

Amintaphil: The Philosophical Foundations of Law and Justice  
Series Editors: Mortimer Sellers · Ann E. Cudd

Joan McGregor  
Mark C. Navin *Editors*



# Education, Inclusion, and Justice

AMINTAPHIL

 Springer

# **Amintaphil: The Philosophical Foundations of Law and Justice**

Volume 11

## **Series Editors**

Mortimer Sellers, University of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD, USA

Ann E. Cudd, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

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Joan McGregor • Mark C. Navin  
Editors

# Education, Inclusion, and Justice

 Springer

AMINTAPHIL

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ISSN 1873-877X

ISSN 2351-9851 (electronic)

Amintaphil: The Philosophical Foundations of Law and Justice

ISBN 978-3-031-04012-2

ISBN 978-3-031-04013-9 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04013-9>

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Ann E. Cudd

# Introduction: Education, Inclusion, and Justice



Joan McGregor and Mark C. Navin

**Abstract** Education is a centrally important human good because it fosters the development of intellectual, moral and civic virtues necessary for a robust liberal democracy. Moreover, education is critical because it cultivates the development of valuable skills for work and for life. Accordingly, debates about justice, democracy, equality, and inclusion often focus on questions about the kinds of education people should receive, how scarce educational goods should be distributed, and the role of education in responding to historical and ongoing injustices. The 16 essays in this volume explore these kinds of pressing ethical, political, and legal issues from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives, including law, philosophy, and political science. They engage broadly with both core concepts and contemporary issues on topics including education justice, inclusive education, free speech, affirmative action, democratic citizenship, equal opportunity, and civility.

This volume is organized into six parts, and each part focuses on a different set of themes related to education, inclusion, and justice. The essays of Part I address the notion of inclusion in education. The essays of Part II focus on the grounding and basis for the universal right to education. The essays of Part III address what justice in education requires. The essays of Part IV focus on how universities and other educational institutions in society should respond to the history of institutional racism. The essays of Part V address the nature and desirability of civility, including its role in university education. Finally, the essays of Part VI focus on questions about the role of individual merit in university admission decisions.

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J. McGregor, M. C. Navin (eds.), *Education, Inclusion, and Justice*, Amintaphil:

The Philosophical Foundations of Law and Justice 11,

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04013-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04013-9_1)



## 1 Part I

The essays of Part I address the notion of inclusion in education. The central question is how to ensure that differently-abled students and students from a diversity of backgrounds, religions, and cultures can be included in the educational endeavor, so that they can become equal citizens in democratic societies. Professor Deen Chatterjee's "Tagore on Human Flourishing" discusses the important role that education can play in the promotion of human flourishing, especially in pluralistic societies. It focuses on the ideals and experiences of the great Indian polymath, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), in the development of the experimental school he founded for girls and boys in rural Bengal, India, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Professor Chatterjee argues for the importance of local educational projects such as Tagore's for the cultivation of an egalitarian and cosmopolitan ethics. The example of Tagore's school illustrates how pedagogies based in reason and common interests can promote creative self-expression and thereby enhance human experience in diverse cultures. Such a model of education can prepare students to respect human rights and respond to human needs, in their own communities and beyond.

In "The 'Rights' Road to Inclusion: Disability Rights, Care, and Normalcy," Rachel Levit Ades identifies how primary and secondary schools socialize children to attitudes and behaviors about disability. Levit Ades argues that schools should focus their educational efforts around disability on the rights of disabled persons, rather than on their dependency or normalization. According to Levit Ades, many schools orient their education about disability around the idea that disabled people require care, or else schools fail to address disability at all, and make it invisible. This is wrong. Schools should focus neither on "caring for" the disabled nor on "normalizing" disability, but should instead prioritize the rights disabled people have to be fully included as equal participants in our shared social and political worlds. That is the kind of education about disability that a true commitment to democratic society requires.

## 2 Part II

The essays of Part II focus on the grounding and basis for the universal right to education, including how and whether democratic societies should fund private schooling. Professor Wade Robison argues, in "The Constitutional Right to an Education," that the right to education is implicit in the US Constitution, not as a consequence of any particular provision of that document, but based on the idea of democratic governance that the Constitution expresses. Professor Robison objects to attempts to defend a constitutional right to education as a consequence of other particular rights that the Constitution stipulates. For example, while the Constitution identifies a right to petition the government, and while people may need to be able to read and write in order to exercise this right, Professor Robison argues that the

Constitution actually defends a broader right to *education* than to *mere literacy*. Professor Robison argues that the way to argue for this right is not by piecemeal appeal to particular parts of the Constitution, but by a ‘transcendental’ argument that identifies a robustly educated population as a necessary condition for effective democratic government.

