

Margonis's Challenge

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Frank Margonis has laid a serious challenge before us. He has surveyed various regions of academic literature seeking to support the challenge he sets forth. Were there time we would gladly retrace the ground he covered and discuss certain controversial conclusions he arrived at along the way. But limitations are severe; we move directly to Margonis's challenge itself, rather ignoring as irrelevant much of the dance around the mulberry tree Margonis executes on the way to issuing his challenge.

Through a series of well-chosen, well-summarized quotations from the entire corpus of the master's works, Margonis establishes a central point for his case: Dewey maintains the Enlightenment elevation of reason to the pinnacle of human virtues. Deweyan reason, described as habits of intelligence, looks different from either Descartes' or Rousseau's picture of that faculty in action, but no less than those Frenchmen does Dewey insist that the flowering of reason is the end sought in our cultivation of children in school. With all the human virtues out there to be developed, each child bringing to school a unique package, is it not arrogant thus to elevate reason, even Dewey's version of it? Thus one way of putting Margonis's challenge.

The neatest connection Margonis makes is to tie Dewey's "arrogant" reason, in both its individual and collective manifestations, to the cooperative practice of problem solving, scientific method applied beyond the boundaries of science. The method of intelligence in politics is democracy, the form of human association in which fulfillment of human potential can be most fully accomplished. The method of intelligence in personal life is practical: reason aims to find solutions to problems that arise in course of living, to the end that human life, which is above all social life, may be lived more abundantly, happiness in the Aristotelian sense more stably achieved.

Consider the little bundles of protoplasm who enter our schoolrooms just after infancy: if we can see their progress through our institutions as actualizing Dewey's vision of science, democracy, and human fulfillment, our educational efforts have been, as Margonis says, "profoundly" ennobled. Even when we know very well that our efforts will be systematically undermined by the irrationality of the commercial culture our charges imbibe with every breath, even then we are sustained by the certainty that the habits of scientific rationality we *want* to develop, try our level best to develop in our students will serve, if anything can, to mitigate the blind stupidity of our present political course.

In this society, the PES itself, those opposed to one another on central points, in times past, could find common ground in supporting a Dewey-like interconnected conception of science, democracy, and human fulfillment as the overall goal of education, however differently those key terms were defined. Consider: Is critical

thinking an identifiable activity that can be practiced as such? Or is critical thinking so bound up with what the thinking is about that efforts to isolate it as a separate skill are inherently fruitless? That issue is still open, I think; its debate and refinement make sense because both sides are interested in promoting those general habits of intelligence demarcated by Dewey and others in that tradition.

How deeply does this consensus penetrate? Not as deeply, perhaps, as it once did. Various movements in recent philosophy — feminism, critical theory, social constructivism — have forced us all to recognize an uncomfortable truth: our adored reason has become thoroughly prostituted to power. Margonis has absorbed that truth, put it together with a liberal, humane political stance, and now challenges us, speaking particularly to that political tendency in the PES still loyal to the old cause of Progressive Education, to reconsider our commitment to Deweyan reason.

Margonis calls it arrogance, meaning “making or implying unwarrantable claims to dignity, worth, or authority,” according to my Shorter Oxford’s first usage. Let us distinguish, as Margonis unfortunately did not, between the philosophical issue and the political issue. The philosophical issue is this: is reason’s claim to special dignity, in particular, the dignity of being the final end and goal of education in a democratic society, *warrantable*? The political issue is this: Is continued pursuit of Deweyan reason (carrying democracy attached, as reason practiced politically) as education’s *summum bonum* the best strategy politically for dealing with children “reared in values powerfully opposed to the values implicit in the method of inquiry?”

Let us be brutally blunt about the philosophical issue: reason has no problem establishing its warrant to be the court of final appeal for any challenge to its authority. The transcendental argument may not be all that persuasive, but it is irrefutable.¹ Though we are allowed, encouraged even in this society, to dispute any person’s claim to speak *for* reason, we recognize that the same unwritten rules constituting us an academic society also legislate that we *always* acknowledge reason’s *final* authority. Philosophically speaking, like turtles, it is reason all the way down. Case dismissed.

