Debra Satz and the Remaking of Philosophical Ideals
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Debra Satz is one of those exciting scholars who is breaking the traditionally rigid molds of philosophy and creating new paths for younger academics and activists to follow. Heavily influenced by feminist scholars and socialist politics, Satz’s work proves that the tensions between theory and practice are as constructed as the inequalities she works against. Denying the illusion that philosophical understanding stems from pure rationality, Satz’s work shows that there is a clear correlation between personal experience, politics, philosophy, and pedagogy.

At just the age of fourteen, Debra Satz joined the anti-war movement and began selling socialist newspapers on street corners. Raised in a working class family, she had a strong understanding of how class and labor politics shaped her daily life. She went on to study economics, and this training continues to influence how she approaches questions of justice and equality within the discipline of philosophy.

I had the privilege of talking with Satz about this work when she came to UWM’s Center for 21st Century Studies on November 18, 2005. Earlier in the day she met with the Feminist Theory Workshop to discuss two of her articles: “Markets in Women’s Reproductive Labor” and “Markets in Women’s Sexual Labor.” Each of these articles uses economic and political theory to explore the ethics of how and under what conditions women sell the labor of their bodies. Satz is quick to admit that many people respond differently to women using their bodies to sell sexual or reproductive labor than to the commonly accepted practices of using one’s body to sell something like secretarial labor. These articles force us to think through precisely how selling the labor of a body performing gestation and birth differs from other types of service commodities.
For instance, “Markets in Women’s Sexual Labor” considers several arguments for why prostitution may be regarded as wrong. Satz accepts the intuition that selling sexual labor is significantly different than selling other commodities, but she suggests that the reasons why may reshape our legal policies on prostitution. She critiques the economic approach that assumes sexual labor is just another commodity, but that it should be regulated because of the social costs of the practice, namely disease, guilt, distrust, and other social sufferings. The essentialist approach, which assumes that the selling of sex is inherently wrong or damaging, is deficient because of its narrow definition of who is a prostitute and under what conditions. Once the broader practices of sexual exchange are incorporated into the conversation, this position begins to fall apart. Alternatively, Satz suggests that the wrongness of prostitution should be understood in relation to its role in upholding gender inequality. Rather than suggest that prostitution should remain illegal because of its wrongness, she suggests that because women are disproportionately punished for engaging in the commercialization of sex, legal regulations of prostitution should be guided by principles that acknowledge the vulnerability and rights of those who sell their sexual labor regardless of gender.

Satz’s work consistently brings together the theoretical guiding principles of those concerned with social justice and specific explorations of how these principles are enacted in society. At the Center for 21st Century Studies lecture later that day, Satz gave a talk titled “Learning as Equals: What is Wrong With Equality in K-12 Education?” in which she looked at two models of critique aimed at pointing out the inequalities of U.S. public schools.
Beginning from the assumption that a democratic society requires an educational institution that models justice and provides equitable education for all, Satz turns our attention to the differences between seeking equality of opportunity for students and the ideal of providing adequate education for all. Both models offer solid critiques of our current educational system, but provide contrasting guidelines for how it may be improved. Satz argues that the adequacy approach constitutes a more promising structure through which to shape a democratic educational system, but she suggests that other proponents of this approach have overlooked how inequalities above adequacy may also challenge democratic values through creation of an elite class. In response, she puts forward the concept of a democratic adequacy that would discourage inequalities above a given threshold.

There is a sense within Satz’s work that her daily politics and political philosophy are in constant conversation with one another. Though this may seem like an obvious relationship to some, the broad critique of the discipline of philosophy and of philosophers in general is that their political work is too abstracted from lived experiences to be useful for political action. I believe that the richness of Debra Satz’s scholarly and pedagogical work stands in sharp contrast to the sort of two-dimensional caricatures at which such critiques are aimed. As in any discipline there is a large number of philosophers who are actively engaged in debates over the future forms and directions of the field, and Satz is one these figures.

In her department at Stanford University Satz has been developing a new model for the introductory course, which would be structured around the themes of anti-racism and multiculturalism. During our conversation, she expressed the belief that there is a
sense in which the university fails if it does not connect what it is teaching students with their lives and personal choices, and certainly 101 courses play a significant role in how students imagine a discipline affecting their lives. Since many moral and political philosophers would insist that philosophy is precisely about how we live, the disconnect lies not in the relationship between theoretical abstractions and social experience, but in how this relationship is being taught to undergraduates.

One way that Satz helps her students to understand the relationship between economic theories and social inequalities is by incorporating assignments that require students to assess real social situations themselves. She developed an assignment in which she assigns each student a fixed income, and then she asks them to find affordable housing around the university area. Such activities provide rich material for classroom discussion, and allow students to connect theoretical models to the types of decisions they will make through their lives.

In addition to her work within her department, Satz has also helped to develop Stanford’s Ethics in Society curriculum, an interdisciplinary program dedicated to fostering political reflection on “the nature and implications of treating people with equal dignity and respect; the scope of liberty; the legitimacy of government; and the meaning of responsibility.” Currently, Ethics in Society functions primarily as an undergraduate minor program that regularly offers campus lectures and events, but the program also encourages community service.

One way that the Ethics in Society faculty model the integral relationship between personal choices and political positions is through their work at Hope House, a residential drug and alcohol treatment program for women who have been recently incarcerated. As
the director of Ethics in Society, Debra Satz has been passionately dedicated to the development of a permanent relationship between Stanford University and the Hope House through which Stanford faculty teach for-credit courses at the residence, which can then be used toward degree programs at other colleges in the area. She lights up when she begins to talk about her work at Hope House. It is clear that she finds this work deeply inspiring and personally meaningful.

Satz insists that the lessons she learns from her students at Hope House affect her more strongly than those from her traditional students at Stanford because they are coming from such different life experiences and social positions. Anyone who has taught the same text time and time again gets a good idea of how students will generally respond and can appreciate the excitement of hearing insightfully unique responses from students. But at Hope House, the response to a text is inevitably different from her Stanford classes. For instance, when reading a novel in which a community is deciding whether to sacrifice a single person for the perceived good of the rest of the community, the Hope House students immediately associated themselves with the one who would be sacrificed. Instead of having the usual conversation structured around the idea of whether it is morally permissible to sacrifice someone else for the good of all of us, these students opened up new ways of understanding the text and the moral implications of one’s social standpoint.

Satz’s work at Hope House shines light on how she has been able to maintain a consistent correlation between her philosophical career and her politics. Her dedication to teaching students coming from different social position speaks not only to her integrity, but also to her willingness to continue to grow and be challenged by her students. I think
that this attention to the various social realities in which she lives shows through her written work as well. Whether she is exploring the various realities of prostitution, affordable housing, or adequate education, Debra Satz shows us how to incorporate the lessons gleaned from feminist scholars and activists in academic life.

Ashley Falzetti is a former graduate student of UWM’s Philosophy Department (MA 2006), and she is currently working on her dissertation in Women and Gender Studies at Rutgers University.