonial states, education is reformed to better reflect Indigenous intellectual traditions. They emphasize that while "decolonizing the mind is the first step" it is "not the only step toward overthrowing colonial regimes."[25] Tuck and Yang highlight the importance of Frantz Fanon's attention to particular, concrete, and material struggles for complete internal and external liberation over Freire's emphasis on education as a universal solution to the problem of internal colonization.[26] Unless stolen land, property, and cultural and political autonomy are successfully reclaimed by Indigenous people, decolonization remains woefully incomplete. The danger here is that a small part of decolonization will mistakenly be seen as sufficient on its own, metaphorically or metonymically standing as a replacement for decolonization tout court. Indeed, this admittedly important first step may even be carried out in a way that makes the next steps in the decolonization process more difficult rather than enabling them. Merely changing a syllabus, or even an entire educational system, Tuck and Yang caution, can serve as a way "to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege."[27] Full, literal, material decolonization is mistakenly thought to be redundant under the illusion that "decolonization is already completed by the indigenized consciousness of the settler,"[28] a variant of the phenomenon Philip J. Deloria calls "playing Indian."[29]

In addition to providing the comforting illusion that an injustice has been reversed to a greater extent than it has been, focusing first on a single part of an injustice such as colonialism also poses the danger of creating new injustices of its own. Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò warns against a particular kind of injustice that he calls "sociocryonics," which he defines as "the ignoble science of the cryopreservation of social forms without paying any attention to whether those to whom they belong wish to preserve, modify, or eradicate them."[30] The danger in our case is that syllabi can easily become sociocryonic preservation chambers.

[25] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40, 19.

[26] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

[27] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization," 10.

[28] Ibid., 17.

[29] Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

[30] Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst & Co., 2022), 148.

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Consider the debate among newly empowered Indigenous educators in Evo Morales's Bolivia as to whether universities should focus on technological skills or "ancestral knowledge."[31] To take this decision away from Indigenous students and educators in the name of decolonizing the curriculum would itself be a new kind of colonial imposition. The impulse on the part of non-Indigenous outsiders to insist on the preservation of Indigenous forms of ancestral knowledge, even if the Indigenous people themselves want otherwise, is analogous to the colonial practice of looting cultural artifacts so that they could allegedly be better preserved in European or settler-colonial museums.

Even if the inclusion of certain epistemic perspectives is not being imposed unjustly on an oppressed group from the outside, we must be careful that the impetus to reverse the epistemic injustices that enable and accompany social oppression does not become an excuse to silence internal dissent and practice sociocryonics from within the relevant group. Not only would such internal silencing be an assault on the autonomy of individuals, but any attempt to preserve a worldview unchallenged will prove self-defeating in the long run. As Humeira Iqtidar argues, "vehement debate" and "internal contestation" rather than sheer preservation is what keeps a tradition vibrant and alive.[32] For example, as Sharia-based law was reintroduced in Muslim societies emerging from colonialism in the twentieth century, there was widespread agreement that pre-colonial *fiqh* (jurisprudence) could not simply be reinstituted in a cryopreserved form. The widespread debate about the specific changes that were necessary is what gives modern *fiqh* its intellectual vibrancy,[33] something that any syllabus on the topic needs to be sure to capture adequately.

To his credit, Santos avoids sociocryonics by seeing epistemic justice less as a matter of preserving knowledge for its own sake and more as a matter of doing justice to those who live according to this knowledge. His primary recommendation is that, when choosing among epistemologies for purposes of making authoritative decisions, "preference must be given to the form of knowledge that guarantees the greatest level of participation to the social groups involved."[34] What this requires is not a simplistic, mechanical reversal of epistemic parts of the world's larger injustices and more of an active, inclusive, and participatory process to find a way forward that will be of greatest holistic benefit to all. In the case of syllabus design, this entails including students and educators from within and outside specific oppressed groups to determine what curricular materials are of most value to all concerned. Such a process must be careful to ensure that reversing part of an injustice at hand neither leads us to downplay other parts of this injustice nor to create new forms of injustice. The identification model, taken

[31] See Anders Burman, "Damnés Realities and Ontological Disobedience: Notes on the Coloniality of Reality in Higher Education in the Bolivian Andes and Beyond," in *Decolonizing the Westernized University*, ed. Grosfoguel et al., 71–94.

