

# Respect, Concern, and the Wrongness of Manipulation in Education

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## INTRODUCTION

Ron Aboodi provides an attractive account of how teachers' manipulative interference with the development of children's deliberative projects can be wrongful, even where such interference is not deceptive. I draw attention to the capacity of Aboodi's account of deliberative projects to avoid a potentially threatening objection. I am more committal than Aboodi in my preferred account of the right attitude towards the students' deliberative projects and explain my preferred version. I explore Matthew Clayton's account of the aims of education, which is also more committal than Aboodi's and differently so, and use this to explain one dimension along which Aboodi might consider developing his account. Finally, I query Aboodi's treatment of emotions.

## DELIBERATIVE PROJECTS: WARDING OFF A THREATENING OBJECTION

One point that wards off the potential collapse of Aboodi's account of deliberative projects could benefit from being more explicitly stated. The point is this: each element of our deliberative project need not be deliberated. Plausibly most elements of our deliberative project depend on further undeliberated premises (unconscious, though often well-formed beliefs, that guide and constrain our planning and reasoning). Demanding that they each be deliberated, would mean that we never get to have a deliberative project. Even Descartes' project of discovering indubitable foundations for science could not have been a deliberative project until and unless it was a success. By that point however, the foundations would no longer need to be discovered. Circumventing this nasty problem, Aboodi makes a nice move which

he does not trumpet, but which I will trumpet for him: each element of our deliberative project need not be deliberated in order to form part of our deliberative project. If we rely on some element (as a suppressed unreflective premise), that will suffice; we need not know that we are relying on it, or even that we have it.

#### DELIBERATIVE PROJECTS: A MORE COMMITTAL VERSION

Abodi seems to favor the view that deliberative projects can improve along several dimensions. I think they improve along just one master dimension: responsiveness to reasons. Humans have various reasons to think, feel, and act, but it is often hard for us to notice these reasons or respond to them appropriately. Education ought to equip and incline individuals to seek, discern, and respond to reasons appropriately. Indeed, this is just what (appropriate) responsiveness to reasons consists in. Our reasons (most generally) are to act in ways that serve our wellbeing, give meaning to our lives, and constrain our actions to within a morally permissible range.

Even where we act as the relevant reasons would have us act, if we do not act *for* those reasons, we may not (fully or even partially) realize the value of acting as the reasons would have us act (this is all most obvious in the case of acting in ways that conform with other people's moral rights). Furthermore, where we act as the relevant reasons would have us act, if we do not have a general and reliable disposition to act *for those reasons*, we are at risk of acting other than the relevant reasons would have us act on other occasions.

Noticing and responding to reasons requires various dispositions and skills. Dispositions and skills in seeking and sharing information, in forming and revising beliefs and betting behavior in ways that respond to the shifting sands of available evidence (including in discerning the credibility of testimony), and in discerning the value or disvalue of outcomes. The crucial question is what reasons we have to be responsive to; some of the reasons we should be responsive to are moral ones. If we have moral reason not to interfere with people's deliberative projects, plausibly this ought to be part

of the moral reasons responsiveness that educators ought to equip children with. I doubt, for instance, that it is only educators who would have such a reason (for example, merely because they have agreed not to interfere in this way, say).

Relatedly, I think that what manipulation typically undermines is our responsiveness to reasons:

1. The reasons-responsiveness of our actions and choices in particular circumstances, and in planning longer term, larger scale projects
2. Our capacity and inclination to seek out, to discern, and to respond appropriately, more generally.

#### PERFECTIONISM VERSUS ANTI-PERFECTIONISM

Aboodi has been careful not to say that children have a weighty interest in developing their own deliberative projects, allowing instead that there can be consequentialist reasons to enable children to form such projects (for example, adopting a deliberative project-enabling policy towards children on the whole conduces to a greater global net value). A more committal version of the thesis has been advanced by Matthew Clayton.<sup>1</sup> For Clayton there are two chief educational aims: equipping children with the opportunity and wherewithal to form 1) a conception of justice and 2) a conception of the good (as well as to be constrained and guided by these). Manipulative, coercive, and deceptive shaping of these conceptions are all ways in which the claims to form such conceptions can be violated. Constraints of justice, however, add a plausible limitation to the kinds of conceptions of the good we may form and act on (and even have an interest in forming and acting on). They also add a plausible limitation to the kinds of conceptions that others must refrain from interference with (for example, we have no valid claim to form or pursue racist conceptions of the good, or to be free from interference in doing so).

I agree with Aboodi that our fallibility and limitations as human beings call for epistemic humility regarding the soundness of prudential, moral,

and religious standards. However, Clayton thinks something much stronger: that acting out of concern for individuals, must be constrained by a requirement to treat them with respect.

Acting (only) from concern: overriding people's deliberative projects where it is in their objective interests for one to do so.

Acting from respect: not overriding people's deliberative projects even where it is in their objective interests for one to do so.

Aboodi is perhaps ambivalent about whether there are respect-based grounds for noninterference. However, policy consequences will require coming to a view. It can be the case that whichever general outlook one adopts, the same policies are recommended, but this fact will be hostage to fortune. Clayton for instance, will not equip children with or alert them to a full range of reasons that they have. Instead he will equip them with primary social goods, which are useful in the pursuit of almost any understanding of the good. Concern without respect means manipulative interference is only ever somewhat superficially wrong; more deeply you should paternalistically manipulate people whenever that yields their greatest paternalistic good. Allowing respect to override concern can mean that people miss out on their known objective good.

#### ABOODI'S TREATMENT OF EMOTIONS

For Aboodi, manipulation can involve mobilizing psychological mechanisms. For me, emotions can be warranted by reasons, and they can make us responsive to reasons. Emotions may play an ineliminable role in motivation, so that without them we could not act at all. First, appreciative understanding, as distinct from more formal and disinterested forms of understanding may require particular emotions since they are apt responses or colorations of relevant facts, as Michael Hand observes:

[C]ognition and affect are not at all easy to separate: an integral part of coming to understand the facts, theories, texts and narratives that make up the cognitive content of the curriculum is coming to feel their interest and excitement, their inspiration or

disenchantment, their nobility, injustice, comedy or tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

Antonio Damasio documents cases of patients who have sustained damage to the ventromedial region of their prefrontal cortices, without sustaining any intellectual damage (for example, to their capacities for memory, attention, language). It turns out that such patients consistently act in dramatically irrational ways. He contends that patients who have sustained this kind of brain damage lack “somatic markers”—bodily feelings such as anxiety, nausea, and disgust that are cued by emotions—fail to translate into action what they can recognize intellectually as being best.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Matthew Clayton, *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

2 Michael Hand, “Should We Promote Patriotism in Schools?” *Political Studies* 59, no. 2 (2011): 330.

3 Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London: Vintage, 2006), xviii.