

Integrity and Identity: Judgment and the Moral Self

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INTEGRITY AND IDENTITY

In *The Power of Their Ideas*, Deborah Meier tells of talking to a student in her office after a hallway altercation. It became clear that “one of the kids was a ‘victim’ — over and over he was the subject of teasing and other minor cruelties ... everyone knows about it, including us adults.” In speaking to the student who had done the bullying (my word, not Meier’s), she asked the boy, “Which side are you on ... his [the victim’s] or the tormentors?” She tells us that both she and the student were “startled” by the question. The boy answered that he “wasn’t really on any side.” Meier did not accept that answer; she asked, “If someone is being cruel to someone else, if someone is the victimizer and someone the victim, rapist and raped, abused and abuser — can you really be neutral?” To that, the boy answered, after a pause, “No, I am never with the abusers.” Meier then muses on two different questions raised by the events: “(1) Whose side am I on? and (2) what am I prepared to do about it?” She then points out that knowing what to do, or having the resources to do what she would like, is often difficult: “I see lots of things I don’t like being done to others — and I often pass by. But I still know ‘whose side I’m on.’”¹ What should interest us about this story is that it shows an awareness of the importance of integrity — of knowing where one stands on moral issues — of who one is. And what should concern us is how rarely we talk in these terms in school, that neither Meier nor her student expected that to be the topic of their conversation. Schools are driven by a culture of obedience to rules, orders, and routines, not by questions of virtue and integrity.

Identity and integrity are inherently linked: without some sense of identity, discussion of integrity is meaningless. The reverse is equally true. Moral self-assessment must be made both with a sense of self-continuity and against a set of moral norms I accept as my own.

In our postmodern world, it is often difficult to talk about integrity of the self, a concept that has been variously “problematized.” The idea is that our lives place so many various demands on us that we actually construct multiple identities.² This seems to me a serious error in two ways: (1) it confuses *identity* with *role*, and (2) this has always been true, though not perhaps to the degree seen today. Long before modernity had a “post,” Shakespeare observed that each of us plays many parts on the stage of our lives. Long before that, Antigone and Ismene faced a conflict between the identity of citizen and that of sister. Tragedy, Euripides tells us, happens when one is forced to choose between the legitimate and conflicting demands of different roles. That choice reveals and affirms, creates, changes, or alters the self that does the choosing: that Antigone was sister first and citizen second is discovered in her realization that *she must* bury her brother. Ismene, faced with the exact same choice, makes the opposite decision, one that Antigone appreciates. In a non-tragic

world, that choice would never have to be made, but when the world does force those choices upon us, we must choose — and in so doing discover — who we are.

Our contemporary social world has made it more difficult to maintain integrity. Indeed, it has made it difficult to even see this as a problem. In ancient Athens, as in small-town USA, the multiple roles of the self were mostly performed to the same or overlapping audiences. Antigone had to choose between her self as a sister and as a citizen precisely because the social situation did not allow her to be a sister *here* and a citizen *there*, to hold one moral code in this setting and a completely different code in a different setting. That is not our case today: *we live in a world not so much of divided selves, as of discrete social settings*. Thus it becomes easier for us to live by one set of norms in one setting and a completely contrasting set in a different setting without wholly embracing either. If we do not hold ourselves accountable for our inconsistencies, few others are in a position to do so.

There are often occupational and situational temptations to dishonesty. If a husband and father preaches about honesty but dissembles in order to succeed in professional life, he lacks integrity. Teachers, police officers, and prison guards — anyone — who act on the job in ways that they would not hold up to their children as models of good behavior are lacking in integrity: they either (1) do not live up to *their own principles* or (2) have no principles to live up to.

This is saying less than that a specific set of principles are worth living up to. There are those whose principles are unworthy, but held with deep conviction. Racists may be sincere, truly believing in principles of racial superiority, and live that vice consistently in their lives. It seems to me that we would grant to such people integrity. Certainly a suicide bomber who gives his life in order to kill in furtherance of a cause has integrity:³ integrity is not itself a virtue. Nevertheless, it is a necessary part of the makeup of a virtuous person: no one can be virtuous without core principles around which integrity may form.

There are, therefore, limits to the range of memberships that an individual can hold with integrity. While it is true that our inevitably multiple memberships will bring with them some range of moral commitments and priorities, it is also true that people with integrity will, just because they have integrity, find they must reject certain memberships. There are likely few people active in both the Catholic Church and Planned Parenthood. To maintain integrity, those who are must either reconcile these groups' opposing positions on abortion and sexual pleasure generally, or else the conflict must be subsumed under some larger principle. Individuals who oppose abortion because all life is sacred, but also support the death penalty, must expect that others will ask how these two positions can be reconciled: their integrity will be questioned. The primary commitments I have as a father may be somewhat different from those I hold as a teacher, but there is a limit to how different they can be if I am to have integrity.