[32] Humeira Iqtidar, "Redefining 'Tradition' in Political Thought," *European Journal of Political Theory* 15, no. 4 (2016): 424–44, 424.

[33] See Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 111.

[34] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 205.

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on its own, does not provide adequate guidance in how to move forward while avoiding these dangers.

Isomorphism

It is entirely possible to reject the idea that curricular reform is necessarily a step toward social justice as a whole but still believe that it is worth pursuing for other reasons. Designing syllabi is one of the few areas where faculty members still have a relatively high degree of autonomy in increasingly bureaucratized universities. Academics who do not think that reforming their curricula is necessarily a step forward in the global struggle for social justice can nonetheless argue that it is "important that we clean up our own backyards."[35]

It may seem plausible that we should make any areas in which we wield effective control—backyards, classrooms, or otherwise—into microcosms of society as we believe it should be. To have a syllabus that takes the same form as a just society is, according to Carol Azumah Dennis, "to prefiguratively build a different world."[36] If a just society would commit itself to the principle of providing more prominent representation of previously marginalized voices, then a syllabus would need to follow the same principle for this reason and this reason alone. This is the view that I am calling *isomorphism.*

Isomorphism is compatible with the identification model if, as in a fractal, a part of justice needs to take the same form as the whole. Yet it is also compatible with the rejection of the identification model, since a good syllabus and social justice may need to take the same form even if the former is not a part of the latter. The intuitive appeal of isomorphism is obvious. It would be very surprising if the kind of curricular reforms that would do the most good in an unjust world ended up producing syllabi that take a form less like that of a just world. Isomorphism may be entirely correct about what form syllabi should take, however, without being able to justify this form as something needed for its own sake. As with the identification model, the isomorphic model may not be incorrect but rather incomplete when taken in isolation.

We use the term "justice" with reference to a very wide variety of individuals, actions, institutions, and practices. There have been many who believed that all instantiations of justice must necessarily take the same shape. Plato's insistence that a just city and a just soul have the same form is echoed millennia later by G. A. Cohen's insistence that the principles that should govern a camping trip should also govern a society's politics and economics.[37] Yet critics of this Platonist position point out that there is no reason a city should strive to be more like a just soul, or a society more like a good camping trip.[38]

[35] Barbara J. Risman and Timothy Adkins. "The Goal of Gender Transformation in American Universities: Toward Social Justice for Women in the Academy," in *Social Justice and the University: Globalization, Human Rights, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Jon Shefner, Harry F. Dahms, Robert Emmet Jones, and Asafa Jalata (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 99–113, 99.

[36] Dennis, "Decolonizing Education," 199.

[37] G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[38] Miriam Ronzoni, "Life is Not a Camping Trip: On the Desirability of Cohenite Socialism," *Philosophy, Politics and Economics* 11, no. 2 (2011): 171–85.

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Andrea Sangiovanni has identified one important family of polymorphic, anti-Platonist theories of justice as "practice-dependent." He defines a "practice-dependent" theory as one that maintains that "the content, scope, and justification of a conception of justice depends on the structure and form of the practices that the conception is intended to govern."[39] A "practice" is then defined, following Rawls, as "any form of activity specified by a system of rules which defines offices, roles, moves, penalties, defenses, and so on, and which gives the activity its structure."[40] Higher education is clearly a practice in this sense, and not the same practice as international relations or recreational camping. Practices that differ in form from one another require principles of justice to govern them that are similarly different in form because, as Rawls observes, "the correct regulative principles for a thing depends on the nature of that thing."[41]

Sangiovanni distinguishes two types of practice-dependent theories based on the kind of differences in practices that they maintain necessitate differences in governing principles.[42] "Cultural conventionalists" argue that goods acquire their meaning and value from the cultures in which they are embedded, and that these culturally contingent values in turn require similarly contingent governing principles. Walzer's influential version of this cultural theory is captured in his slogan that "when meanings are distinct, distributions must be autonomous."[43] By contrast, "institutionalists" argue that it is not culture that matters, but institutionally mediated relationships. Even though they maintain that there are culturally independent principles of objective justice, institutionalists nonetheless argue that morality cannot determine just governing principles without considering social facts about the institutions within which human beings interact. In their favorite example, the principles that should govern citizens of a sovereign state are different from those that should govern those across international borders who do not share citizenship.

