

Misleading the Students: Conceptual Difficulties in Woolfolk's Account of Motivation

Frederick S. Ellett, Jr.
University of Western Ontario

David P. Ericson
University of Hawaii, Manoa

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to help student teachers come to understand the concepts and issues basic to the social, psychological, and philosophical foundations of education in these times. Some on the right, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, regard the social context as having so far degenerated that all that is left is “emotivism” and a confusion of tongues. Some of the radical left, such as Herbert Marcuse, regard capitalism as so constricting that one needs to get beyond tolerance, yet one sees no hope in so doing.¹ Some of the liberal left, such as Richard Rorty, believe that the system is now controlled by greedy and selfish people.² And even those who wish to get beyond the labels “right” and “left,” such as Jeffrey Stout, fear that the language of the market is leaking into other practices and corrupting them.³

Such criticisms are, of course, well known. There is no need to recount them here. But the surprising thing is that one, clearly unintended, manifestation of these imputed social plagues lies within our institutions of teacher education! Indeed, we may particularly find it in our departments of educational psychology. For a favorite text in many, if not most, introductory courses is Anita Woolfolk's *Educational Psychology*.⁴ The manifestation arises in Woolfolk's chapters on learner motivation, and it largely involves the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motives for behavior (*EP*, chaps. 10 and 11). Given Woolfolk's faithful rendering of the field, educational psychology *en tout* may well be on trial here. We shall argue, however, that the central ideas can be *recovered* in a more plausible account. Getting Woolfolk, at least, “on the road to a recovery” will rely upon a kind of virtue ethic, a kind of Aristotelean approach. The views of David Carr, William Hare, and Jeffrey Stout do have important insights.⁵ But we argue below that the *key* concepts and principles are presented in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and have been developed and extended by the work of John Kekes.⁶

WOOLFOLK ON INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND “FREE CHOICE”

Woolfolk's views are persuasive to students because Woolfolk uses “free choice” and “need” in seemingly plausible ways. That almost all regard these *terms* as important to an *ethical* (or moral) understanding of education is what gives her discussion such rhetorical force. In this section, we will explicate her central concepts and claims and try to put them in a wider context. In the final section, we will provide a critical recovery of the key ideas.

Woolfolk begins her discussion by noting that for psychologists motivation “is usually defined as an internal state that arouses, directs, and maintains behavior”

(*EP*, 366).⁷ She states that psychologists have focused on five questions, the first of which is “what choices do people make about their behavior?” (*EP*, 366). Later it will become clear why Woolfolk has limited motivation to those situations in which a person makes a *choice*. But here it should be pointed out that there are many educational settings in which a student was motivated to do something, but where the student did not make a choice. For example, a student may have strongly felt that the teacher was being unfair so that when called upon in class, the student quickly yelled back “Get lost!” So, students sometimes act out of indignation (or anger) without deliberating and making a choice. Sometimes they act out of jealousy (or envy) without deliberating and making a choice.

It might seem that Woolfolk accepts this general point, for when she asks “What energizes and directs our behavior?” she does say that “[t]he explanation could be drives, needs, incentives, fears, goals, social pressure, self-confidence, interests, curiosity, beliefs, values, expectations, and more” (*EP*, 368). This is a sensibly broad list. In her view, some explanations of motivation are “in terms of personal *traits* or individual characteristics” such as “a strong need to achieve, a fear of tests, or an enduring interest in art” (*EP*, 368). On the other hand, an explanation of motivation can be “a *state*, a temporary situation. If, for example, you are reading this paragraph because you have a test tomorrow, you are motivated (at least now) by the situation” (*EP*, 368). Woolfolk then concedes that our motivation is “usually a combination of trait and state” (*EP*, 368).

Yet Woolfolk holds that “some explanations of motivation rely on *internal, personal* factors such as needs, interests, curiosity, and enjoyment,” while other explanations “point to *external, environmental* factors—rewards, social pressure, punishment, and so on” (*EP*, 368, emphasis added). In trying to reach a general characterization, Woolfolk says that:

motivation that stems from such factors as interest or curiosity is called *intrinsic motivation*. Intrinsic motivation is the natural tendency to seek out and conquer challenges as we pursue personal interests and exercise capabilities.... When we are intrinsically motivated we do not need incentives or punishments, because the activity itself is rewarding (*EP*, 368).

