

Response to Suppes

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Pat Suppes has invited us to think about two important ideas. First, he reminds us that responsible people in every age and place must be concerned about the aims of education. We can learn from the past, he says, but we must still think afresh and find answers for our own time. With this I agree heartily. Not only do aims differ across cultures and times and among individuals but they even change within an individual. Experience, reflection, and imagination may induce substantial change.

Second, after describing three very different approaches to the subject of aims, Pat suggests that negotiation and effective modes of conflict resolution are necessary if a discussion is to be useful -- that is, applicable to public education. On this I also agree, but with some reservations.

I will comment briefly on each of the three approaches Pat has described and then concentrate on the issues involved in negotiation and conflict resolution.

It is probably a sign of the times that most of us today reject Aristotle's notion of a "greatest good." Those of us struggling with Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Levinas, and their helpful interpreters (Bernstein and Caputo come to mind) are almost completely cured of searching for single greatest "x"s -- goods, virtues, visions of justice, sets of criteria for knowledge, or any other greatest x. There is just one flaw in our pluralism: We still want to argue over these matters. As we toss out most of the products and prejudices of the Enlightenment, we cling to some of its basic methods: locating and positing premises, rooting out fallacies, pressing for evidence, suggesting feasible alternatives, and the like. We no longer seek grand narratives or absolute beginnings, but we still rely -- at least to some degree -- on rationality writ large. We have more faith in problem solving and rational conversation than we do in burning incense, examining the entrails of freshly killed chickens, or casting our daughters into volcanoes. This will be important as my response progresses.

Because we see value in rational conversation, even those of us who reject Aristotle's view of the virtues engage eagerly in conversation about them. For example, I would argue (along with Dewey and many postmodern writers) that virtues should not be regarded as attributes of individual persons but, rather, as qualities of relations and interactions. We could have a splendid argument over this, and several of us would dash home and write spirited papers as a result. Obviously our differences on the subject of the virtues would lead to differences on the topic of aims.

Dewey presents a picture very different from Aristotle's. For Dewey, the aims of education must be embedded in education itself, and that is because the primary aim is more education. Pat is right to say that Dewey is not specific in his discussion of aims. But Dewey is not vague about what he opposes; he is clearly opposed to a pre-specified ideal of the educated person, a single greatest good, or any goal lying entirely outside education. This is one of the few places where I disagree with Pat. He says that "with a change of only a few words," what Dewey says about the aims of education could apply as well to agriculture, steel manufacture, or warfare. But surely we would have to take a very cynical stance to say that the aim of agriculture is more agriculture; of steel manufacture, more of the same; or of warfare more war. No. Education is, for Dewey, unique and fundamental among human enterprises.

As a postmodern fellow-traveler (I haven't actually joined up yet), I can forgive and perhaps even applaud Dewey's lack of specificity. What worries me is that he continually *covers up* what must be, for him, a primary educational aim: to produce people who will understand, appreciate, and use the "method of intelligence." It is clear that he wants this, but he never comes right out with it -- at least not in his discussion of aims. Elsewhere, as Pat points out, he does describe several desirable outcomes of schooling. I suppose he resisted this kind of specificity in his discussion of aims because he feared that others would distill an ideal from his description and rupture the seamless fabric of means and ends by detaching a set of ends entirely.

The Freudian view strikes many of us as right and important at a rather abstract level; that is, we may agree that the "instinctual" life of the child should be a consideration in education. Early childhood education today is loaded with talk of natural interests, developmentally appropriate tasks, readiness, and the like. But our current view of the child is very different from Miss Freud's. Most of us do not believe that the child is naturally inconsiderate, greedy, cruel, and destructive. If we follow Maria Montessori, we would blame ourselves for producing these apparently natural traits by failing to attend to the critical periods of child development.

But notice again what a wonderful conversation could be started. Freudians and anti-Freudians, developmentalists, followers of Montessori, believers in original sin, and almost everyone else could be part of the conversation -- almost everyone else except those who do not believe in this kind of conversation at all.

This last observation leads to some questions about Pat's recommendations. It sounds entirely reasonable to say, as he does, that "we need to make good use of the wide agreement on the restricted aims of instruction" -- for example, the three Rs. But I wonder how far beyond this such "wide agreement" exists. Pat suggests that we might satisfy some current demands for moral education by extending Aristotle's thought. Well, I wonder.

Consider the case of Heartwood, a literature-based program in moral education. It is clearly in the "character education" tradition, and this tradition traces its roots to Aristotle. Heartwood presents high-quality literature illustrating seven great virtues. The stories are drawn from all over the world. One would think that Christian fundamentalists would be delighted; all of the virtues discussed by Heartwood are virtues embraced by the Christian right. But they are *not* delighted. On the contrary, they are outraged, because Heartwood does not locate the source of these virtues in God. These people would rather have *no* moral education in schools than one that suggests (even implicitly) that human beings may find a source other than God for their goodness. Is compromise possible here? For that matter, is compromise even regarded as legitimate by the opponents of Heartwood?

Cases like Heartwood do not exhaust our problems. Today, people contest not only goals and aims, but the very methods and procedures by which we might establish and assess our goals. In philosophy, some challenge not only the traditional questions and answers of epistemology but the whole enterprise; others attack traditional ethics and even blame "ethical" thinking for many of the world's ills; still others heap scorn on scientific notions of replicability and objectivity. I have great sympathy for these heretical movements -- especially the one in ethics where I am, myself, a heretic, working hard to introduce a new vocabulary. But here I face a paradox of sorts: I want the new vocabulary to include the language of emotions, to resound with the voices of the marginalized, to capture previously unarticulated traditions in a language compatible with those traditions, to use stories freely and effectively; but I do not want to give up logic and critical thinking entirely. I just want them (logic and critical thinking) to understand that they cannot always occupy the front of the bus.

So, then, how do I respond to African-American colleagues who say straight-out that they value passion and rhetoric above reasoned argument; to curriculum-makers who brush aside questions of veracity in curriculum materials in favor of the curriculum's effects on the self-esteem of minority

students; to some of my own feminist colleagues who equate understanding with agreement -- one who does not agree does not understand?

Just consider Pat's antinomies. How would I approach these? A few years ago I would have answered easily: "Why, through a type of Deweyan dialectic, of course." I would show that each can be construed as a resolvable paradox -- that there really is no *inherent* conflict between adjustment and achievement, method and content, the child and the curriculum, freedom and discipline. Plenty of practical conflicts would remain, and many of these would yield to the political techniques Pat has described.

But suppose that listeners today will not enter such a discussion? Worse, suppose the name "Dewey" (if I were foolish enough to use it) conjures up visions of Satan, and the picket lines are thrown up before I get out another word? What does an advocate of rational decision making do now? What, for that matter, does a radical, feminist, postmodern, heretic (who still believes in logic) do now?

I think we may have to learn to live with some conflicts. We may even have to live as several publics for a period of time: separate but peaceful; ready to talk but willing to let be. Abstaining from an insistence on resolution may indeed be one way to avoid both the violence inherent in forcing others to accept our rational procedures and the collapse of our own integrity.

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