Fortunately, there is no need to decide here between the culturalist and institutionalist versions of practice-dependence. University syllabi are importantly different from societies both in terms of the cultural meaning of the goods being distributed and in terms of the institutionally mediated relationships that they establish among individuals. The unique meaning of higher education in our culture is not the same as that of other goods such as rights or resources, and the institutionally mediated relationship of students and professors in classrooms is distinct from the relationship of citizens and officials in states. As a result, there is no reason to insist that a good syllabus must necessarily take the same shape as a good society.

[39] Andrea Sangiovanni, "Justice and the Priority of Politics to Morality," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2007): 137–64, 138.

[40] John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 20–46, 20.

[41] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 29.

[42] Andrea Sangiovanni, "How Practices Matter," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (2016): 3–23.

[43] Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 10.

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Both culturalist and institutionalist practice-dependent polymorphisms suggest an immanently critical method for determining what governing principles are required in different spheres of human activity. For culturalists, this will be an immanent critique of the culturally determined value and meaning of the goods to be distributed. Institutionalists will instead focus on the purpose of institutions and the governing principles needed for their proper operation. Such immanent criticism may reveal considerable disagreement; the mere fact that the goods and institutions are shared does not mean that there is a consensus about their meanings or purposes. The rest of this article will be devoted to examining competing, often diametrically opposed interpretations of both the meaning and the purpose of higher education. All these interpretations might suggest that a just syllabus should indeed take a form that more closely resembles what a just society would look like, but always for reasons other than the importance of isomorphism for its own sake.

Instrumentalism

For Walzer, education is a central example of a sphere of justice, home to a distinct set of culturally defined goods to be distributed, "and the distributive patterns cannot simply mirror the patterns of the economy and the political order."[44] Yet while he rejects isomorphism among different spheres of justice, Walzer never insists that the educational sphere is unrelated to the rest of society. To the contrary, in nearly every culture, the purpose of education is understood to be preparing students to enter a certain kind of social order. Appealing to how other goods should be distributed to determine how education should operate is therefore entirely legitimate. In making this appeal, however, we must remain attentive to the unique value and meaning of education, which is instrumentally connected to but nonetheless distinct from the value and meaning of the goods distributed in other spheres.

Under the model that I call *instrumentalism*, the form that a syllabus should take is determined by the purpose it is intended to serve. As with the previous models, the main problem with instrumentalism is not so much that it is incorrect as that it is incomplete. First, instrumentalism faces the very difficult problem of determining what the purpose or purposes of higher education actually are. Second, even if this purpose is identified successfully, considerable empirical evidence is necessary to establish the effectiveness of a particular kind of syllabus in best achieving any given purpose.

When debating the purpose of higher education, academics are often quick to decry the idea that universities are tools for investment in human capital and hence to be evaluated in terms of their economic payoffs, a position that often results in prioritizing STEM over humanities subjects. This neoliberal view is typically contrasted with the Aristotelian theory of education as having a primarily civic purpose, sustaining a polity by reproducing in each generation the type of character its constitution requires. Martha Nussbaum invokes this

[44] Ibid., 198.

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civic purpose to defend universities from narrowly economistic evaluation, celebrating the humanities in particular as schooling for social justice.[45]

Danielle Allen also identifies two further purposes that education can serve: preparation for aesthetic self-expression and for "rewarding relationships in spaces of intimacy and leisure."[46] She also argues that these four purposes are not mutually exclusive; a well-designed curriculum can and should advance all four of them. Another theory of the purpose of higher education is therefore that it is best understood as a kind of general-purpose tool, suitable for all four of Allen's purposes and perhaps others as well.[47] A general education in critical thinking, clear communication, and other transferable skills can be put to the pursuit of virtually any goal that human beings might set for themselves.

One possibility, then, is that higher education can be of instrumental use for social justice by providing the exact same skills to activists and politicians that it supplies to bankers, novelists, and (at least under Allen's theory) lovers. David Reidy correctly points out that "the cause of social justice is undeniably advanced by the widespread dissemination of advanced literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, historical knowledge, and so on."[48] Such a view suggests that the best way to aid social justice may be a broad, skills-based curriculum designed to prepare students for a wide variety of futures without paying any particular attention to what is instrumentally required for purposes of achieving social justice or any other specific aim. Certain purposes, however, are best achieved with custom-designed tools which, while they may also be used for other purposes, are deliberately designed for certain uses over others.