This last phrase (the activity being rewarding) is misleading for two reasons. First, Woolfolk usually regards incentives, *rewards*, and punishments as performed by (under the control of) other persons outside of us. Second, Woolfolk holds (in a margin definition and in the glossary) that “intrinsic motivation is motivation associated with activities that are their own reward” (*EP*, 369). And this second move by Woolfolk leads many students to confuse (mistakenly) *intrinsic motivation* with *intrinsic value*. We return to this below.

As a *slogan*, we could say that intrinsic motivation gets us to do something we do not *have* to do. As Woolfolk says, “satisfied Sam studies chemistry outside school simply because he loves the activity; no one makes him do it” (*EP*, 368). How, then, does she characterize extrinsic motivation? She begins with the following remarks:

[W]hen we do something in order to earn a grade or reward, avoid punishment, please the teacher, or for some other reason that has very little to do with the task [activity] itself, we experience *extrinsic motivation*. We are not really interested in the activity [task] for its own sake; we care only about what it will gain us. Safe Sally works only for the grade; she has little interest in the subject itself (*EP*, 368).

We have now reached the core of Woolfolk's "definition" of intrinsic—extrinsic motivation. Woolfolk holds that "[t]he essential difference between [intrinsic and extrinsic] motivation is the student's reason for acting, that is, whether the *locus of causality* for the action (the location of the cause) is internal or external—inside or outside of the person" (EP, 368). And Woolfolk links the concept of locus of causality to the concept of free choice:

[s]tudents who read or practice their backstroke or paint may be reading, stoking, or painting because they *freely chose* the activity based on personal interests (*internal locus of causality/ intrinsic motivation*) or because something else outside is influencing them (*external locus of causality/extrinsic motivation*) (EP, 368 [emphasis on "freely chose" added]).

At any rate, a person's behavior is intrinsically motivated when it is freely chosen (self-determined), while a person's behavior is extrinsically motivated when it is unfree (determined by others). Woolfolk does immediately grant that "the dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is too simple, too all-or-nothing," for all can see that "[o]ur activities fall along a continuum from fully *self-determined* (internal locus of causality/ intrinsic motivation) to fully *determined by others* (external locus of causality/extrinsic motivation)" (EP, 369).

In summarizing Woolfolk's conception of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, the last passages provide the best clues. In effect, Woolfolk has put forward a Lockean view of freedom: to be free is to be *free from the influence or control* of other persons. In this view of freedom (self-determination), other persons tend to be seen as constraints or restrictions on the agent. Woolfolk herself does sense some difficulties with this view. Suppose a student wants to be a doctor and is working hard on anatomy to meet medical school requirements. For Woolfolk, such a student still "may freely choose to work hard" on activities which they do not find enjoyable, for the student sees "the activities to be important in reaching a valued goal." For Woolfolk, such a person has *freely chosen* to respond to the outside (external) causes—the medical school requirements; the student has "internalized an external cause" (EP, 11). (Yet, as we argue below, Woolfolk does nothing to clarify and defend this claim.) And Woolfolk writes elsewhere, "But even if they are not intrinsically motivated by a particular task, they are serious about getting the intended benefit from it. They know *why* they are studying, so their actions and choices are self-determined and not controlled by others" (EP, 390). Again, a student who has decided to wash the car will only have one's (intrinsic) motivation dampened by a parent who now insists that the car be washed. For Woolfolk, in this carwash situation the student's intrinsic motivation has become extrinsic motivation (EP, 390). It leaves one wondering what Woolfolk could consistently say about the significance of students being *required* to attend school and to take specific courses?

So far we have focused on the general discussion Woolfolk places in chapter ten. Yet some relevant concepts are placed in chapter eleven, "Motivation, Teaching, and Learning." Woolfolk says that whether a student sets about to perform the tasks (and so to learn the material) may well depend upon whether the student *sees* the tasks (and the material) as having *value*. And for Woolfolk, "[t]eachers can use intrinsic and extrinsic motivation strategies to help students see *the value* of the learning task" (EP, 422, emphasis added).⁸ Seemingly unmoved by the enormity of

the task of defining (or characterizing) *value*, Woolfolk straightforwardly defines the following concepts: *intrinsic (or interest) value*, *attainment value*, and *utility value*. For Woolfolk, “attainment value” is the importance of doing the task well; it is tied closely to the student needs. (And perhaps tied to the meaning of success for that person? Woolfolk wavers.) “Intrinsic (or interest) value” is simply the *enjoyment* one gets from the activity (task) itself. Some people (just) like the experience of learning. Finally, a task (activity) has “utility (or instrumental) value” when it helps the student achieve some short-term or long-term goal (*EP*, 407, 422-24, 601).

