

Indoctrination Reloaded: Authenticity and Moral Authority in Teaching

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Duck-Joo Kwak asks where in today's "post-liberal" society teachers might find a source of legitimate moral authority. To compensate for the limitations she sees in both liberal and communitarian answers to this question, she proposes that the proper authority to undertake moral education can be found in a teacher's authenticity. Since teaching is inescapably a moral endeavor, I agree with Kwak that the source of legitimate moral authority in education is a question well worth investigation. I am also sympathetic to her reservations with the liberal ideal of state neutrality between competing views of the good life and with any attempt to equate moral education simply with the development of intellectual competence in principled reasoning.¹ However — although elsewhere I have written on the limitations of Alasdair MacIntyre's characterization of ethical judgment and moral education² — I am not persuaded by Kwak's particular criticisms of his position on moral authority. I undertake to show in what follows that Kwak's appeal to authenticity complements rather than corrects MacIntyre's ethics of virtue, for her emphasis upon the crucial role of character in moral education and her pessimism about the prospects for moral consensus in our pluralistic, postmodern social context echo MacIntyre's own declarations on these themes. I conclude by proposing that, if Kwak wishes to locate the source of moral authority in authenticity, then she will require something like MacIntyre's account of the rationality of moral traditions and his teleological world view. Without the possibility these provide for distinguishing what is and is not justifiable in their moral values and beliefs, even honest and self-reflective teachers would be unable to avoid perpetuating political indoctrination.

MACINTYRE AND MORAL CHARACTER

On Kwak's account, MacIntyre holds that teachers have legitimate moral authority to the extent that they have mastered rules and standards of moral excellence that are socially justified. Following Sandel, she contends that teachers can legitimately "indoctrinate" students — or, as I would prefer to say, initiate them — into particular moral practices and corresponding traditions because these are prerequisite to self-discovery and rational moral autonomy. Charges of political indoctrination do not apply because, if MacIntyre is correct, then it is possible (at least in principle) for the rules and standards to be rationally redeemed.

One concern that Kwak raises with MacIntyre's understanding of moral authority in teaching is that, by looking to the rules and standards internal to moral practices for legitimation, he overlooks the central role that teachers' characters — in particular, their personal relationship to the rules and standards of the practice they represent — play in helping students learn to think for themselves. Kwak suggests that MacIntyre would approve of teachers deliberately concealing personal doubts about the practice they represent in order to avoid compromising their moral

authority over their students. I do not think this reading is supported by MacIntyre's texts. I cannot recall any recommendation that teachers should deliberately conceal a lack of confidence in the beliefs and values they have acquired through their participation in a moral practice. Nor can I call to mind any element of his ethics of virtue that would incline him to such a view. On the contrary, as Kwak herself observes, MacIntyre understands moral education as analogous to an apprenticeship through which practitioners of a craft cultivate such a personal appreciation of its internal goods that, as masters, they can revise its rules and standards of excellence as circumstances might require.³ I would think that, because his ethics is so centrally concerned with acquiring both moral and intellectual virtues, MacIntyre is the last contemporary philosopher of moral education that would discount the character of a teacher as unimportant. I think it is more representative of his views on moral education to expect that those who place their faith in the rules and standards internal to a moral practice are inspired to do so precisely by a "particular individual teacher" who whole-heartedly embraces and embodies the ideals of that tradition.

MACINTYRE AND MODERNITY

Aye, but there's the rub, or so Kwak might exclaim. I take her chief concern with MacIntyre's position to be that "the rules and standards of moral excellence...are either too close or too far from our everyday experiences to become a source of teachers' authority in their moral teaching." If I understand correctly, one sense in which Kwak believes that the rules and standards internal to a moral practice are too far from our experience is that what would be considered initiation into a rationally justified moral point of view by those who are committed to a particular moral tradition would look like political indoctrination to those who stand outside of that tradition. Another sense in which those rules and standards are too far from our experience is that we have all too often seen the moral values and ideals espoused in modern societies play an ideological role to take them to heart. I agree that these features of modern social life are valid concerns for anyone wishing to legitimate moral instruction in public schools. If I am not mistaken, MacIntyre would agree as well. On more than one occasion he has observed that the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions prevailing in modern, pluralistic liberal democracies preclude the possibility that members of the general public could achieve moral consensus or agree on how children should be taught to think for themselves on moral matters. He has also observed that, in the absence of a genuine moral consensus, appeal to principles supposedly shared by all rational persons often serves dominant interests.⁴ I assume that MacIntyre believes his account of legitimate moral authority is sound, but I do not think he believes it will be widely enough accepted, in the short term at least, to inform moral education in public schools.