Here we also see the complexity of the issue of identity formation and integrity. We are forged by our commitments, but we also get to choose at least some of what those commitments are. One is born — thrown into — reality, and is situated from

the first, but then one also makes choices, however constrained those choices are by our starting points. Morally normative communities shape and change us, but the reverse is also true.

Robert Jackall presents us with a wonderfully detailed vision of the sort of warrior code of honor that serves as a set of moral principles in the world of corporate executives.⁴ It is a set of principles completely divorced from the morality by which these men (and they are mostly men) live at home. It is not that these men are immoral, or even amoral. It is that they lack integrity; the moral principles by which they work are not those by which they live outside the job. They are bi-moral. They are, in effect, like two different people with two different sets of moral commitments inhabiting one body. They know, even though they do not talk quite in this way, that they lack integrity and that this is not a good thing. The point is not just that the moral norms differ in different normative communities, but that they are incompatible, directly opposing each other, reversing what causes one to feel pride or shame. It is not necessarily cause for concern in a plural society that two moral communities have seriously conflicting moral norms. It is, however, a cause for concern when one individual is a committed member of both, with all that entails.

Lynne McFall explores the issue of integrity in some helpful detail, pointing out its meaning for moral development.⁵ Integrity requires consistency. If I say I hold certain moral commitments that I do not hold in fact, then I am simply a hypocrite. But if say I value honesty and mostly act accordingly, but then cheat consistently in specific circumstances (say, in business), then I lack integrity; I am not whole. My moral life is fragmented, and so am I.

Further, integrity requires more of us than that we merely act in a certain way, by telling the truth, for example. If we tell the truth because there is a rule against lying and we do not want to get caught breaking the rule, that is not integrity. Even if we follow the rule, but do not understand its value, its rightness, we are not acting with integrity. We must act in accordance with a norm, not merely in compliance to some rule. As McFall puts it, “A *merely* conventional relation to one’s principles seems to rule out personal integrity. One must ... make one’s principles ... one’s own.”⁶ Or, as Tom Green put it, a dog does not lie, but that is not because he is honest.⁷ For me to have integrity, my principles must be *mine*.

And even this is not sufficient. Another aspect of integrity is that my commitments must be *genuinely* mine; they must also be ones that I have come to after due consideration. As Steven Carter puts it, “Integrity grants no credit for being honest about your beliefs unless you have gone through a period of moral reflection, not just to be sure what your beliefs are but to be sure that your beliefs are right.”⁸ While we can see that integrity requires a coherence and a consistency, it cannot be about just anything. McFall poses the example of a person who takes pleasure to be her central commitment, a man who will do anything to win the approval of others, and a man who will do anything for money. While each of these characters can be said to have a form of integrity in the sense of consistency and coherence, it will not do to say that the people in question are persons of integrity. To be a person of integrity, one must

be committed to principles that morally justify such a commitment. I think here McFall phrases her claim badly. I argue, as I pointed out previously, that a person may have a commitment to goals that are morally reprehensible, such as genocide or racial conquest, and be said to have integrity. What is required is not that the commitment be to goals that are morally *justified*, but that it be to goals that are morally *significant*. That is, when we speak of integrity, we are in the domain of the moral. I may be morally corrupt, but if I am committed to that corruption and the commitment is one that is within the domain of the moral, then I may claim integrity.

The measure of one's integrity, then, is not the correctness of the moral commitments one has, but the moral weight of those commitments and their centrality to one's sense of identity. As McFall puts it:

Unless corrupted by philosophy, we all have things we think we would never do, under any imaginable circumstances, whatever we may give to survival or pleasure, power and the approval of strangers; some part of ourselves beyond which we will not retreat, some weakness however prevalent in others that we will not tolerate in ourselves. And if we do that thing, betray that weakness, we are not the persons we thought; there is nothing left that we may even in spite refer to as *I*.⁹

This sort of shame is soul-destroying. This is why Winston's ordeal with the rats leaves him unable to face Julia after he does that which *he* would never do: he betrays her.¹⁰ It is why we understand how Sophie's choice destroyed the rest of her life and why we understand how Oedipus is undone by his tragic mistake.¹¹ Each of these is a fictional example of the truth that we can betray ourselves; that there is a point at which our actions destroy the person we were. It is not that they had been self-deceived or that they had never been persons of integrity; it is that under the press of unbearable events the person who was there before no longer exists. After the betrayal, the choice, the discovery, these characters are quite literally not the people they had previously been or thought they had been. They had, each of them, been people of integrity whose very selves were lost in a moment's action and the subsequent realization of its significance. This is exactly why it makes sense to speak of people who have experienced great tragedy as "broken."