Of course, a writer *can* define her terms in anyway she wants. But several difficulties quickly arise from Woolfolk’s use of the terms. First, most students tend to confuse intrinsic motivation and intrinsic value. Probably this confusion is partly due to the verbal similarity between the two terms. But it is also likely that the confusion is partly due to the way in which Woolfolk has (mistakenly) characterized intrinsic motivation as “motivation associated with activities that are their own reward.” To say an activity is its own reward tends to suggest that the activity has intrinsic value. The second difficulty is that intrinsic value is given a *hedonistic* characterization. For Woolfolk, intrinsic value is conceptually linked to finding enjoyable, liking, or finding pleasant. In contrast, R.S. Peters surely did not mean this when he argued that to be educated a person must see specific forms of knowledge as intrinsically valuable. Here, Peters was not talking about good feelings. Perhaps we should not be surprised to find psychologists psychologizing the key value terms. But those of us who are interested in teaching about the concepts and issues basic to the social and philosophical foundations of education will find it dismaying that students (who have read Woolfolk) have acquired serious misconceptions and confusions.

ON THE ROAD TO A RECOVERY

In spite of our views about the serious inadequacies of Woolfolk’s views, we think there is a way to “recover” the key terms in a comparatively plausible manner. Perhaps Woolfolk will accept our criticisms as *constructive*. Again, the recovery is based upon a kind of virtue ethic, a kind of Aristotlean approach to human flourishing. The views of David Carr, William Hare, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Jeffrey Stout have important insights here. But in our view the key concepts and principles relevant here are found in work of MacIntyre and have been most plausibly developed in the work of John Kekes.

The following quotation might serve to give a brief overview of Kekes’s general approach:

The idea I propose to develop is that good lives depend on doing what we want. However, no sooner is this said than it must be qualified, for we may want to do vicious, destructive, stupid, or incompatible things, and they, of course do not lead to good lives. Thus, we should do what we want only within the bounds of reason....I shall call lives good only if they are both personally satisfying and have moral merit.⁹

For Kekes, reasonable humans seek to live a good life (and avoid evil). A good society will help provide basic conditions that are needed for living a good life (and so it will fulfill basic “deficiency-needs”). And a good society will foster basic decency and help maintain an adequate variety and number of social *practices*

(“local traditions”) so that individuals may acquire those *internal* and *external* goods best suited to their good life.

Let us start, then, by considering Woolfolk’s (Lockean) views on *free choice* (and *self-determination*). There are several difficulties with the view that to be free is to be free from the control of others. First, the Woolfolk view seems to allow that a person with a drug addiction (or a person with a severe snake phobia) is acting freely in so far as the person is motivated by such an internal state. But most people do *not* regard addicts (and phobics) as *acting freely*. Second, the Woolfolk view seems to allow that a “free” person can (reasonably) judge that the right thing would be doing A, but be unable to bring oneself to do A because of temptations (or weakness of will). But even though this person was motivated by their own internal state, most people would *not* say the person is acting *freely* (or in a self-determined way). At one place Woolfolk seems ready to move in a promising direction when she introduces the notion of volition (or will power); she grants that a person can have “the knowledge and the motivation, but to keep going [the person needs] a good dose of volition” (EP, 11).¹⁰ But adequate development would require Woolfolk to take seriously the role of *character* in motivating people to act. As MacIntyre and Kekes might put it, most of the time most people act out of *character* (and not out of *choice*). But in Woolfolk’s textbook, the concepts of virtue (good character) and wickedness (bad character) hardly appear. And related to this difficulty for Woolfolk would be that one’s (initial) character is largely one which the person has been *trained* by others to have. If one has acquired the virtue of courage (and then has acted courageously), this virtue was probably acquired primarily by the influence of others. Here other persons are seen as *enabling* a person to act (instead of seeing others as constraining). So, contrary to Woolfolk’s view, free action (and self-determination) may not be so opposed to being influenced by others.

Although Woolfolk seems willing to include some conception of volition (or will power), she shows little inclination to link “volition” to practical rationality that has the task of deliberating about what to do, about what action to perform. Yet without some linkage to rationality, Woolfolk’s *volition* will be able to “stand in opposition” to what reason decides. The difficulty here is not that sometimes one can *be overwhelmed* and act against one’s reason. This is a fact of human life. The difficulty is that when one is *so overcome* that one acts against one’s reasonable view of what one should do (should be), then most people would *not* regard it as plausible to call such activity *free* (or self-determined).