Investigation of how to best design syllabi as tools for achieving particular social outcomes would need to consider the possibility of an instrumental defense of isomorphism. While there may be no intrinsic need for a curriculum that takes the same form as a just society, studying such curricula might in fact be the best way to prepare students for working toward social justice. This aligns with Audre Lorde's famous dictum that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Lorde explains that "when the tools of racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy" the result is "that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable."[49]

Lorde's claim here is not that the master's tools should be shunned because they are morally tainted; it is that they will not do the work that needs to be done. As an empirical claim, this cannot be evaluated a priori, but once it is carefully distinguished from a moral commitment to isomorphism for its own sake it loses much of its initial plausibility. While it is entirely possible that some other set of tools would be better suited to the job, the fact that a certain set of tools was

[45] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[46] Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 17.

[47] Jason Brennan and Philip Magness, *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 11.

[48] David A. Reidy, "Social Justice, the University, and the Temptation to Mission Creep," in *Social Justice and the University*, ed. Shefner et al., 128–46, 128.

[49] Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (New York: Penguin Modern, 2017), 17.

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designed by oppressors does not imply that they could not be used effectively against them. Santos vividly describes how ideas can be "taken from our enemies ... We learn that, when we wield them autonomously, they frighten the enemy."[50] If this is correct, then the best way to pursue social justice might be to put the powerful intellectual weapons of oppressive ideologies into the hands of their opponents, turning them from what Walzer calls mere external critics into more effective internal critics.[51] Teaching them to be internal critics of oppressive ideologies gives students the cultural capital necessary to gain a "feel for the game" of existing power structures to first critique and then ultimately dismantle them from the inside.[52]

Ultimately, whether Lorde or her critics are correct here can only be established through considerable empirical research. One likely scenario is that instrumentally useful tools have been produced both by those included and by those excluded from traditional university curricula, and that the education that will best prepare students to make their way in the world is one that is as comprehensive as possible. There are limits, however, to how comprehensive a curriculum can be; the number of years students spend in higher education is finite. While it may be desirable to expose students to a wide variety of intellectual tools, deriving from a wide range of sources and serving a wide range of purposes, they cannot be expected to gain proficiency in the use of every potentially useful tool in the time available. Only careful empirical evaluation of the actual effects of various curricular designs can determine which mix of proficiencies will be the most valuable instrumentally. Even the most plausible, broadly inclusive position cannot be established a priori.

Unlike the previous two models, which directly demand curricular reform either as part of a larger demand of social justice or as valuable for its own sake, the instrumentalist model thus cannot shape pedagogical practice directly on the basis of philosophical principles, but only when accompanied by empirical evidence of the sort that, for reasons of both space and disciplinary competence, cannot be gathered here. This is not itself an objection to the instrumentalist model, but it does limit the guidance that it can give on its own. There are, however, also genuine objections to the instrumentalist model put forward by those who instead advocate what I call *isolationism.*

Isolationism

Michael Oakeshott has written against all instrumentalist views of higher education. More generally, he is opposed to the dogma that everything valuable has a "social function."[53] For Oakeshott, many valuable things have no function at all. The university, he claims, is one such thing; its only value is intrinsic.

[50] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 4.

[51] Michael Walzer, *In the Company of Critics*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[52] Dennis, "Decolonizing Education," 197.

[53] Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 92.

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Rather than "a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result … it is a manner of human activity."[54]

Oakeshott claims that this is not true of primary or secondary schools, which are instrumentally valuable in a way that universities are not. In higher education, a subject is not "learned merely up to the point where it can be put to some extrinsic use; learning itself is the engagement and it has its own standards of achievement and excellence."[55] The idea that these standards must be protected from outside pressures (including but not limited to the demands of social justice) is the central feature of the isolationist model.

Although Oakeshott argues that the university must be isolated from the world around it, he never denies that participation in university education can have beneficial effects on those being educated and the societies to which they belong.[56] As in the casuist doctrine of the double effect, the achievement of social purposes may be a foreseen side effect of higher education, but it must not be the intended end. In this case, the foreseen side effect is a good rather than an evil but pursuing it intentionally would nonetheless be a mistake—not only a prudential error in instrumental reasoning, but a moral mistake about what justice requires.

