

Education, Desire, and Human Well-Being

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We are grateful to Mr. Marples for having prepared a thorough and thoughtful paper on an important topic too seldom discussed, especially grateful that he came all the way from London to present it here this morning. As he notes, Marples's paper assumes familiarity with two books by John White, while my acquaintance with that scholar and his work is nodding at best. Taking a cue from current courtroom drama, I try to turn ignorance into a virtue; I adopt the stance of a juror, one who grows more qualified for the job with each increment of ignorance of the case to be tried. In that spirit, then, I attempt a brief survey of Marples's case against White, pronounce a verdict, and close with a few remarks on the topic itself.

MARPLES'S CASE AGAINST WHITE

Marples's text makes the case sound promising. If White occupies the positions Marples assigns him, e.g., if he "remains oblivious to the distinction between satisfaction of *desire* and satisfaction of *self*," then his "conclusions and recommendations" are quite likely to be "both counterintuitive and educationally suspect." My confidence in the plaintiff's case, however, began to dim. When Marples quotes White to the effect that in making a career choice a pupil should "think [it] through in the full knowledge of *what he is*," it is hard to credit the earlier claim that "White appears not to recognize the distinction between desire-satisfaction and self-satisfaction."

Credence in the plaintiff's case is further weakened when the accuser (rather offhandedly, perhaps unconsciously) sets before us a series of astonishing claims -- or should they be called confessions? I take only three examples for comment.

Example i: "After all, the satisfaction of desires and acting in accordance with my needs are frequently impossible to reconcile."

If (i) is true, then the unfortunate author of this paper wrote it under psychological stress most of us, thank God, experience only at terrible, agonizing moments of life crisis. Each of us, I am sure, has known of such crises. But for myself (and I think for most of us, most of the time) when satisfaction of some present desire D cannot be reconciled with acting in accordance with my needs N, reflection usually compels me to recognize that I want (one might say *really* want) to satisfy N even if it means sacrificing D. On occasion, as Fortune may dictate, the intensity of immediate desire cannot be stilled, and one says, "I want to risk it all for this one chance to gratify D." In either case, pursuing D or N, I act as *I want* to act. Whenever I act otherwise, I lose personal autonomy; I suffer false consciousness, alienation, *anomie et ressentiment*, inauthenticity, diminution of character, forfeiture of self-respect, possibly even dandruff.

Which brings us to Example ii: "Do I reflect in order to find out what I *want* or what I *need*?"

One supposes Marples intended this question to be rhetorical. I take it as real, one of existential import to its asker. The correct answer is: Seek to find out both, dear colleague, and on the basis of what you discover, work out plans, projects, intentions, goals, purposes...such that, in the main, you can do what you want to do, live the life you want to live, live it so as to be and become the person

you want to be. Reflection is the intrapersonal search for some pattern, some orderly arrangement of activity, one that balances long-range, large-scale desires with immediate gratification of present desire, all to the end that life be found good in the living of it.

Example iii: "I may not always be *certain* about what I want, but when I am, the question of error does not arise."

Sentence (iii) is patently false or trivially true in that if *you* are certain about *z* (where *z* = your needs, wants, the color of Mars, anything) then the question of error *about z* does not arise *for you*. (Or so you say, but I wonder. Speaking personally again, the question of error does trouble me on occasion, even about matters I'm most certain of.) But let us grant your self-description and ask if the question of error can arise elsewhere. Just to be sure, let us put the question exactly: Given that Marples is certain that he wants X, is there possible error in the claim "Marples wants X"?

Marples points out one way in which error can arise. "Desires have a certain rationale," as he says, you want X because you believe it has, to use Marple's phrase, "so-called desirability-characteristics." That *belief*, of course, is no more shielded from the question of error than any other belief you may hold, however certain you are of it. Others may say of you. "However certain he feels about it, Marples doesn't really want X; he only thinks he does because he's confused it with Y."

And the question of error can arise at a deeper level still. Let us grant everything questioned above, that X has C, the desirability-characteristics you attribute to X, grant also that you believe with certainty that you want X and that you want it because it has C. Even so, the question of error could arise. "Oh yes," a friend might say, "Marples is quite certain that he wants X, but that is only because he doesn't know himself very well." (The question of error can arise *almost* anywhere, even about the perfectly air-tight arguments just presented.)