So, then, let us reject the Woolfolk (Lockean) view of “freedom.” In our view, Kekes offers a comparatively (more) plausible account of self-control by linking “freedom” to our ability to evaluate and control our *desires*. In particular, we are *in control* of actions insofar as we *identify* (by means of a *reasoned evaluation*) with the *desires* that motivate the *actions*.¹¹ Woolfolk never discusses students evaluating and controlling their own (conflicting) *desires* in acting. In Kekes’s account, it is important to see the *problem of self-control* not as one of *total-control*, but as one in which the person *increases the control* she already has. For Kekes, one can admit that a lot of kinds of things—genetically inherited dispositions and capacities, socially induced values and prejudices, familial attitudes, and so on do indeed

influence us, and yet one can still hold that we are “in control.” For to be *comparatively free* and able to *increase* our control involves, among other things, knowing what factors have been influencing our actions, *evaluating* whether the *desires* we have are at least consistent with our *conception of the good life*, and freeing our actions from those *desires* judged to be unacceptable.¹² Given that reasonable people seek to make a *good life* for themselves, then reasonable people will be better able to make a good life for themselves as they *increase* their control of their desires and actions. Thus, most people have good reasons to do what they can to *increase* the amount of control they have.

We have provided reasons for rejecting Woolfolk’s account of freedom (self-determination), and we have tried to present in a brief manner an approach to self-control that is comparatively more plausible. Of course, a lot more needs to be said here. In the space that remains, however, we will turn to a (brief) recovery of the key *value* terms. In the widest sense, our approach is broadly Aristotelean, but it has been informed by the recent work of MacIntyre, Stout, and Kekes. From MacIntyre we draw upon his notion of *social practice*. For MacIntyre, “arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelean sense, the making and sustaining of a family, all fall under the concept [of practice].”¹³ For MacIntyre, a *social practice* can be characterized by having two kinds of goods, internal and external goods. And one can *only* achieve the *internal goods* of a practice by *engaging in the practice* by following its standards, rules, and authoritative exemplars. Whether one is following the standards, rules, and authoritative exemplars of the practice is something about which *objective* judgments can be made. Such judgments hardly fit an *emotivist* account of value. The external goods of a practice typically involve such things as money, status, prestige, and security; and external goods can in general be obtained in many different ways. For MacIntyre, every viable practice needs to be housed in an institution. Institutions typically distribute the external goods.

One feature of an Aristotelean kind of approach needs emphasis. Let us assume that teaching (the instruction of students) is a social practice.¹⁴ Let us suppose that the teacher has performed well by helping, say, the students “deeply” learn that only by their own efforts can they make a good life, a life which is forever vulnerable to natural and moral evils (undeserved harms).¹⁵ So far, then, the teacher has conformed to the practice’s standards, rules, and authoritative exemplars (which was one of teacher’s deepest commitments). Let us also suppose that in the teacher’s recognizing that the activities so conformed, the teacher also reaped (an appropriate amount of) satisfaction. In *both* conforming to the practice’s standards, rules, and authoritative exemplars *and* experiencing satisfaction the teacher has achieved an *internal good* of the practice. Suppose also that the teacher has received awards (which were *justly* given out) *and* felt satisfaction in being so recognized and acknowledged. In such a situation, the teacher will have achieved recognition as an external good. And a similar story can hold for security. The physical and financial security afforded by the school system may well enable the teacher to carry out the good teaching. And when the teacher also has a deep sense of appreciation of that security, the teacher will have achieved security as an external good. Achieving such internal and external goods is what makes teaching, for some at least, a rewarding

part of their efforts to live good lives. Thus, what is central to this broadly Aristotelean approach is that *both internal and external goods* involve human *satisfaction*. There is a very old tradition which holds that only internal goods are required for good lives. But it should be clear that this view is mistaken because some external goods (such as security) are also basic requirements for good lives.¹⁶

Now let us explicate the *traditional* distinction between *intrinsic* value, *instrumental* value, and *mixed* value. An object has *intrinsic* value insofar as it has value-in-itself. For teaching, it is plausible that one of the intrinsic values of the practice is helping the students learn (things which are important to making their lives good). For R. S. Peters, an educated person recognizes specific cases of *knowledge* as good or valuable-in-itself.¹⁷ By contrast, an object has *instrumental* value in so far as it *leads to* something else which has *intrinsic* value. Now for Aristotle, and for us as well, the best objects have *mixed* value: such objects have *both* intrinsic value and extrinsic value. For example, in winter people often find a warm bath both intrinsically good (it *feels good*) and extrinsically good (it cleans one up).¹⁸

How do these traditional distinctions relate to *internal* and *external* goods? Well, let us begin by asserting that helping the students learn (things which are important to making good lives) is one of the intrinsic values of the practice of teaching. And let us also suppose that the teacher also takes satisfaction in helping students learn. Then the teacher will have achieved an internal good of the practice. The *internal good* is itself a *mixed value*. Since it involves satisfaction and intrinsic value, it is intrinsically valuable. Yet it is also “instrumental,” for achieving such things plays a key role in making the person’s life good. As it is often put, achieving such things is a “constitutive” part of living a good life. Similar points also hold for external goods; these, too, are often mixed goods.