MACINTYRE AND THE "MORAL MATRIX"

In what sense are the rules and standards of a moral practice too close to our experience to serve as a source of legitimate moral authority? Kwak is concerned that teachers committed to a particular moral practice and corresponding tradition will lack the psychological distance necessary to assess them critically. Citing David Cooper, she paints a portrait of a teacher caught in a kind of "moral matrix," unable to distinguish between true moral commitments and the beliefs and values that they

have been socialized — programmed, one might say — to accept. Trapped inside a particular moral horizon, such a teacher would be unable to avoid the kind of political indoctrination that both liberals and communitarians abhor. The cure that Kwak recommends is authenticity, defined as being truthful in relation to one's beliefs and values, and in particular not pretending to more certainty than is warranted given that "indoctrination takes place always and everywhere despite ourselves." Through such integrity and honest self-reflection teachers are likely to gain the trust of their students, and this trust is "the only reliable ground on which any significant sense of moral learning can take place."

Here, my first disagreement with Kwak is not on the importance of authenticity in teaching, but on the suggestion that an appreciation of this is foreign or antithetical to MacIntyre's position on moral authority. MacIntyre's endorses something very close to Kwak's notion of authenticity when he maintains that members of traditions of inquiry should understand that their current standards do not represent certain truth, but simply the best to emerge so far from its history of internal and external arguments.⁵ My second disagreement is that, while necessary, the kind of authenticity Kwak describes is not sufficient to serve as a source of legitimate moral authority and "morally educative" teaching. Students are warranted in trusting their teachers as moral exemplars and guides only if they have gained genuine insight into what is right and good. As Kwak earlier observed, schooling avoids indoctrination only to the extent that the teachers' and subsequently the students' beliefs are "rationally motivated on the basis of reliable knowledge about the real world" and not just the result of social conditioning. This is no less true when the values and beliefs in question result from initiation into a particular moral practice.

This point can be made with reference to different forms of teacher authority. Lance Roberts and Rodney Clifton cite Max Weber in distinguishing four. The first and second forms, traditional authority and legal authority, derive from the history of the school in the first case and its organizational character in the second. That is to say, students willingly follow the directions of teachers who embody traditions that the students respect and/or who occupy roles in a bureaucracy with legally-sanctioned positional power. The third and fourth forms, expert authority and charismatic authority, derive from the character of the individual teachers. In Roberts's and Clifton's account, "teachers possess expert authority to the extent that they have specialized knowledge and experience."⁶ In contrast, teachers enjoy charismatic authority to the extent that students know from experience that the teachers are genuinely dedicated to student welfare. In these terms, my claim is that students — not to mention parents and the public — are warranted in trusting teachers only if they have some degree of expert as well as charismatic authority.

To speak of rational motivation for moral values and beliefs it must be possible — contrary to what Kwak suggests — for teachers to escape the "moral matrix"; that is, to distinguish among the standards of moral excellence they have adopted uncritically those that can be rationally — that is, historically and dialectically — redeemed. Recognizing that their moral commitments have been shaped by social, cultural, political, and historical conditions should incline authentic teachers, not

simply to admit this honestly, but also to undertake individually and collectively a critical analysis of what moral beliefs and values can and cannot be warranted. How, then, is it possible for teachers to get critical distance on the beliefs and values they have acquired? How could it happen that they develop the critical self-awareness even to wish to try? To what larger narrative and set of epistemological assumptions would Kwak have to appeal to explain her philosophical and moral project in this paper? Since I cannot provide the arguments here, I must simply propose that the conclusion to which these questions lead is that a full account of moral authority needs something like MacIntyre's characterization of the rationality of moral traditions and his teleological world view.⁷ For it is these that provide for the possibility that a self-correcting dialectic of moral theory and practice might yield genuine knowledge of the right and the good.

1. For a summary of the "liberal neutrality" ideal, see Kenneth Strike, *Educational Policy and the Just Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 1-13. For a succinct critique, see Amy Gutmann, "Democratic Education in Difficult Times," in *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings*, 2d ed., ed. William Hare and John Portelli (Calgary: Temeron, 1996), 293-94.

2. Daniel Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 172-205.

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 61-66.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 244-55.

5. MacIntyre maintains that we become full members of traditions of enquiry and practice, moral and otherwise, by understanding how current standards of judgment have emerged through a historical dialectical process. Part of this understanding is an appreciation that current standards do not represent certain truth, but simply the best standards to emerge so far.

6. Lance W Roberts and Rodney A. Clifton, "Authority in Classrooms," in *Contemporary Canadian Educational Issues*, ed. Lance W. Roberts and Rodney A. Clifton (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1995), 462.

7. For an account of moral development that is complementary to MacIntyre's neo-Thomistic view, see Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 2d ed. (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1973), 27-55.