

## The Freedom of the Playpen<sup>1</sup>

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McClellan has a vision of the world that he has been propounding all of his career — it's found in his earliest and now in his latest works; it's a utopian world, one in which people never do anything because they are forced to do it, a world of freedom where people's desires and actions blend together in harmony.<sup>2</sup>

It's an educational utopia where people learn only what they want to learn as their lives intersect with the world and with others' lives. It is a world where no one is compelled to undergo any experiences for the purpose of learning something that someone else had decided must be learned. And it's a world where the great things in human culture are learned and treasured and passed from one generation to the next because people have come to recognize their greatness through this voluntary learning.<sup>3</sup>

It's an impossible world, of course; that's what utopias are. That McClellan believes that it might come about by political action and changes in schools (not to say education) gives us another element of his philosophical character: he's what I want to call a "hopeless" optimist — but that would be wrong, for he is nothing if not hopeful in his optimism. He really believes that things could be different, that the nature of human communities (or societies) could change if only we would wake up and think right.

That's the problem faced in this paper: How *can* we think right? What sort of thinking should we try to get our children (or students) to engage in if we really want them (and us) to approach this Nirvana? How should we ourselves think as we engage them in their education?

Throughout my career, I have been surprised by McClellan's philosophical moves. His treatment here of what he sees as the "intractable dualism" between theoretical and practical reasoning leaves me agape. In the first place, the usual way of distinguishing the two centers on the object of the reasoning: theoretical reasoning aims at knowledge, it is said, while practical reasoning aims at action. Both are deductive, but practical reasoning always includes a desire (value, need, want, etc.) as at least one premise (or *in* at least one premise).<sup>4</sup> In the second place, there has been considerable effort to show that theoretical and practical reasoning are not all that different. This takes two forms: the simpler attempts to show that practical reasoning must involve theoretical reasoning (i.e., knowledge proven or supported by theoretical investigations); the more complicated form argues that practical reason is always involved in theoretical reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

But in a move that I have not seen in the literature,<sup>6</sup> McClellan argues that practical and theoretical reason cannot be reduced to a single form or type of reasoning. Why not? Because in theoretical arguments, the conclusions (propositions) necessarily follow from the premises, while in practical arguments, the conclusions (actions) do not. Only tortoises (or obstreperous students in elementary

critical thinking classes) are unable to *feel* the necessity of the first; but everyone (tortoises and the rest of us) realizes that Adam's staying on that boat is not a logical contradiction of the premises that McClellan assumes should lead him to jump.

The difference that these examples putatively establish between T-reasoning and P-reasoning sets up a dilemma for schools, McClellan holds. For if we go for theoretical reasoning (about featherless birds, an immortal Socrates, or even Our Theory of the World, perhaps), we might well end up with glib students who are unable to see how any of their conclusions affect their lives. But if we go for authentic P-reasoning students in schools, we cannot succeed because schools are not where those students would choose to be. If we did have a school where students could be directed by their own "impulses," it would be highly unlikely that their impulses would lead them into the T-reasoning mode: Summerhill is not noted for turning out great scientists, whatever its other virtues.

To resolve the dilemma, McClellan suggests attention to "productive" reasoning — that used in "making and building," in creating works of art, in building cities and character. But this reasoning, he fears, has no "logic" or at least none that could be useful in guiding educational practice. So he proposes that we (educators, philosophers, teachers, human beings) become practical thinkers, working out a vision of "human upbringing where children and youth self-consciously engage in building their individual characters while cooperatively re-building their world, practicing T-reasoning rigorously and P-reasoning courageously." Putting this vision into practice, of course, requires a greatly changed political and economic order — and that means collective action to change the system.

At this point, I admit to being a bit confused. I thought that these were incompatibilities, that the three types of reasoning in some way precluded one another in McClellan's world; but no — they are incompatible only in *our* world, and that world can be — and *must* be — changed to become his. Compatible T-reasoning, P-reasoning and Productive reasoning are possible, it seems, only in that world to which we are drawn. In fact, they define McClellan's Utopia: it's that place where these are actual and are compatible.

Now for some comments on the development of this vision. Realize, please, that McClellan's perennial optimism will be faced with my endemic pessimism: I don't believe that human society — or human nature — is likely to change as much as McClellan believes is possible. On the other hand, I'm not as gloomy about the present state of affairs. We do a lot of things wrong, but it's our *doing* that's wrong. To understand why the doing is wrong, let me present two more tales to add to the practical reasoning tragedy that is central to McClellan's paper.