Reidy calls this error "mission creep," defined as "the incremental and so easily missed but nevertheless unwise extending of an otherwise sensible initial mission." He claims that, "when it comes to social justice and the university, the temptation to mission creep can be strong."[57] There are two kinds of arguments for why universities have an obligation to avoid mission creep via the intentional pursuit of social justice in their curricula. The former, by Oakeshott, takes a perspective internal to the university; the latter, by Reidy, takes a perspective external to it.

The intrinsically valuable intellectual activities that ought to take place in a university could potentially take any branch of human knowledge as their subject. One might reasonably assume that, since some object of study must be selected, it would be better if curricular material has instrumental as well as intrinsic value. In this way, one could combine the insights of the instrumentalist and isolationist models. Yet Oakeshott insists that social utility is an impermissible reason for selecting any particular piece of curricular material as an object of study.[58] In order to maintain its intrinsic value, a university can and should always choose assignments for purely pedagogical reasons, reasons which have "nothing whatsoever to do with vocational or other extraneous considerations."[59] To teach anything other than what is pedagogically best is to betray the essence of the university.

The isolationist model is thus in some ways akin to the isomorphic model, since both see the right kind of university education as valuable for its own sake,

[54] Ibid., 96.
[55] Ibid., 24.
[56] Ibid., 79.
[57] Reidy, "Social Justice," 129.
[58] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, new and expanded ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 216.
[59] Ibid., 198.

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not as part of a larger whole or as an instrument for the achievement of purposes outside itself. Yet the isolationist model cannot provide the direct pedagogical guidance that the isomorphic or identification models can. Just as the instrumentalist model has the difficult task of determining what purpose higher education should serve, the isolationist model has the difficult task of determining what kind of pedagogy is best for the intrinsically valuable practice of higher education. Just as there is the possibility of an instrumentalist case for a kind of isomorphism, there might also be an isolationist case for a kind of isomorphism, should syllabi that take the same form as a just society prove to be pedagogically superior to syllabi that do not. Regardless, there is nothing inherently conservative about isolationism per se, since purely pedagogical considerations might require significant curricular reform.

The important thing for the isolationist model is that syllabi must be designed solely based on considerations internal to the practice of higher education. While Oakeshott is concerned that the university remain true to its mission for its own sake, Reidy is more concerned about universities unjustly usurping the proper social roles of other actors and institutions. Although often both highly regulated and publicly funded, universities were never authorized as political representatives of any demos. As a result, it would be democratically illegitimate for them to usurp powers rightly reserved for those with better claims to legitimacy on the domestic or global stage. Universities only have the authority to teach and conduct research using public funds because they have been chartered to do so by legitimate processes. Although (as the previous section of this article makes clear) the purpose that universities are intended to serve is highly controversial, Reidy nonetheless claims that they have not been authorized by any democratically legitimate process to pursue social justice.[60]

Isolationism might also (incorrectly) be thought to be supported by Walzer's theory, under which the influence of spheres of justice on one another is usually something to be avoided. For Walzer, one sphere may unjustly "invade" another, with the distribution of one kind of distinctively meaningful good improperly affecting the other.[61] In a worst-case scenario, a single good can become "dominant" over all others in a society, a situation that Walzer identifies with "tyranny."[62] Isolationism might be understood as an attempt to both protect the university from outside invasion and protect the outside world from invasion by the university, making higher education an important bulwark against tyranny of any kind.

However, we have already seen that when it comes to education Walzer does not see the design of either schools or universities to fulfill a social function as an illegitimate invasion. Oakeshott's distinction between instrumentally valuable schools and intrinsically valuable universities would strike him as arbitrary, unrooted in any actual intimations of our shared cultural understandings of the goods involved. Yet a Walzerian rejection of isolationism can go deeper than that. Those designing university curricula cannot successfully guard against

[60] Reidy, "Social Justice," 145–46.
[61] Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 10.
[62] Ibid., 19

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being invaded by or invading other spheres of justice by seeking utter separation from the rest of society.