In “Pluralism, Diversity, and Choice: Problems with School Vouchers,” Professor Emily Gill criticizes the expansion of ‘school voucher’ programs in many US states. A school voucher is a taxpayer-funded coupon that the government provides to parents to allow them to pay tuition and other fees at a school other than the public school that the student could have attended for free. Professor Gill argues that recent court cases, like *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, which have upheld expansive school voucher programs, have troubling implications for state neutrality about religion. Professor Gill acknowledges that public schools cannot be neutral among all competing conceptions of the good, but she rejects the claim that school vouchers somehow correct for the sectarian values that public schools promote. Instead, she argues that school voucher programs promote a different and more troubling kind of nonneutrality than the one that public schools promote. However, Professor Gill concludes that, if US states are going to continue to endorse expansive school voucher programs, the private schools that receive voucher monies should be more accountable.

### 3 Part III

The essays of Part III address what justice in education requires, specifically for the inclusion of diverse groups in society and for ensuring equality of educational opportunity. Professor Columbus Ogbujah argues, in “Interculturality, Justice and Inclusion: Key Educational Values for a Pluralistic Society,” that the strength of a nation depends on the educational standards it imposes in its schools. Whether a society grows or collapses depends on its schools, colleges, and universities because these are the social institutions that cultivate the skills and values of productive citizenship. Professor Ogbujah uses a case study of Nigeria to argue that many contemporary social and political problems have their origins in educational systems that are not oriented towards the public welfare, but which tolerate or encourage greed, unhealthy rivalries, and oppositional social relations. Professor Ogbujah argues that these kinds of failures in a country’s educational system can contribute to broader forms of social injustice and that they encourage forms of cultural homogenization. Instead, countries should insist that their educational institutions promote intercultural dialogue, justice, and inclusion, which can promote the flourishing of pluralistic societies.

In “The Concept of Opportunity and the Ideal of Equality of Educational Opportunity,” Professor Alistair MacLeod discusses the concept of opportunity and the contexts in which it makes sense to apply it. In doing so, Professor MacLeod lays the foundation for identifying an account of the diverse kinds of educational

opportunities that societies may have good reasons to provide their members. Professor MacLeod attends, in particular, to a distinction between two different ideals of equal opportunity in education, one that affords the same opportunities to all, and one that applies only to sub-classes of the members of a society.

## 4 Part IV

The essays of Part IV focus on how universities and other educational institutions in society should respond to the history of institutional racism. These articles focus on efforts to *transition* towards greater educational justice. Regents' Professor Rebecca Tsosie describes what "institutional racism" means within public institutions of higher education. Many universities have adopted the framework of "diversity, equity and inclusion," realizing that framework is required for transformative change in higher education. Exactly how that is achieved is contested, however. The current debate about banning the teaching of "critical race theory" in educational institutions illustrates the contested nature of justice as regards to racial history. Professor Tsosie explores the need for recognition of the rights and experiences of distinctive groups as well as the epistemic forms of injustice that have been experienced by specific groups, including indigenous, Black, and Latinx peoples within institutions of higher education.

Professor Eric Smaw's chapter "Janus-Faced Affirmative Action: Restorative Justice and the Transition to a Just Society," reminds us of the deeply racist history of many of our most revered intellectuals and the role that racist views played in our history of education and employment. He argues for backward-looking and forward-looking affirmative action policies in education and employment. Professor Smaw engages the criticism of affirmative action programs offered by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, Nicholas Capaldi, and Carl Cohen. Finding those objections without merit, and since there has continued to be state-based discrimination against African Americans, he argues that affirmative action is warranted as a redress to those injustices. Furthermore, in order to move to a just society, we need to rectify for those past injustices. He calls this conception of affirmative action Janus-faced because it is backward-looking and forward-looking simultaneously.