First consider the story of Charlene, who is driving her new ABT equipped Volvo along "the Strip" in Tallahassee, Florida. A drunken student stumbles in front of her. Charlene stamps on the brakes and comes to a screaming halt just short of the drunken student, who sobers up and walks away more carefully. There is no reason to believe that Charlene did a quick practical calculation here, considering desires and ways of achieving them; she just stamped on those brakes and they worked. But any attempt to explain (or justify) her action will lead directly into classical P-reasoning:

1. Charlene desired very strongly not to hit that student.
2. Charlene believed (recognized, knew) that stamping on the brakes was a (the?) way to avoid hitting the student.
3. Charlene had no other options open to her: there were cars in the other lanes and collision with them would have been worse.
4. Charlene had no reason not to stamp on the brakes — she knew their excellence, and she knew that the car stops without swerving.
5. Charlene stamped on the brakes and missed the student.

Why is this important? Actions explained and justified by practical syllogisms (or other forms of practical reasoning) should often be habitual actions, actions done without the need for immediate episodes of such thinking. Charlene deserves praise for her driving, but the teacher who taught her how to drive also deserves praise, at least insofar as Charlene's actions are the result of the teaching. Charlene has been taught a syllogism not too terribly different from the one that Bert too glibly accepts, hasn't she?

But if this is the result of good teaching, why not Adam's and Bert's tragic learning? It's the *content* of the learning that's wrong, not the form. And if Bert were to be aware of what he has accepted, and to argue with McClellan that Adam did the *right* thing, not merely the *conditioned* thing, it would be a substantive argument about right conduct in such circumstances.

Now let us imagine another situation, one in which the P-reasoning is as explicit as Adam's.

1. Duncan wants (for various reasons) to own a satin Seminole warm-up jacket. In fact, this is a burning desire for him, an all consuming passion.
2. Duncan sees Elliot — a young man of his own size and shape — walking out of the Garnet and Gold shop carrying a new satin Seminole warm-up jacket over his arm.
3. Duncan just happens to be a Karate expert; he knows that a quick blow to the neck will kill Elliot; there will be no pain for him, and Duncan will have a satin Seminole warm-up jacket for himself. Being poor, he can conceive of no other way get a satin Seminole warm-up jacket for himself.
4. Duncan surveys the street, sees that there is no one who might see him there; there is no apparent risk to him if he were to give that rabbit punch to Elliot.
5. You fill in the ending.

The fact that there are at least two possible endings may prove McClellan's point, but it also suggests that something is missing in these examples of P-reasoning. What I find missing is that *impulse* that McClellan finds so important in his educational utopia. I suspect that it's hidden somewhere between premise 4 and the conclusion 5. Premises 1-4 can be seen as leading not to *action*, but to another conclusion: Adam *wants* to jump off the boat; Charlene *wants* to stamp on the brakes, and Duncan *wants* to rabbit punch Elliot. The "practical syllogism" doesn't have an

*action* as its logical conclusion, but rather another *want*, one that follows logically from the description of the first want and the premises describing the means to achieve it.<sup>7</sup>

The gap — no longer logical (if it ever was) — is between wanting and doing. But this, McClellan or someone else might charge, is just another *argumentum ad infinitum* since we must have another practical syllogism that starts, “Adam wants to jump off of the boat, and...” leading to the conclusion that he jumps. A tortoise might appreciate this move, but this doesn’t work. Adam just does it (or doesn’t) at this point. The reasoning is behind him now and he acts. Period. It isn’t a tragedy because of the form here; again it’s a substantive argument we might have over which decision is correct. Adam’s got it all wrong if he doesn’t act on that impulse, McClellan argues; but Duncan’s got it all wrong if he does, doesn’t he? Educationally, we’ve done wrong if we have not given Duncan the chance to think about his desires and impulses, to ascend, as McClellan suggests, the scale of Diotima. But to wait for utopia for this seems to me to be a cop out. We have to work with the present world, to change from within.