Walzer admits that not only the threat, but also the reality, of at least some degree of invasion among spheres of justice is always present. "What happens in one distributive sphere affects what happens in the others," he writes; "we can look, at most, for relative autonomy."[63] While each sphere must be governed by its own principles, these many and varied polymorphic principles must nonetheless "somehow fit together within a single culture." It is the task of citizens and officials to negotiate the "deep strains and odd juxtapositions" that are inevitably produced when imperfectly autonomous, yet properly polymorphic spheres must coexist together.[64]

To preserve the integrity of higher education as a distinct sphere of its own, it is therefore necessary to understand that what happens on campus will always interact with what is happening outside it. Preventing social injustices from affecting pedagogical practice will require constant vigilance, as will ensuring that pedagogical practices do not help perpetuate social injustices. As is true in international relations, a policy of simple isolation will prove self-defeating in an interconnected, interdependent world.

Interdependence

The literature on practice-dependent theories of justice has increasingly come to appreciate the interdependence of all social practices.[65] We must ensure that the governing principles for any given practice are consistent with the justice of all of them. When higher education is the main path to decent life prospects, and elite higher education is the main path to wealth and power, what happens at universities can have profound effects outside the campus gates. At the same time, since universities are always embedded in a larger society, what happens off campus can have equally profound effects inside. The model that I am calling *interdependence* maintains that the quality of a syllabus and the justice of a society mutually depend on each other in a wide variety of complex ways while nonetheless remaining importantly distinct, each with an independent value of its own.

One matter of particular importance is the question of who ends up on campus in the first place. Anders Burman reports on two related understandings of "decolonizing the university" among Bolivian students, the former of which is a matter of giving "everyone access to a high-quality university education, without any form of discrimination," and only the latter of which involves decolonizing the curriculum per se, "incorporating Indigenous knowledges … to transform the syllabi completely."[66]

[63] Ibid., 10.

[64] Ibid., 319.

[65] See, e.g., Miriam Ronzoni, "The Global Order: A Case of Background Injustice? A Practice-Dependent Account," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37, no. 3 (2009): 229–56.

[66] Burman, "Damnés Realities," 83.

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The former—decolonization of access—is far less controversial than decolonization of the curriculum. Even Reidy admits that "preventing excessive and obviously unjust economic and social inequalities from arising" and encouraging "the ongoing circulation of capital, both human and real" can be a legitimate part of a university's mission, at least when it is carried out, not by inappropriate activism, but merely "by honoring the demands of universal access and nondiscrimination" and by "doing their part … to maintain some meaningful equality of opportunity."[67] When universities fail to ensure equality of opportunity in access to higher education, this is what Walzer would classify as bidirectional invasion: outside injustice is causing injustice within the university, while the university is simultaneously reinforcing injustice outside its walls.

Yet the need to avoid such injustices should not only influence who gets admitted, but also what goes on after they enroll. Activists have often advocated curricular reform as an essential part of widening participation in higher education. Syllabi need to be changed, under this view, to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds feel a sense of inclusion on campus. Unless students get a sense that they belong on campus, they may refuse to enroll or may be difficult to retain once they do. One way to communicate to students that they belong in university classrooms might be to demonstrate to them that authors "like them" in some relevant sense belong on the syllabus. Much like the instrumental considerations made earlier, this claim requires empirical investigation, but university administrators seem to find it plausible. Their motives on the matter may not be entirely noble, of course; they may simply fear the loss of tuition fees from an increasingly diverse generation of university-bound young people.[68]

Yet what administrators find beneficial for instrumental or financial reasons may also be defended by academics and students for pedagogical or moral reasons. When oppressed groups are excluded from syllabi, students from these groups may not only be more likely to stop paying tuition but may also be more likely to stop paying attention, and hence learn less than their classmates, thereby unfairly disadvantaging them both during their studies and later in life. Indeed, students from these groups may not only be disadvantaged, but they may also feel disrespected, believing that they have been denied the recognition that they are due when it is tacitly suggested that ideas produced by people like them are not worthy of study.[69] It is therefore no surprise that campaigns for syllabus reform are so often led by students who may feel unrecognized and excluded by existing curricular material. Engaging these students in a collaborative process co-producing reformed syllabi can be a powerful tool for building a broadly inclusive community.

Just as it is important to consider the broader moral, political, and social implications that our curricular choices may have, it is also important to

[67] Reidy, "Social Justice," 36.