The final paper in this section by Professor Laurence Houlgate is "Three Responses to Racism and Systemic Racism: Therapy, Punishment, and Education." In this chapter Professor Houlgate asks what roles the responses of therapy, punishment, and education to racism should play in a pluralistic democracy that has a long history of bigotry, racism, and systemic (institutional) racism. In other words, what does justice require of any public response to racism and systemic racism? He considers these three responses to both racism and systemic racism. First, Professor Houlgate considers whether therapy which has been viewed favorable in recent years is an appropriate response to racism. Hundreds of legislators, governors, and mayors, under the banner, "Systemic racism is a public health crisis," have advocated for this approach. Professor Houlgate's analysis of the concept of therapy shows that it has

implications that are unacceptable in a liberal-democratic society. Racism is not a disease, nor is it a symptom of a disease. It does not make racists candidates for cures created and administered by public health therapists. Secondly, he considers punishment as a response to racism and find it wanting as well. The concept of punishment implies the existence of a transgressor who violates the law. But racist thoughts and expressions do not violate valid laws in constitutional democracies. It is not a crime to be a racist unless the racist behavior is harmful to others. At the same time, Houlgate acknowledges that punishment is a justifiable response to *systemic* racism because such institutional systems can and often do violate contemporary valid laws. Finally, he considers the concept of education as a response to racism and finds that education as a response to racism avoids the unacceptable implications of therapy and punishment. Education does not assume that racism is a symptom of a disease, nor does it assume that racism violates valid laws. An analysis of the concept of education shows it to be a voluntary relationship between students and teachers in which students are at liberty to retain or give up their prejudicial opinions. If responsive education succeeds in an effort to eliminate or mitigate racism, then this might eventually have the side effect of abolishing all systemic racism.

## 5 Part V

The essays of Part V address the nature and desirability of civility, including the role of civility—and of *educating* for civility—in university education. Professor Robert Boatright in “Three Arguments for Incivility” argues that the idea that we should be civil to each other is being challenged in the current American political climate, and in particular in higher education. Are calls of civility, as suggested by some, a means of stifling dissent? Others contend, according to Professor Boatright, that uncivil acts by political leaders necessitate an uncivil response not civility. In this chapter, he argues that much of the contemporary debate over civility rests on a disagreement about what civility is. Boatright supports his argument by drawing upon Michael Oakeshott’s *On Human Conduct*, where Oakeshott defines civil association as a state of voluntary equality within a particular group or society. This theory holds that civility is not a moral condition or imperative—that is, it is not something we “should” be. Instead, it is something that we are under certain circumstances. Incivility, on this account, is a denial that we are engaged in any sort of shared enterprise or have a shared set of facts or reference points. Civility is best achieved not when we call for it, but when we refer to community or to other values.

In Professor Joan McGregor’s “Moral Capital, Civic Grace, and the Role of Education” she explores the notion of ‘moral capital’ and its role in well-functioning society. In the current society, even before the pandemic of 2020–21 and racial reckoning in America, we found ourselves in a place where social norms are flaunted by our leaders, by television and radio personalities, on social media, and generally deteriorating throughout the society. This chapter explores the notion of moral capital, as that set of shared values, virtue, norms and practices, and the role it

plays in flourishing societies. McGregor argues that there has been a deterioration of our nation's moral capital, which includes disregarding social practices that make a democracy work—e. g., tolerance of differences of opinions, open rational discussion and debate, reliance on empirical data—is exhibited in the behavior of both the right and the left. And finally, McGregor argues for the important role that higher education plays in supporting moral capital through cultivating the virtues of civility, civic grace, and the epistemic virtues.

## 6 Part VI

The essays of Part VI focus on questions about the role of individual merit in university admission decisions. Professor Ann Cudd in “‘Merit’ in University Admissions” challenges the preeminence of merit in university admissions, and she argues that there are reasons to doubt that individual merit is the best way to achieve the social goals of higher education. The mission of universities, according to Cudd, is primarily to create new knowledge, educate individuals, and serve society through related activities and products. Most universities are highly subsidized by their state and national governments. Higher education confers great benefits on students, especially those who attain credentials through the completion of degree and certificate programs. Beyond the intrinsic rewards of education, attaining a degree from an accredited university unlocks economic opportunity and enhances social status. Universities themselves are highly stratified by their status and quality, and the more elite the institution, she argues, the greater the social benefits that are conferred with its degree, both to society and to individuals. Given the lifelong benefits that are conferred upon those who receive a college degree for elite institutions and the governmental support of those institutions, Cudd argues against the traditional merit-based admission standards which favor some groups at the exclusion of others.

