Intention Is Not Enough

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Barbara Peterson's essay on indoctrination draws on literature in the tradition of conceptual analysis. This approach has been out of fashion in philosophy, and even more so in philosophy of education, for long enough that the names of its central figures may be unfamiliar to those of my generation. So, among the virtues of Peterson's essay is the opportunity to revisit the analytical literature on indoctrination, to see what may be of enduring value. Here I will criticize I.A. Snook's focus on intention and argue that Thomas Green, whose work is contemporary with Snook's, provides a more compelling account of indoctrination. Yet thinkers of this era attempt to analyze questions of value out of their conceptual distinctions, a project doomed when it comes to an idea as central to what we value in education as (avoiding) indoctrination.

Snook provides a helpful division of educational cases that clearly involve indoctrination, that clearly do not, and that are problematic. One of his problematic cases is "inculcating doctrines believed by the teacher to be certain, but which are substantially disputed."[1] Bearing in mind that few beliefs are held with *absolute* certainty, peace education may fit this model. Peace educators may want to argue against their lessons being considered doctrines, but usually they *will* firmly believe peace to be a far better option than war, rather than approaching the question disinterestedly. All of the authors we are considering agree that content is an inadequate criterion for judging indoctrination, so we can set aside the question of the truth or falsehood of any potential view on peace.

Snook defines indoctrination in the following way: "A person indoctrinates P (a proposition or set of propositions) if he teaches with the intention that the pupil or pupils believe P regardless of the evidence."[2] As further elucidated by Snook's work and Peterson's essay, the aspect of intention is primary. However, intention can serve as neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for types of teaching we would consider indoctrination.

A teacher who believes something with sufficient strength — a particular religious viewpoint, for instance — can easily believe that any possible evidence will support her view. Therefore, she can present that view in a way she believes to be supported by reasons and evidence, thereby not in the least intending to indoctrinate. Yet her authority as teacher, as well as her ability to prescreen what is considered and how that is framed, leads her students to hold her view in a manner that is not open to what an independent observer would consider contradictory evidence.

Neither is intention sufficient. A teacher may intend to indoctrinate, but her incompetence enables her students to see through the plan. Or it may be that the evidence to the contrary is simply so overwhelming that the plan of indoctrination

has no hope of success. We would call this not indoctrination, but an attempt at it that failed.

A better understanding of indoctrination begins with the work of Green. "A Topology of the Teaching Concept" is one of several works in which he elucidates his understanding of the concept. As he defines it here, "indoctrination aims simply at establishing certain beliefs so that they will be held quite apart from their truth, their explanation, or their foundation in evidence."[3] While this speaks of teachers' aims, the focus is on the results. How do students hold beliefs in question? By extension, what kind of habits for holding beliefs in general do they acquire? His answer would be that indoctrination results in the creation of belief-forming habits that rely on factors other than evidence.

Green places indoctrination on a "teaching continuum," where it sits in opposition to "instruction," but does not reach the extremes of "propagandizing" and "lying." Instruction falls well within what he calls "the region of intelligence," the conceptual space concerning what is logically central to teaching. Indoctrination is on the edge, while propagandizing and lying are outside this region. Indoctrination and its counterparts refer to the teaching of knowledge and beliefs; there are a set of matching concepts that refer to the teaching of behavior and conduct. Corresponding to indoctrination is the concept of "conditioning," which is juxtaposed to "training" within the region of intelligence and "intimidation" and "physical threat," which lie without. To repeat, indoctrination is the part of the teaching continuum dealing with knowledge and belief and lying just on the border of the region of intelligence.

An important aspect of indoctrination and conditioning is, however, obscured by equating them with the rest of the teaching continuum. That is their unwittingness from the perspective of the student. In indoctrination beliefs are held for what falsely appear, even upon reflection, as good reasons, whereas with propagandizing and lying, inspection of what lies behind the belief will reveal foul play. The same is true with regard to conditioning of behavior — the conditioned behavior appears natural, whereas in the case of intimidation or threat the student is aware that his behavior is being coerced.

Peterson argues against Green's consequentialist approach. She says,

> The problem with a consequences analysis of indoctrination is that one can never be sure whether students holding beliefs non-rationally is due to something the teacher did or due to something else entirely. Simply because a teacher has students who end up holding beliefs non-evidentially does not mean that the teacher causes them to hold beliefs in such a manner.

However, we face exactly the same uncertainty in discerning teachers' intentions. In both cases we can make educated guesses regarding what is occurring in another's mind without ever being able to completely penetrate the barrier that separates our minds from theirs. In both cases, thinking about what might be happening in another's mind — however unverifiable — can help us in understanding the problem of indoctrination. This is a pervasive aspect of theory building. We must accept a certain degree of uncertainty in applying an idealized model to the complex phenomena of the real social world.

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Green holds indoctrination to be a logical, as opposed to evaluative, attribution. Indoctrination is neither right nor wrong — it merely occupies a certain space on the teaching continuum. I part ways with him here and, like Peterson, want to maintain the pejorative import of the label. Further, I want to disagree with both in placing the label upon a particular (transfer of) belief linked to a single teaching act. Peterson may well be right that some students will come to hold some beliefs in a non-evidentiary way no matter what the teacher does. Yet this does not make a consequentialist understanding of indoctrination invalid. Teaching, indoctrinary or otherwise, is the story of an extended relationship rather than a brief encounter. So the question is, does the teacher's actions tend to promote in students the ongoing *habit* of holding beliefs in a non-evidentiary way? If that is the case, then the practice is indoctrination.

Indoctrination is valued negatively because of its role in inhibiting something we value positively: autonomy. The discussion of indoctrination is therefore enriched by looking at current philosophical work that views autonomy as realized through a process of development that includes education. Harry Brighouse believes it is the role of schools to foster a traditional, Kantian version of autonomy.[4] Recent feminist scholars of autonomy find it necessarily fostered, but often also hindered, through processes of socialization.[5] John Christman has his own unique take on the temporal situatedness of autonomy.[6] The next stage of a contemporary appropriation of the concept of indoctrination would be to continue exploring the connection between earlier and contemporary literature on autonomy. Jim Lang has addressed this connection in a critical fashion, siding with feminist scholars most critical of the liberal background to both concepts.[7] I hope to have hinted at possibilities for positive development.

Finally I return to where Peterson started — with peace education. In many cases, educational attempts to promote pro-war sentiments in students will appeal to patriotism. This is an appeal to affective loyalty to a concrete or abstract group, which bypasses rational scrutiny. If peace educators induce students to habits of analyzing these claims on the basis of facts and moral principles, the students' autonomy has been augmented — the opposite of indoctrination is accomplished. Only if the peace educators also promote doctrine via furthering students' reliance on emotional connection to group loyalties and unreflective acceptance of authority are they indoctrinating.

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1. I.A. Snook, "Indoctrination and Moral Responsibility," in *Concepts of Indoctrination,* ed. I.A. Snook (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 152.

2. Ibid., 154.

3. Thomas F. Green, "A Typology of the Teaching Concept," in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 3, no. 4 (1964–1965), 290.

4. Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. chapter 4, "The Case for Autonomy-Facilitating Education," 65–82.

5. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This volume provides a nice collection of feminist scholarship on autonomy.

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6. John Christman, "Autonomy and Personal History," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (1991), 1–24.

7. Jim Lang, "The Great Indoctrination Re-construction Project: The Discourse on Indoctrination as a Legacy of Liberalism" (paper presented at the annual Graduate Student Conference on Philosophy of Education, Toronto, October 14, 2006).

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