Let us now consider Woolfolk’s terms. Recall that for Woolfolk an object has “utility (or instrumental) value” when it helps the student achieve some short-term or long-term goal. So, then, Woolfolk’s “utility value” is not the same as the traditional “instrumental value” because the latter is, but the former is not, conceptually tied to “intrinsic value.” Furthermore, Woolfolk arbitrarily restricts “intrinsic value” to “enjoyments” (good feelings). A Millian utilitarian might accept this restriction, but most others will not. Any plausible account will have to provide for other varieties of (objective) intrinsic goods. Also, Woolfolk’s distinguishing between *intrinsic(w)* and *utility(w) value* overlooks the possibility that the best objects are *mixed*. To be useful Woolfolk’s “attainment value” should be separated out into either intrinsic or instrumental values. And she should develop the suggestion that a person’s conception of the good life should play a key role in explicating both “intrinsic value” and “freedom.” Indeed, Woolfolk’s distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic motives* is primarily used to develop a (defensible?) notion of *free* action (or self-determination). Yet Woolfolk mistakenly suggests that intrinsic-motives are always intrinsically good.

We have presented reasons for holding that Woolfolk’s view is comparatively inadequate; we have tried to articulate a more plausible account of *self-control*. Finally, we have noted that both *internal* and *external goods* involves *satisfaction*

and that “external good” also applies to those things which we require to carry out our lives and which must be primarily provided and maintained by other people. So *external* goods (which are primarily provided by others) are indeed required for having a good life.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that Woolfolk’s views on motivation, freedom, and values create serious difficulties for helping student teachers come to understand concepts and principles basic to a (more) plausible account of human motivation. In the spirit of constructive criticism, we have briefly argued for a (more) plausible account, and we have pointed the way to Woolfolk, if not educational psychology as well, “to the road of recovery.”¹⁹

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1990); and Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in *Critical Sociology*, ed. Connerton (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 301-29.

2. Richard Rorty, “Human Rights,” in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 167-85.

3. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).

4. Anita E. Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology*, 8th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001). This book will be cited as *EP* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. David Carr, *Educating the Virtues* (London: Routledge, 1991) and William Hare, *What Makes a Good Teacher?* (London: Althouse Press, 1993).

6. See John Kekes, *Moral Tradition and Individuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

7. Here we just note her use of term “behavior.” See footnote 10.

8. In fact, why not start with the learner’s evaluation?

9. Kekes, *Moral Tradition and Individuality*, 3.

10. Here Woolfolk talks about trying to carry on when she is *tempted* to take a nap or to go eat!

11. John Kekes, *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). Kekes builds upon the work of Harry Frankfurt and Stuart Hampshire. Woolfolk (*EP*, 386) seems to limit accountability to freely chosen *behaviors*. Are students not accountable for their *desires*?

12. Even the judgment involved in one’s evaluation is subject to distorting influences, so steps will have to be taken to overcome typical obstacles to one’s judgment’s being reasonable. See Kekes, *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives*, 80-84.

13. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188.

14. Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 269-72, argues that doctoring and nursing are “social practices” for which the cardinal virtues (practical rationality, justice, courage, and temperance) and the theological virtues (hope, faith, and love) are central. See also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chap. 14-15; Kekes, *Moral Tradition and Individuality*, chap. 10. Given certain restrictions, we hold *teaching* is also a social practice. (In what situations can *learning* be a practice?)

15. “Character-morality” is especially concerned to face (natural and moral) evil. See John Kekes, *Facing Evil* (Princeton University Press, Princeton; 1990); Kekes, *Moral Tradition and Individuality*; and Kekes, *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives*.

16. See Kekes, *Moral Tradition and Individuality*, chap. 10.

17. We believe it can be shown that for *some* people having knowledge *is* an intrinsic good and that for most people some form of knowledge, especially self-knowledge, will have instrumental value.

18. This passage only concedes that pleasant feelings are (often) one of the intrinsically good.

19. We would like to thank Kathryn Hibbert and Delyne Latimer for their thoughtful reactions.