This section also includes a set of critical commentaries on Cudd's contribution, as well as a rejoinder from Cudd. In Richard Barron Parker's “An Alternative to ‘Merit’ in University Admissions: A Comment on the paper of Ann E. Cudd” he agrees with Cudd's argument that “access inequality” to higher education in America is so severe that higher education itself “is a source of inequality in America.” Moreover, he worries that the United States is in danger of going the way of Japan, England, and France where admission to the University of Tokyo, Oxford or Cambridge, or the *École nationale d'administration* is a prerequisite for holding high political office. Furthermore, Professor Parker agrees that any individual merit standard for university admission cannot be the basis for a fair and just system of university admissions. Cudd suggests instead a system which emphasizes diversity and looks at what the applicant can contribute to the group rather than whether or not the applicant's individual talents merit admission. Parker points to a problem with Cudd's proposal is that the ability to contribute to the group is just another sort of individual “merit.” Sorting out the individuals who have the ability to “improve the

excellence of the group as a whole” would require the same huge cast of admissions officers and consequent expense that now burden universities. It is easy to foresee disputes about how to determine which applicants deserve “diversity bonuses” similar to disputes over which tests should be used to determine individual “merit” under the old systems.

Another challenge to Cudd’s proposal comes for Richard De George in “Collective Merit in University Admissions.” In his paper, he argues that Cudd’s proposal for a new system of admission goes far beyond the issue of fairness in admissions, and her model proposes a purpose of the university different from the traditional one and a radical change in the nature of the university in order to achieve more inclusive diversity. Access equality is to be achieved by building inclusive diversity into the outcome of the admissions process, according to De George. Whereas Cudd’s model makes equal results replace equal access, and the change, De George argues, leads to a very different, vague and questionable notion of excellence from the one of individual merit.

In Leslie and John Francis’ commentary on Cudd’s paper they raise concerns about her positive account of “merit” as a group-based characteristic. In “‘Merit’ in University Admissions,” Cudd explores the interface between inequality of access to higher education and “merit” as a criterion for admission. Her aim is to reconceptualize merit in a way that preserves selectivity while addressing inequality. Reconceptualizing “merit” as “collective” merit, she thinks, can justify differential admissions standards in light of the goals of higher education. Professors Leslie and John Francis agree with Cudd that there are many problems with how “merit” is understood in current admissions priorities and the measurements used to try to implement these priorities. Nevertheless, they raise concerns about her positive account of “merit” as a group-based characteristic. Their argument is that her claims about the relationship between diversity and merit are conceptual and rooted in ideal theory, rather than in the functioning of actual universities in the not-very-just circumstances of the United States today.

In the final commentary, Professor Alistair M. Macleod, though he finds her arguments about the merit system persuasive, he suggests that Cudd’s argument have a *number* of puzzling features. They are, according to MacLeod (1) How Cudd’s claim that “unequal access” to institutions of “higher education” is an ineliminable feature of defensible admissions policies to be squared with her recognition that the social goals universities must pursue include the provision of the kinds of general education needed—and needed equally—by all the members of a society? (2) Why does Cudd think that cultivation of (what she calls) a “growth mindset” in all the members of a society would be desirable? (3) What is the rationale for Cudd’s attempt to link a university’s pursuit of the goal of “inclusive diversity” with endorsement of (a collective version of) a merit-based admissions policy?

And finally, Professor Cudd responds to the commentaries to “Merit in University Admissions.” Cudd acknowledges that the commentaries raise several important objections to the notion of collective merit and how it could be used in university admissions processes. This rejoinder provides her with the opportunity to clarify her critique of the way individual merit is currently used in university admissions and her idea of collective merit.

**Part I**  
**Inclusion, Justice, and Education**

# Education, Inclusion, and Identity



## Tagore on Human Flourishing

Deen Chatterjee

**Abstract** This essay explores the role of education for human flourishing in a pluralistic society. It illustrates how local projects with global vision, when founded on reason and common interests and put into practice for promoting creative self-expression, can enhance the human experience across cultures and respond well to broader human needs and rights. I will focus on the innovative educational experiment initiated by the great educational reformer Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) at his school for girls and boys in rural Bengal, India, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

### 1 Introduction

This essay explores the role of education for human flourishing in a pluralistic society. It illustrates how local projects with global vision, when founded on reason and common interests and put into practice for promoting creative self-expression, can enhance the human experience across cultures and respond well to broader human needs and rights. I will focus on the innovative educational experiment initiated by the great educational reformer Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) at his school for girls and boys in rural Bengal, India, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Amartya Sen, who had his early education at the school, writes:

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The essay is based on an international conference on Tagore’s Philosophy of Education that I co-directed with Martha Nussbaum on March 29–30, 2006 (<https://app.box.com/s/ya70siyift07nm00rdde>).