The realization is that I am not who I was or thought I was and, more to the point, I am that which I abhor and detest. In each case, it is important to note, choice was constrained. None of these individuals willingly violated their principles. Winston was tortured; Sophie forced to make a choice no one should have to make; Oedipus acted in ignorance. Despite the dire circumstances, their integrity was destroyed and they were undone. The point is not that they *willingly* violated their principles — they did not. The point is that they were each placed in circumstances in which they did that which their own commitments and identity committed them not to do *under any circumstances*. These commitments to core principles are the things that give us our identity. They are the things that we carry from one role to the next. To be people of integrity requires of us that we have such commitments, that we live up to them, and that they be morally significant.

McFall makes two final points about integrity. The first is that our roles sometimes do bring commitments into conflict, and we must then decide who we

are — who we *really* are. It will not do to say that the self is divided and I cannot choose. In the reality of the world, we do choose: we act (or we fail to do so). And in those choices, those (in)actions, we define ourselves. We declare our core identity, perhaps even more when we act quickly and without deliberation than when we act after deliberation. McFall supposes that she is a ship's captain. As such, it is her responsibility, central to that identity, to treat all passengers equally, especially with regard to their safety while they are in her care. She is also married, and as a wife, she cares about and has responsibilities to her husband that she does not have toward others.

Now suppose I see that my husband and two other passengers are drowning. My husband weighs what the two others weigh put together. He is drowning on starboard, they are drowning at port. If I save my husband, the two will drown, and vice versa.

As wife I should save my husband; as ship captain I should save the two strangers.¹²

As McFall sees it, and I think she is right, what we should *do* depends on who we *are*. If the captain is first a wife, she should save her husband. If the wife is first a captain, she should save the two strangers. There is no "correct" answer to the question, "Which should she be?" Similarly, there is also no "correct" answer to the question, "What should she do?" Each obligation binds her equally, yet only one can be met. There is a way of viewing either action as acceptable, and a way of seeing both as culpable. But what *she* should do depends on who she is, a wife or a captain. It may be that it is only in such moments that one discovers who one really is. Note too that whatever she does, the captain will be ashamed of the wife's action, or the wife will be ashamed of the captain's. As mentioned before, this is the stuff of tragedy.

McFall then considers the possibility that we should just give up integrity as a goal, the price being too high. She rejects this, saying, "Without integrity, and the identity-conferring commitments it assumes, there would be nothing to fear the loss of, not because we are safe, but because we have nothing to lose."¹³

This point of having nothing to lose without integrity is why I ask my undergraduate preservice teachers to consider what they would happily be fired for, or resign over. What sort of thing would they put on their resume as a matter of pride? This is an important question, because it gets at the heart of what it means for them to be a teacher. If they have no answer to the question, they have no integrity (as a teacher), and being a teacher does not have meaning for them.

The issue of integrity becomes even more complex when we add in the concept Philip Jackson, Robert Boostrom, and David Hansen call "upward hypocrisy," which they describe as the result of "being forced by circumstances to behave in ways that belied one's innermost feelings or 'true' self."¹⁴ The point here is that the people so acting — in this case, schoolteachers — are acting in ways that are better than their "true" selves. This is an interesting way to describe things, and one with which I take issue. Jackson and his colleagues are interviewing teachers who describe situations in which they are conscious of the fact that they are role models for their students, and they therefore act in ways that are better than they usually would.

It was not just that teaching often required them to put up a front, but that it called on them to put up a very special kind of front, a good front, as opposed to a bad one (like that of the person who acts tough) or one that was simply false (like that of an actor in a play). That good front could also be called false, of course, and sometimes it is shown to be, as when a teacher reaches his limit of tolerance for certain kinds of student behavior and proceeds to lose his temper momentarily. But its basically desirable character is what distinguishes it from other forms of this brand of deception.¹⁵

Much here depends on what is meant by the term “true” self. As a matter of moral development, it appears that the teacher is living up to his or her own principles regarding what a teacher should be, at least when in the role of “teacher.” Perhaps the teachers’ failure to fully live up to that ideal self in other contexts is the sign of a lack of integrity. Perhaps it is a measure of the high standards they hold as their professional ideal. What needs explaining here is not that teachers have high ideals for themselves as teachers, but that those ideals are not part of their personal lives outside the classroom, if that is the case.

What is clear is that the classroom behavior expresses the teachers’ image of how they should be. Why should we not say that *this* is the teachers’ true self, when they are at their best? If they sometimes slip from this moral level in their life outside the classroom, it may just be because they are not monitoring themselves as closely in private life as they do when they are conscious of their presence in the classroom as role models. Virtues are developed with practice, and if we have not yet developed the habit, we are more likely to slip when we are not paying attention. Conversely, we are more likely to practice the virtue that we wish we had, that is part of our ideal self, when we are aware that we are being watched by the children in our care. Holding open the question of which of these is my “true” self, it seems that if we first of all have an image of ourselves that includes a virtue we do not have — patience, for example — and we find ourselves frequently practicing that virtue consciously, it is likely that we will begin to develop it. That is, it is likely that, with enough conscious practice, we will come to exhibit the virtue naturally and habitually.