Proceeding at an equally intense level of criticism through each page of Marples's paper we encounter many more interesting philosophical issues than we've time to pursue. But the upshot is determined once we get past the first few pages. Marples's case is not exactly a non-starter, but it fades fast after the first furlong. In this juror's opinion, based solely on evidence presented, the case against White is to be dismissed, all costs assigned to Marples.

THE QUESTION RE-CONCEPTUALIZED

Along with apologies to Mr. Marples for inattention to other points of interest in his paper, may I extend to him respect and support for the progressive pedagogical consequences he derives from his thesis ("Pupils [must] make their own decisions about what to believe and what to do...") and congratulations on the good things he and his friends enjoys in life, ("We take delight in art..."). But may I return to his opening line: "My aim is to cast serious doubt on those accounts of well-being which see it in terms of desire-satisfaction." Cut to the core. What *is* the connection between human well-being and the satisfaction of desire? How is education related to both? Aye, those connections trace to the deepest conceptual levels where all theorizing must converge. Marples is asking how the conceptual map should be construed. I propose the following rough sketch. We start from the top of the map, labeled the *Summum Bonum* of Human Life. We see various options to plug in. How shall the highest good of human life, that state of being we desire above all else, be named or conceived -- human flourishing (Marples's term, and a good one), well-being, happiness, eudaimonia, blessedness, life found good in the living of it...? On this question more than any other now current in philosophical discourse, I should say, the best answer we can give is simply to quote Aristotle: "Happiness is...activity in accordance with virtue, or, if there be more than one of these, in accordance with the highest or noblest of them" (N.E. 1078).

Having anchored our concepts at the top, we look around for candidates to instantiate Aristotle's abstract categories. How do the particulars gathered under "activities in accordance with virtue"

correspond to those under "desire-satisfaction?" Here, Mr. Marples, is a truth the Greeks knew well, one you seem to have forgotten: no act is an instance of activity in accordance with virtue that is not also an act aimed at the satisfaction of some desire. Thus desire not only holds "logical priority over value," an obvious truth Marples seeks to "undermine," desire holds logical, moral, ontological, even theological priority over *everything*. Before the first verse of Genesis was true, there was God's *desire* that there be a universe to look upon. (Based on the status accorded Eros in our respective theologies, I hypothesized, correctly as it happens, that Mr. Marples is my junior.) But on the point at issue here: action aimed at the satisfaction of desire is not the most important component of human well-being, it is the only component. (Thank you, Vince Lombardi.)

Marples says that we are not mere bundles of desires confronted with the task of getting ourselves into some sort of order. I say that is precisely, nicely, exactly-to-the-letter what we are. Each of us is a mere bundle of desires; we collectively, as a family, community, society, nation, even as a species, are mere bundles of mere bundles of desires, collectively confronting (or, alas, more often failing to confront) the task of getting ourselves into some sort of viable order.

Primary socialization at mother's breast is the first step in getting a mere bundle of desires into some sort of order. Education enters when we are concerned about *what* sort of order we want, when we want it badly enough to insist that not just any sort will do, but only one in which human personality can find its fullest development and expression. Through education we seek an order which comes from and leads to harmony in the souls of our people, first off, in the lived lives of children. Aristotle assures us that the end of education is that children shall love (read desire) what they ought to love and hate what they ought to hate. What children should learn to desire is a form of collective life in which they may reasonably believe it possible for everyone to pursue happiness, that is, to achieve a life of activity in accordance with moral-political and intellectual virtues.

A curriculum designed to achieve that end would emphasize feeling and imagination, taking its cue from Plato's treatment of music throughout the *Republic*. I would but add a codicil to the simple wisdom here cited from our Hellenic forebears: To know what we ought to love, desire, pursue; and what we ought to hate, despise, shun -- implies knowing who we are, what roles we play, where and how we stand in the drama of human evolution now unfolding toward species climax. If that seemingly obvious premise is accepted, the whole skein of Marxist-Leninist theorems follows inexorably. But that is for another occasion.

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