Now the political question is where it gets interesting. Reason, as children entering school encounter it (that is, not the philosophical conception thereof but the socially constructed real life political force), embodies, says Margonis, “the economic, political, or technical logic of dominant institutions.” Any given child entering school may come from a culture operating on a different logic, that is, a different system for making value, including truth value, decisions. Is that child of another culture infinitely plastic, mouldable, malleable, ready to take on the logic of our dominant institutions? May it not be the case that some other logic does better than “reason’s” to “build communities, guide moral and courageous behavior, or create an egalitarian distribution of wealth.”

At this point in history, do we really want to pass around the epithet “authoritarian” with such cavalier disregard of specifics? Do we really wish to be engaged in an “assimilatory” raid on cultures we have thus dismissed?

Notice, please. No one advocates increased effort to cram the scientific world view and democratic problem-solving down the throats of young people whose beliefs and desires have already been shaped in different moulds and whose lives, following school, are to be led in environments where ("Western") science and democracy are less valued than they are (supposed to be) in school. In such a situation, one as familiar to Margonis in Utah as to us here in South Texas, we are faced, in quite attenuated form, with what Lenin knew as the "national" question. The line I think Lenin would lay out and Margonis accept is this: you treat existing cultures and traditions with great respect. In schools you introduce a scientific world-view as just what it is: the way things are looked at in another community, a world community composed of scientists plus the technologists and power holders who are busy assimilating every other community into their world system of production and finance. Even in communities operating, perhaps operating quite competently, on non-standard logics (Mormons, Mexican-Americans, Southern Baptist? It is hard to draw the line), some students will find the school's offerings appealing, and the pain of study and isolation not unbearable; they must be encouraged, enabled to follow academic or trade routes into a world view and life deeply different from that of their ancestors. And we should make no bones about where we stand: the socialist teacher, says Lenin, "must always fight *against* small nation narrow-mindedness, aloofness, and insularity."²

Not that the political line just above is easy to follow in specific conditions. In your area, let us say, the traditional, "authoritarian" culture does display a tight community with exemplary behavior and little variation in wealth. But women, let's say, are there routinely abused and humiliated. Should girls be allowed to attend school over protests of the elders? Suppose the alternative world view requires a ritual sacrifice of a victim chosen by lot? These are routine questions to pose to the opponent of assimilation. How do you stand, Prof. Margonis?

What is of utmost importance is to hold fast on the philosophical principle, it is reason all the way down. Margonis shows his personal dedication to that principle in his careful prose and restrained stance, for example, in his toning down of Heidegger. As Margonis poses it, the issue becomes more a matter of broadening the context of inquiry than rejecting its primacy. No complaints against Margonis on that score.

But the line of thinking Margonis starts down, then backs away from, is carried to its logical conclusions elsewhere. By extraordinary good fortune, Meera Nanda's fine "Against Social De(Con)struction of Science: Cautionary Tales from the Third World" appeared in the March issue of *Monthly Review*. It begins with a quote from Ian Hacking: "People resisting despotism and its lies need ideals of one truth, one reason, one reality, and, on occasion, one science. To be able to be critical of the unities is a luxury and let us never forget it."³ The article goes on to show how rampant relativism in Western philosophy gave support to reactionary social movements in Third World countries, for example, fundamentalist religious groups in India that have seized political power and turned back the clock on various progressive developments — the emancipation of women, the spread of "people's

science” with consequent improvement in local technology and so forth.

How, Prof. Margonis, do you answer Ms Nanda?

Just over the hill from Prof. Margonis’s paper lies the larger issue of assimilation and the culture of inquiry. In its larger sense, the question of assimilation is moot: the international system of finance capitalism *will* assimilate the entire planet to its needs for production and trade. That system of finance is totally dependent on the methods of rational inquiry to conduct its daily life, while the underlying irrationality of capitalism as a system stands in radical contradiction to its daily logic. The true socialist teacher is she who enables her charges to see Deweyan-like cooperative inquiry (the revolutionary pedagogy of Paolo Freire fits easily under that big label) as a tool for personal and political liberation. With that tool, students from whatever backgrounds can choose for themselves how much and to what they will be assimilated. The price may be high in personal disquietude for both student and teacher: these are not quiet times in human history.

1. Harvey Siegel, “What Price Inclusion?” in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 13-15. The point is further developed in Siegel’s “Can Reasons for Rationality Be Redeemed?”

2. V.I. Lenin, *Marx, Engels, Marxism* (New York: International Publishers, 1927), 152.

3. Meera Nanda, “Against Social De(Con)struction of Science: Cautionary Tales from the Third World,” *Monthly Review* 48, no.10 (March 1997): 1.