This is just the process that Aristotle described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The wonderful thing is that the same sort of modeling that makes teachers role models for their children’s moral development also is the practice in virtue that makes the teachers themselves better people. And all this is driven by the desire of the teachers to be good (to live up to their ideal of themselves) coupled with the desire for integrity (the desire to be as good in private life as they are in public life). This only works, of course, if the person has integrity and seeks to live by a consistent moral compass. Lacking integrity, the teacher will have no compunction about leaving one’s higher ethical standards in the classroom. Of course, in that case, the teacher has no moral ideal at all, just a job requirement.

MORAL JUDGMENT AND INTEGRITY

Moral judgments are reflections of personal identity. Who we are influences — perhaps determines — what we see as good, and vice versa. This is more than

pointing out that social position influences perception of events and thus moral judgment of them; it is to say that regardless of where one stands in relation to others, there are several options for how one responds to the moral realities of that location. Though we are surely shaped by the society and culture in which our moral sensibilities and perceptions are developed, there are in any given culture crosscurrents of dissent at odds with the moral givens of that time and place. Thus it is that our moral identity winds up being unique; we are products of our culture, but that culture is never monolithic. There are always varieties of critique.¹⁶ And we make different decisions with respect to those choices that we face.

The task facing any society with respect to moral education is not how to teach children the moral rules; that is easy. The important and interesting question is this: How do you get those rules to be binding on the individual, to have force in shaping individual behavior? This, of course, is equally a question with respect to adults: How do we come to do what we know is right, even when it does not appear to be in our best interest to do so? Or, as in the case of teachers who are trying to help children become moral, how do we become the sort of people who live by our highest ideals when there is no one looking? Or, as Meier put it: whose side am I on, and what am I going to do about it? How do we foster integrity?

The great achievement of modernity has been the discovery of the individual's need for, well, individuality. That is, the story of modernity has been the advancement of the project of liberalism, the conception and creation of social and political forms that maximize individual liberty and freedom. The central theme has been the development of the ideal of the fully autonomous individual.

It is worth noting, however, that to Aristotle this was not a *human* ideal at all. That sort of radical autonomy was characteristic of gods and animals, not human beings. What made humans human was their connection to a group, to the *polis*; not their separateness, but the reality of connection and the ability to make one's unique contribution for the good of the whole. It is not that individuality did not exist for the Greeks; Antigone clearly was not the same person as Ismene. However, the Greeks well understood what we too often forget: one's identity is never — can never be — shaped in isolation. Our individuality is formed in and by a normative community. A society that creates only a "thin" social consensus while leaving the thick normative communities disconnected from each other forgets the importance of personal integrity maintained across roles and does not help the young to develop it. This is the problem that David Blacker, Robert Kunzman, and David Purpel and William McLaurin all address in different ways, recognizing that schools must not violate the liberty of conscience protected by the First Amendment, but at the same time considering ways that a thick conversation can take place in the public between people and communities with differences.¹⁷

This points up the educational task: children need to come early to understand the need for integrity. Further, as the child matures and comes into the complexity of social interaction and varied roles to play, developing integrity becomes more difficult to do. A person who enters a professional or career role without integrity

already developed is less likely to develop it on the job when faced with conflicts between personal morality and professional morality. Under such circumstances, maintaining integrity is difficult enough; achieving it when it does not already exist strikes me as likely impossible.

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1. Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995), 86–87.
 2. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1999).
 3. On this point I am in disagreement with Lynne McFall's excellent account of integrity, as discussed later in the essay.
 4. Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
 5. Lynne McFall, "Integrity," *Ethics* 98 (1987): 5–20.
 6. *Ibid.*, 6.
 7. Tom Green, personal conversation with author.
 8. Steven Carter, *Integrity* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 52.
 9. McFall, "Integrity," 12.
 10. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: New American Library Classics, 1990).
 11. William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Random House, 1979); and Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. George Young (New York: Dover, 1991).
 12. McFall, "Integrity," 18.
 13. *Ibid.*, 20.
 14. Philip W. Jackson, Robert E. Boostrom, and David T. Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 288.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
 17. David Blacker, *Democratic Education Stretched Thin: How Complexity Challenges a Liberal Ideal* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2007); Robert Kunzman, *Grappling with the Good: Talking About Religion and Morality in Public Schools* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2006); and David E. Purpel and William M. McLaurin, Jr., *Reflections on the Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).