McClellan thinks that compulsion makes it impossible for P-reasoning to be a possibility in any school. He quotes Miss Baker, from Greta Morine-Dersheimer’s work. It’s worth quoting her in more length:

They’re not here because they want to be here, they’re here because they have to, and if they can kid around a little bit, they’re gonna try and do it. And so it doesn’t bother me a whole lot (if they’re talking). It does bother me when they get loud. And if they won’t *quit* talking, then I get mad.<sup>8</sup>

But where is “here?” Suppose it’s Summerhill — the children whose parents sent them there surely didn’t *want* to be there, so we can’t use that example. In general, we can assume that any school or educational institution involves some form of compulsion to get and keep the students there. Miss Baker is talking about an ordinary school somewhere in the United States, but she might as well have meant “here in this life,” for it’s part of the human condition for teenagers and other beings not to want to be here. And sometimes we have to control the kidding around and get mad at it. And sometimes (wisely or serendipitously) we are able to use it for their own education. We probably aren’t clever enough always to see the opportunities, but *we* might learn. We can make those institutions educational in surprising ways — the playpen, after all, can provide freedom and education for its occupant.

An anecdote to illustrate this point: I spent an afternoon last summer with my eight-month old granddaughter, Lindsay, and her parents. I was reading and dozing in grandfatherly fashion while the baby and a parent sat on the floor surrounded by a great variety of toys. Lindsay was almost crawling, almost standing. In a desultory way, she played with the toys, noisily encouraged by a parent who showed her how to stack things together, how to make a music box play, how to manipulate the things in front of her — and who neaten up everything as the play period went on. Then the parent left, leaving Lindsay in a playpen with all of the toys. I saw the freedom of the playpen then: left to her own wiles, Lindsay tried all sorts of new things with those toys: played new music on the music box, discovered how things don’t fit together; she stood up and threw things out of the playpen. She learned a lot in that

half hour period before her parents reappeared and started encouraging her again. The playpen had given her the freedom to find her own way in a rich environment, to explore it in safety and comfort, to bang her head on things when she fell down, but to get up again.

I think that rich environments for learning are possible in schools now; I also think that children should expect to be there whether they want to be or not. They do not and cannot always set their own agendas,<sup>9</sup> although there is much more room for cooperation than most schools allow. We have to provide the playpen and the toys to fill it. If we do this well, they might develop<sup>10</sup> the sort of character that McClellan doesn't find in poor Adam and Bert. That is not a utopian vision, but a possibility in today's schools. Maybe.<sup>11</sup>

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1. I owe much to Mr. Yasushi Maruyama, who has discussed the issues in McClellan's paper with me. He showed me the way.

2. The intellectual roots of this vision can be traced from ancient times through Rousseau to Dewey, from Hegel to Marx through Quine to McClellan. I won't take on that formidable task; nor do I want to praise or blame any of these for being forerunners of this piece.

3. The child runs toward the street; the parent swats her as he brings her back into the yard. In McClellan's world, that swat cannot be justified by a pedagogical goal, i.e., that she learn to stay out of the street. Perhaps it cannot be justified at all.

4. As well as I understand it — which may be very little — this is what I think Aristotle was after in the Nichomachean Ethics; others have generally followed his lead or have written footnotes that make minor corrections.

5. For the latter view, see Jaakko Hintikka, "Practical vs. Theoretical Reason — An Ambiguous Legacy," in *Practical Reason*, ed. Stephan Körner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 83-102.

6. My inability to recall this move may not be a great compliment to McClellan, however, since this isn't an area of expertise for me. It's brilliant wherever it comes from.

7. Put differently, only propositions follow logically from propositions. Actions are a different matter; they follow other actions, which might be episodes of reasoning by the agent.

8. Greta Morine-Dershimer, "Practical Examples of the Practical Argument: A Case in Point," *Educational Theory* 37, no. 4 (1987): 398, fn. 10.

9. To get a flavor of how this term might be used in a better school, see Henry J. Perkinson, *Teachers without Goals, Students without Purposes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 30-31.

10. They might *develop* character, not "self-consciously engage in building their individual characters" as McClellan put it; to show why I object to this would require another complete response.

11. My qualms are political: with public schools controlled the way they now are, it might be difficult to set any agenda that didn't run into conflict with parents, politicians, and others with anti-educational drums to bang. But that just says it's difficult, not impossible. See Herbert N. Foerstel, *Banned in the U. S. A.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).