Amartya Sen and Kathleen O’Connell were two of the participants. In the essay I draw on Sen’s, O’Connell’s, and Nussbaum’s writings on issues that were featured in the conference. I thank Uma Das Gupta, also a participant in the conference, for her help with historical and biographical references.

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Most of [Tagore's] work was written at Santiniketan (Abode of Peace), the small town that grew around the school he founded in Bengal in 1901. He not only conceived there an imaginative and innovative system of education ... but, through his writings and his influence on students and teachers, he was able to use the school as a base from which he could take a major part in India's social, political, and cultural movements.<sup>1</sup>

Martha Nussbaum—a great admirer of Tagore—writes:

Santiniketan was only one school in one region. It became world-famous, inspiring imitators in many countries, and attracting pupils from all over India [and the world].<sup>2</sup>

Tagore's vision was similar to John Dewey's idea that democracy, education, and good citizenship are inextricably intertwined and that there is an organic connection between education and personal experience. But Tagore's project went beyond Dewey's in its global vision, which features a far-reaching social justice and human rights arc. What was remarkable about Tagore was that as patriotic as he was in his quest to liberate India from the British subjugation, he was not a nationalist nor did he consider the Brits as his (or India's) enemies. Being a global-humanist and being ever mindful of the fluidity and contestability of cultures and identity, he went beyond the confinements of national borders as he embraced the universal mandate of broader humanity in responding to people's needs and interests at the grassroots level.

All these values featured centrally in Tagore's innovative take on liberal education that he implemented in his school for girls and boys well over a century ago. These ideas have profound implications for contemporary education in responding to the imperatives of justice, inclusion, and human flourishing in a liberal democracy.

## 2 Tagore's School

A global network of pioneering educators such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean Piaget, Johan Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey has been influential in shaping the modern foundation of liberal education. But it was Rabindranath Tagore—the great Indian poet, novelist, educator, composer, painter, social reformer, and Nobel Laureate—who offered the most innovative vision of how best to educate the whole child. For Tagore, the cultivation of the artistic and the imaginative side of a child's personality should be given as much attention as the intellect in a child's education. Accordingly, in Tagore's school, music, art, dance, drama, and nature studies were an integral part of the curriculum for fostering a sense of empathy, wonder, and interconnectedness with the surrounding world. Set on an idyllic campus in rural Bengal, classes in the school were held outdoors under trees

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<sup>1</sup>Sen (2005), pp. 90–91.

<sup>2</sup>Nussbaum (2013), p. 99.

for better communion with nature (except during rain or when using a laboratory).<sup>3</sup> It is through this playful engagement with the arts and nature, along with the basics in the sciences and the humanities, that a child can joyously develop his or her highest potential.

In exploring Tagore's contribution to education, Kathleen M. O'Connell writes:

One . . . characteristic which sets Rabindranath's educational theory apart is his approach to education as a poet. He states in his essay, "A Poet's School," that in starting his school, he hoped to create a poem "in a medium other than words." . . . It was this poetic vision which enabled him to fashion a scheme of education which was all inclusive, and to devise a unique program for education in nature and creative self-expression in a learning climate which was congenial to global cultural exchange.<sup>4</sup>

This is holistic education at its best, put into practice in a most creative way to synchronize the diverse aspirations of human personality. For Tagore, academic quest was not a narrow and one-dimensional pursuit detached from the rest of one's life—it was a living, multi-dimensional adventure meant to enrich all aspects of one's life. A rebel at heart and a non-conformist even as a young boy, Tagore persuaded his elders to take him out of formal schooling at the age of 13 because he felt it was too narrow and dry for him, set within the stifling confines of four walls. He did not graduate from any school or college. The co-educational school he founded was his own vision of education put into practice.

In Tagore's school, it was important that the teacher not only make lessons relevant to the lives of the students, but that the teacher should help students develop curiosity, imagination, empathy, and critical thinking—attributes that Tagore believed were essential for the flourishing of a student's mind.<sup>5</sup> For Tagore, these and similar traits were to be cultivated early in a student's life in primary and secondary education so that the student can be adequately prepared not only for college but for responsible citizenship in a global world. With an emphasis on education's local roots and global outreach, Tagore's project went a step beyond Dewey's educational vision of a healthy democracy as an engaged community of empowered individuals.

