

Challenging Affirmation

Susan Verducci

San José State University

Ryan Bevan calls for us to dispense with the model of cultivating autonomy based on the liberal consumerist model when it includes challenging students' identification with their comprehensive traditions. Instead, he invites us to cull and cultivate from within benign traditions the very values and deliberative processes necessary for liberalism. His argument deconstructs the logical and metaphysical problems of the challenging model. He writes that when the traditions themselves contain the values to be cultivated, guiding students to challenge these traditions effectively undercuts educational objectives. It is more sensible and more effective to affirm students' connections to their traditions and use the traditions themselves to cultivate the values and procedures required of liberal citizens.

Affirmation makes sound philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical sense for reasons beyond those Bevan articulates. A hallmark pedagogical strategy of the progressive movement that continues to withstand the tests of time and empirical science is the idea that we ought to use students' interests, understandings, and beliefs as springboards toward curricular objectives. The California Standards for the Teaching Profession open with this very idea; "Teachers [should] build on students' prior knowledge, life experience, and interests to achieve learning goals for all students."¹ Note that the words "build on" imply the sort of project that Bevan recommends. There is much sense in the proposed affirmation model.

Having myself, however, claimed membership in a small but vibrant pragmatic tradition in which a fundamental tenet includes skepticism of dualities, I shall begin where I stand within this tradition — curious to know the practical consequences of the affirmation model and resisting the invitation to choose between affirmation and challenge. On this last point, Bevan's conclusion that "the persistent challenging aspect of the consumerist model...*should be jettisoned all together*" (emphasis added) troubles me. In what follows, I will wonder about two related questions: (1) is it possible to make Bevan's affirmation model functional? and if so, (2) can it work without challenging students' identification with their religious traditions?

To see if the affirmation model holds, I try to imagine cases in which affirmation might bring about the diminishment of a value inherent in both liberalism and the particular religious tradition under examination. However, I immediately run into an obstacle: Bevan has narrowed the scope of discussion to "benign" comprehensive traditions. What is a benign tradition and how do I identify it? How do I distinguish between traditions that are benign and those that are, in contrast, malignant? To address these questions, I borrow the objections Bevan makes against the challenge model itself; he writes,

there is no standard for moral educators and their students in citizenship education by which to judge what aspects of their traditions need to be scrutinized and discarded and what aspects

need to be integrated or accepted as worthy of dedication into the morally autonomous reflective and deliberative process.

Bevan's own objection translates into a standard for determining the status of a tradition itself as benign or malignant. As a precursor to affirming a student's religious identity, we must do exactly what Bevan claims impossible: evaluate which traditions (consisting of values, practices, doctrines, and so on) are benign and which are not. Making the affirmation model functional requires making these distinctions.

Perhaps Bevan can leave the benign descriptor out of his argument and find aspects of all traditions to affirm in cultivating liberal citizens. There are a number of social science researchers battling about the idea that common moral concerns transcend cultural traditions. Although they bicker about what these concerns are, psychologist Jonathon Haidt's serve as an example: fairness/justice, harm/care, in-group attachments/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity.² Steven Pinker argues that the variability seen across cultures and traditions depends primarily on the way these concerns are prioritized and enacted.³ If so, we might conclude that all traditions can be affirmed, at least in some sense.

Yet, we have no difficulty recognizing that certain beliefs fueling the treatment of women in the fundamentalist tradition practiced by the Taliban in Afghanistan (and depicted graphically in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*⁴), limit women in a way antithetical to liberalism's notion of autonomy. We again come up against the problem of needing to evaluate which manifestations (or which prioritizing) of these values and processes align with those that are educationally desirable for liberal citizens. The same obstacle keeps arising — the need for a clearer understanding of what ought to be affirmed and what ought not, and in which traditions we find each. This persistent need tests the functionality of the affirmation model.