[68] Uvanney Maylor, "Leadership for Race and Social Justice in Higher Education," in *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, ed. Arday and Mirza, 349–64, 358.

[69] See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Explaining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), esp. 65–66.

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consider the influence that broader spheres of justice may have on our curricular choices. Even when we think we are selecting what to teach for purely pedagogical reasons, oppressive ideologies might still be at work. Oakeshott takes it as obvious that it is pedagogically superior for undergraduates to study "the history of medieval England rather than of contemporary Java" and "Roman law rather than Hittite or Celtic."[70] It seems suspicious how closely these pedagogical choices align with ancient and modern imperialist ideologies. This is not to deny good faith on Oakeshott's part, only to suggest that it may be difficult to free oneself from prejudices masquerading as pedagogical principles.

Since instructors can never be sure they have rid themselves of these prejudices, it is arguably better to err on the side of underrepresented material. Curricular reform may be needed, not because social justice should supplant properly pedagogical principles, but instead to help increase the extent to which pedagogical considerations are implemented without undue bias. Such an approach to curricular design may not only help minimize the effect of non-pedagogical social forces on the specific syllabi being designed but may also help students identify and eliminate the influence that these forces have on their own judgments. Since students are the academics of the future, the hope would be that the influence of oppressive ideologies on curriculum design would decline over time.

This account of interdependence incorporates the key insight of the isolationist position, synthesizing them with the key insights of the three other positions also discussed. Like the isolationist model, the interdependence model wants to protect what makes the university uniquely, intrinsically valuable, rejecting only the idea that isolation from society is an effective form of protection. At the same time, like instrumentalism, interdependence requires careful empirical analysis of the effects of curricular choices on outcomes both within and outside the university. Both models thus remain a subject for future empirical investigation. We must be open to the possibility that this investigation may lead to a kind of interdependence-based isomorphism just as it could lead to a kind of instrumental isomorphism, should a curriculum that takes the same form as a just society prove itself empirically to have the right kind of internal and external effects.

Finally, as with the identification model, there is a sense under the interdependence model in which a good syllabus is part of global justice. While the relationship of parts and wholes is always complex (and becomes more complicated still when combined with the asymmetries of justice and injustice), under the interdependence model a good syllabus is nonetheless clearly part of an intricate array of interdependent practices that together could constitute a just world.

Conclusion

My argument has been that each of the first four models of possible relationships between just curricula and just societies discussed in this article captured

[70] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 198.</FN>

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something valuable and correct but is nonetheless incomplete when taken in isolation. Only the fifth interdependence model manages to integrate all these facets into a consistent whole.

While the debate about the relationship between curricular reform and social justice is one of the most heated in academia today, it is widely quipped that academic infighting is so heated precisely because the stakes are so low. It therefore might seem absurd to compare the principles that ought to govern the small choices that academics make about what to include and exclude from their teaching with the grand project of transforming the world. The usefulness of the comparison becomes more evident, however, when we remember that ancient Greek political philosophy began by comparing the proper governing principles of something large with those of something much smaller: Plato's comparison between justice in the city-state and justice in the individual soul. We often learn something important about foundational normative principles when we see how they are properly applied in revealingly similar (isomorphic) or different (polymorphic) ways to regulate very different things.

Yet this is only one of several reasons why comparing the proper governing principles of something as small as a syllabus to something as large as a society is so important. As both the instrumentalist and interdependence models emphasize, we might also discover that the proper functioning of the small sphere under investigation interacts with that of the large sphere in important ways. And, as the identification model emphasizes, any improvement in a small sphere may be a marginal contribution to improvement to the larger phenomena of which it is a part.

Finally, as both the isomorphic and isolationist models emphasize, any improvement to small things is still improvement, and hence valuable for its own sake. While political philosophers have traditionally focused on the justice of states and the international order, their success in reforming these great spheres of justice is debatable at best. The path from theory to practice can become easier to navigate when we determine the proper relationship between already-accumulated knowledge on grand topics and a small sphere of human activity directly under the control of the kind of people likely to read an article in a peer-reviewed journal. The resulting improvement in the world might be marginal, but at least it is a real change for the better at a time when so much else, both in higher education and outside it, is changing for the worse.

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