Tagore's philosophy of education has much broader implications than just education for children. Effective implementation of Tagore's ideals would call for reform of the primary and secondary school curriculum as well as a radical re-thinking of the goals of institutions of higher learning.<sup>6</sup> Along that line, what started as a small school in 1901 evolved into an international university by 1921. Tagore's chosen name of the university, *Visva-Bharati* (India and the World), with a

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<sup>3</sup>Often during rain, students would join their teachers to hike in the countryside. Far from being viewed as disruptions, these breaks gave the students yet another outlet for a joyous celebration of their presence in nature.

<sup>4</sup>O'Connell (2002), p. 261. See also Tagore's essay, "My School," in Tagore (1917).

<sup>5</sup>O'Connell notes: "In fact, these are the same essentials that are being emphasized by some of today's most innovative thinkers." O'Connell (2003), p. 81.

<sup>6</sup>Professor Alistair MacLeod highlighted this point in commenting on an earlier draft of my essay.

motto of *Yatra Visvam Bhavatyeka Nidam* (Where the World Finds Its Nest), indicates a focus on promoting a creative synthesis among the various cultures of the world. Tagore himself put it this way in 1927: “. . . I have formed the nucleus of an International University in India, as one of the best means of promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West.”<sup>7</sup>

Tagore’s global vision behind his educational philosophy was equally matched by his attempt to motivate the marginalized rural and tribal communities around the university to economic self-sufficiency. For that, he set up a nearby Institute for Rural Reconstruction in 1922 as a wing of his Visva-Bharati International University for promoting agricultural economy and rural upliftment.<sup>8</sup> The Institute also helped broaden the school curriculum by offering students on-site lessons on handicrafts such as carpentry and pottery.

As much as Tagore admired the Western Enlightenment ideas, he saw that the Eurocentric education in colonial India was not suited to proper human flourishing for the students.<sup>9</sup> For a broad, diverse, and well-rounded education, he made efforts to see that students’ education was firmly rooted in Indian history and culture as well as in the Asian heritage, while simultaneously pursuing relevant knowledge and wisdom gathered from all corners of the world. This led to “the creation of a school and university that became world-famous exemplars of arts-oriented democratic education.”<sup>10</sup> Over the years they produced some of the world’s best-known thought leaders and democratic stalwarts, as well as preeminent talents in arts, the social sciences, and literature.

After Tagore’s passing in 1941 and soon after India’s independence from the British rule, the university was given the status of a central research university in 1951 by an act of the Indian Parliament, with the provision of the prime minister of India as its *ex officio* chancellor.

### 3 Reason and Imagination

There are many interwoven threads in Tagore’s philosophy of education, but for this essay I am focusing on those that are especially relevant for the imperatives of inclusion, identity, and diversity in a liberal democracy.

The idea of inclusion in a liberal democracy requires a proper understanding of the relationship between relativism and pluralism, especially value pluralism. Rejecting relativism is not inconsistent with endorsing pluralism. Value pluralism rejects the outright endorsement of anything and everything of value in the name of

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<sup>7</sup>Tagore (1927), p. 202.

<sup>8</sup>For more on this, see Das Gupta (2021).

<sup>9</sup>Tagore’s school is often heralded as one of the early experiments in decolonization. For that to succeed, as Tagore saw it, students needed to decolonize their own thinking first.

<sup>10</sup>Nussbaum (2013), p. 87.

cultural practices, and likewise, it is skeptical of denigration of cultural practices per se.<sup>11</sup> Sorting out the right balance is not easy. It requires a delicate blend of reason and imagination that takes time to cultivate and must be started at an early stage in one's life.

In Tagore's school, critical thinking was a prized value in a student's education, and independence of mind and questioning of conventions were strongly encouraged. Amartya Sen notes: "Rabindranath insisted on open debate on every issue, and distrusted conclusions based on a mechanical formula . . . It is in the sovereignty of reasoning—fearless reasoning in freedom—that we can find Rabindranath Tagore's lasting voice."<sup>12</sup> But at the same time, Tagore's educational philosophy was rooted in the belief that a flourishing life is one that has room for play, exuberance, and imagination, which take us beyond mere acceptance of difference in favor of a joyous celebration of diversity, as well as beyond the static comfort of our daily routines to the boundless wonder of the great unknown. Satyajit Ray—the celebrated film director who got his art degree from Tagore's university—has noted that even in Tagore's paintings, "the mood evoked. . . is one of a joyous freedom."<sup>13</sup> This blend between "fearless reasoning" and "joyous freedom" was Tagore's recipe for a flourishing life for his students at the school.