A deeper worry, however, pertains to the claim that the affirmation model should supplant the challenge model. Bevan's second example is worthy of exploration in this regard. In it, a classroom teacher, Sara, initiates a lesson on building bridges across cultures and traditions by asking her students to reflect on a cross that resides on a hill outside the classroom. When a Muslim boy does not look at the cross, explaining that his religious beliefs forbid it, Bevan frames the pedagogical issue as:

Sara had a decision to make as to how she would handle the situation — should she offer an alternative value system as a form of entrance into the present dialogue? If the child in the classroom refuses to look at the cross because he believes that Christ is a prophet of Islam rather than the Son of God, is the consumerist liberal's duty to counter this belief with the imperative to distance and challenge?

I do not see this as a salient pedagogical issue. First, the boy has already entered the dialogue when he replies, "I am not allowed to look at the cross." The pedagogical question is: What will Sara do with this information? Second, if the boy has been paying attention, his spiritual beliefs have already been challenged via the presentation of at least one alternative religious view through the other students' consensual cross viewing and subsequent discussion. The students who viewed the cross

were tacitly affirmed, and the Muslim boy tacitly challenged, thus far in the conversation. The cross-viewing students, however, have yet to be introduced to a meaningful alternative viewpoint. Here the strict distinctions between the affirmation and the challenge models become obscured. Given the pluralism of traditions in most contemporary classrooms, the process of affirming one child's tradition effectively challenges others. Bevan's proposed affirmation model is dyadic and so the social nature of schooling produces tension for it. I suggest that this tension is not problematic (in fact it can be productive and meaningful), if the model does not require jettisoning challenge.

The question remains though: What will Sara do with the boy's statement, "I am not allowed to look at the cross"? Bevan characterizes the teacher's "mission" as "understanding the child's commitment and building on the virtues of reflectiveness contained within his tradition-based identity." First, it may be a mistake to elevate the moment to "mission" status, which itself connotes religious and existential dimensions. Why should Sara deviate from her curricular objective of building bridges between religious and cultural traditions? The boy's contribution to the dialogue is an exquisite opportunity; she cannot teach students how to build bridges if difference is not recognized and explored.

A search for what is common across tradition-based difference requires serious consideration of the values of others. Depending on the depth of this difference, this can require a leap of imagination. I argue that this leap is inherently challenging and distancing, though not in the identity-shaking way that concerns Bevan. The moral imagination is fundamentally *imaginative*; in using it, we recognize that we are imagining. It is someone else's story, someone else's tradition that we explore. We recognize its distance in the same instance that we take it on as possibility. This does not require students to stand as impartial spectators in judgment of their own traditions from some as-of-yet-undetermined morally normative stance. It allows them to stand as closely within another's tradition as is possible. In Bevan's example, understanding what another values in the deep and personal way the moral imagination allows for does not make us "own" the other's value; it helps us understand others and provides the material for a fundamentally liberal lesson — building bridges across traditions. Of course, the exploration of difference must be followed with bridge building itself, which requires that the teacher model or facilitate this skill of citizenship. This ought to be Sara's objective; affirming the child's religious identity is secondary to her duties to teach the child the curriculum.

I have taken it upon myself to extrapolate Bevan's advice and affirm a philosophical tradition of which I count myself as a member. Viewing Bevan's affirmation model within a tradition concerned with how ideas work in the world and skeptical of dualities allowed me to focus on two points: (1) the difficulty of distinguishing which traditions are benign (or affirmation-ready) and (2) the fact that the act of affirming actually produces challenge in the social setting of pluralistic classrooms. I must note that neither of these minor complaints undermines the sense that affirmation makes; they can be adequately addressed by adjusting the model. The affirmation project itself remains standing.

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1. California State Government, *California Standards for the Teaching Profession* (1997), <http://www.ctc.ca.gov/reports/cstpreport.pdf>, 5.
 2. Jonathan Haidt, "Moral Psychology and the Misunderstanding of Religion," *Edge* (2007), http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/haidt07/haidt07_index.html.
 3. Steven Pinker, "The Moral Instinct," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 2008.
 4. Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (New York: Riverhead Publishing, 2007).