Tagore showed us that we can nurture a global vision of shared humanity while being responsive to cultural complexities and differences. A leading critic of culture, Tagore was also a passionate global citizen who embraced the best in all cultures. This delicate balancing act is still a prized challenge in today's liberal democracy,<sup>14</sup> but it is truly remarkable that Tagore not only imbibed it himself but effectively put the idea in practice in his school over a century ago in a remote corner of Bengal, India! Far from being a democracy, India at that time was under colonial subjugation in the heyday of the British empire.

Tagore was deeply committed to the ideal that boundaries and differences that create barriers to our common humanity are to be transcended in favor of a joyous engagement with the global world. Turning tolerance of difference into celebration of diversity was Tagore's message of multiculturalism where cultural differences are not viewed as divides. Tagore's educational experiment reflected this ideal.

Tagore's call for unity and engagement was not a plea for uniformity. In the introduction of his book *Creative Unity*, he wrote:

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this, see Chatterjee (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Sen (2005), pp. 119–120.

<sup>13</sup> Ray (1989), quoted in Sen (2005), p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Here is an example of how a leading liberal democracy can still find it a challenge to pursue this balancing act. In 2011, the then British Prime Minister David Cameron announced in a speech to the annual Munich Security Conference of world leaders that multiculturalism had failed in his country. "Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and much more active, muscular liberalism." (*The Times*, London, February 5, 2011, p. 15) Tagore's advice to Cameron would have been that we need to go beyond both the "passive tolerance" of benign neglect and the "muscular liberalism" of confronting the illiberal other. A viable project of multiculturalism must adequately articulate its professed claims of pluralism and inclusion.

It is some untold mystery of unity in me, that has the simplicity of the infinite and reduces the immense mass of multitude to a single point. This One in me knows the universe of the many. . . . This One in me is creative. Its creations are a pastime, through which it gives expression to an ideal unity in its endless show of variety.

. . . This One in me not only seeks unity in knowledge. . . ; it also seeks union in love for its fulfilment. It seeks itself in others. . . . To give perfect expression to the One, the Infinite, through the harmony of the many . . . is the object alike of our individual life and our society.<sup>15</sup>

This poetic and mystical vision of unity in diversity lies at the core of Tagore's philosophy of education that he implemented at the school and that finds its expression in his message of pluralism and inclusion. Along with an emphasis on reasoning and critical discourse, the values of empathy, imagination, and wonder were ingrained in the school curriculum and exemplified by the remarkable teachers, scholars, and thought-leaders who were drawn to Tagore and his school from all over the world.<sup>16</sup>

## 4 Culture and Diversity

Tagore's promotion of cross-cultural understanding has important implications for rights and justice in a liberal democracy. The liberal tradition has often been challenged for being insensitive to claims of culture as well as for providing the rationale for imperialism rooted in the liberal assumptions about reason and historical progress. In other words, the tradition that supposedly champions diversity has been critiqued for displaying an uneasy commitment to pluralism.<sup>17</sup> Central to this tension between liberalism and pluralism are the competing rights of the individual and the group or culture to which the individual belongs, as enshrined respectively in Articles 3 and 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Individual and group rights are in a dynamic tension, leading to the dilemma of conflicting equalities for liberalism.

Although Tagore was not a vocal defender of group rights per se, he was sensitive to the cultural issues and has drawn attention to the complexity of group allegiance. The focus on artistic instruction at the school promoted cross-cultural experience and understanding, along with giving education a global perspective, since "works of art

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<sup>15</sup>Tagore (1922), pp. v–vi.

<sup>16</sup>The university also drew a steady stream of distinguished foreign dignitaries. For instance, the famed Chinese Studies Institute at the university attracted General Chiang Kai-shek and Premier Chou En-lai. Tagore's ideals of human dignity and shared humanity brought Eleanor Roosevelt to the university soon after her leadership role in the adoption of the landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the United Nations in 1948.

<sup>17</sup>For more on this, see Chatterjee (2013).

are frequently an invaluable way of beginning to understand the achievements and sufferings of a culture or group different from one's own."<sup>18</sup>

Tagore took pride in his cultural heritage, yet he cautioned people not to use the rigid identities of culture and religion as a wedge in their common pursuit of justice and human dignity. Fragility of categories tells us that issues are more fluid and complex than we are prone to acknowledge. Accordingly, Tagore would like us to focus on the substantive issues of interdependence confronting our common humanity, regardless of groups and cultures, while at the same time he embraced the best in all cultures.

We find a nod to this idea in Amartya Sen's Nobel biography. Sen, a fellow Nobel Laureate from Tagore's native Bengal, writes:

I remember being quite struck by Rabindranath Tagore's approach to cultural diversity in the world (well reflected in our curriculum), which he had expressed in a letter to a friend: "Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin . . . . Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine." ("Amartya Sen—biography," [Nobelprize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org))<sup>19</sup>

Culture and religion are intertwined in a complex web of myth and reality. To adequately understand culture, one must discern religion. Without a proper understanding of each, no social, economic, or political empowerment of individuals or groups can take place. Tagore, who was a great admirer of Buddha's deep and abiding humanism, had a radical take on religion. Being a global humanist who was wary of misleading categories that demonize the so-called other, Tagore did not engage in the divisive rhetoric of the sacred and the profane that is at the heart of some major religions, especially those in the Abrahamic tradition. Drawing instead from the more inclusive Indian tradition, he championed the idea of the *secular as sacred* in his educational experiments and social activism. Rising above religious sectarianism, this holistic vision played a central role in the school's educational experiment of fostering a spirit of inclusion and acceptance. Martha Nussbaum calls this vision "humanism of the future,"<sup>20</sup> well reflected in "Tagore's development of a universalistic 'religion of man'."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Nussbaum (2009), p. 58.

<sup>19</sup>In his 2021 book *Home in the World: A Memoir*, Sen has aptly called Tagore's school "School Without Walls," which indicates not only that the classes were held outdoors, but that the school stood for transcending divides and boundaries (Sen 2021).

<sup>20</sup>Nussbaum (2013), p. 87.

<sup>21</sup>Nussbaum (2009), p. 56. See also Tagore (1931b).

## 5 Inclusion, Identity, and Democracy

Ingrained in Tagore's global vision is the universal mandate of a broader humanity that makes room for multifaceted and overlapping identities of individuals and groups. In recent days Amartya Sen has shown us how the exclusivity of any singular identity can lead to confrontation and violence.<sup>22</sup> Like Tagore, Sen is well-known for drawing attention to the multiple identities of human beings across the world, and he, like Tagore, sees no reason why national, group, or cultural divisions should have any automatic, hence undue, priority over other categorizations. Both for Tagore and Sen, the narrow conundrum of conflicting loyalties need not be an irreconcilable dilemma because cultural or political divides should not be viewed as conflicting loyalties but rather as nested multiple loyalties. Claims of culture or allegiance to specific political communities may sometimes compete with wider objects of loyalty such as human solidarity, but nested multiple loyalties, like our plurality of identities, is a challenge that we negotiate all the time.<sup>23</sup>

Tagore's vision and Sen's take on it have an important bearing on today's identity politics in a liberal democracy. The prime source of conflict between the proponents of multiculturalism and nativist populism on issues of identity revolves around the cherished liberal idea, articulated by John Rawls (among others), that an impartial liberal theory of justice need not be incompatible with distinct principles of affirmative equality with regard to minority groups, within reason, of course. This idea helps liberals justify minority accommodation in a pluralistic liberal democracy. But this leaves both sides—the multiculturalists and the populists—unhappy, with complaint of tokenism on one side and that of over-catering to the minorities on the other, leading to simmering anger rooted in experience of powerlessness on both sides.<sup>24</sup> This distrust creates a barrier to dialogue and deliberation as a means of negotiating claims of culture and identity both within and among groups. It makes pluralism—the hallmark of liberal democracy—an elusive goal.

To make democracy truly pluralistic and participatory, we need community engagement and collective action. We need to reach out to real people in real terms in all groups to help them out of their "boxed" identities and connect them with larger movements, causes, and concerns. We need to show them that our identities are not "fixed"—we are bearers of multiple and overlapping identities. This is empowerment via solidarity by reaching out and joining hands. This is community action at its best. It emboldens democracy by making it truly participatory.

Tagore himself was a great icon of community empowerment through his writings and the imaginative educational philosophy put in practice at his school. A leading figure in India's social, cultural, and political movements, Tagore was called

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<sup>22</sup>Sen (2006).

<sup>23</sup>For more on the idea of nested multiple loyalties and how it relates to various strands of nationalism, see Oldenquist (2008).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Fukuyama (2018), Nussbaum (2018).