

Indoctrination Revisited: In Search of a New Source of Teachers' Moral Authority

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE MORAL NATURE OF TEACHING?

These days there seems to be a controversy over the issue of whether teaching is “a practice” or not in Alisdair MacIntyre’s sense, a practice defined as “any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which the goods internal to that activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partly definitive of, that form of activity.”¹ The crux of this controversy, whether we agree with the idea of teaching as a practice or not, has to do with a painstaking search for the moral nature of teaching in an increasingly disenchanting postmodern culture. In today’s schools, in which teaching is seen as a job, rather than a vocation, and especially in a public institution, teachers tend to be expected to play a professional role assigned by the institute as a means of service to the public (students or community) for its welfare.² In other words, what is at stake in this controversy may be a tension regarding the nature of teaching between a view of teaching as institutional and professional and one of teaching as human and moral.

I think that the origin of this problem may be traced back to the problem of indoctrination in education. When indoctrination, especially in moral, political or religious matters, is considered as teachers’ serious and illegitimate interference with students’ autonomy, teachers’ role as a moral guide and their authority derived from it appear hopelessly reminiscent of pre-liberal authoritarian tradition. Under the liberal tradition, teachers, as public functionaries who have a duty to respect other citizens’ freedom to choose their own moral outlook, are supposed either to shun moral and religious questions altogether or to take a neutral position on any particular moral or religious view in their teaching. With indoctrination having long been educationally stigmatized, teachers’ traditional authority as a moral guide has been deeply doubted and debunked in the public schooling of the West.

Analytic philosophers of education, such as Israel Scheffler or R.M. Hare, attempted to replace pre-liberal moral norms and values with a new norm of “reasonableness” or “rule-governed morality,” not only as the source of teachers’ moral authority but also as the content of moral education for the young if moral teaching is allowed at all in public schooling. But this idea of “rule-governed morality” has received serious attacks by both the feminist and the communitarian camps for the last two decades mainly for its presupposed concept of selfhood: the free, independent, disengaged and choosing self. However, my objection to this rationalistic approach to moral education lies rather in its educational ineffectiveness. Let us suppose that a capable liberal teacher succeeds in obtaining an authority over her students by being reasonable and articulate in dealing with moral, political, and religious questions. In this case, all she has established with her students is an

intellectual authority, not a moral authority. For intellectually capable students may be able to follow this teacher's relatively sophisticated reasoning and arguments, but only to be intellectually convinced of her points without really having their moral view or conduct affected by the teaching.³ My suspicion is that educationally significant moral change, if that is our aim in moral teaching, requires more than intellectual competence. In other words, teachers' moral authority in shaping students' personhood and moral orientation towards life may derive from other sources than their intellectual competence.

A teacher today, susceptible to the coexisting pre-modern, modern, and post-modern cultures and moral outlooks, often finds herself disoriented and lost in her moral teachings. She knows it would not work to preach moral teachings; she also knows it would be politically incorrect to let her political position affect her students. Yet, she finds the role of a playful post-modern radical too light-hearted and even irresponsible for a teacher to assume. She does not know where to place her moral standing in relation to her students. Her identity as a teacher seems to be in crisis. The main concern of this paper is the plight of this imaginary teacher: how and where can such teachers find a source of legitimate moral authority in post-modern society? Teachers' authority can no longer be taken for granted; it must be earned if they are to exert any genuine moral influence. And unless we can locate a realizable source of legitimate authority within the human and interpersonal domain of teaching, we will have to abandon the idea that teaching constitutes a "practice" that is not reducible to its institutional and professional functions.

In search of a possible source of teachers' legitimate moral authority, I will recast the notion of indoctrination in the light of two different views, liberal and communitarian. This will be a good chance to retrace the decline in teachers' moral authority in the West, while leading us into a third view of indoctrination with a new source of teachers' moral authority, authenticity, which will be briefly introduced in the conclusion.

THE CONCEPT OF INDOCTRINATION: TWO CONTRASTING VIEWS

In the liberal tradition of education in the West, indoctrination has long been considered one of the educational illnesses to be cured. John Wilson, a British analytic philosopher of education, defines indoctrination as any teaching that does not make use of learners' rational minds in the formation of their moral, religious, or political beliefs.⁴ There are three elements of this definition that deserve our attention. First, unlike conditioning or force that aims at the inducement of certain feelings or the formation of certain behavioral patterns in students' minds, indoctrination is directed to the formation of their beliefs. Secondly, the beliefs at issue are uncertain in the same way as those of moral, religious, or political beliefs are uncertain, rather than those of scientific or mathematical beliefs are. Thirdly, any teaching that tends to diminish learners' rational minds becomes a form of indoctrination.

Wilson introduces two typical ways in which students acquire an indoctrinated moral belief. The most primitive and common way would be by authoritarian or moralizing teachers who, mechanically or with a misguided passion, deliver

particular moral or political beliefs, such as, “Homosexuality is dirty,” “Communism is dangerous,” or “Muslims are superstitious” as if they were objective facts. Learners’ rational minds are not invited to be employed at all, but are put to sleep or by-passed by teachers who have some sort of moral hold over them by way of their authority or some other power-bestowing psychological factor. In this case, both the content of beliefs and the manner in which they are delivered are likely to be irrational. The reason that these are still called beliefs at all is that learners can give reasons for the beliefs they have, but these are only textbook (or official) reasons imposed by their teachers, rather than what they really believe to be right. In other words, this brainwashing form of indoctrination, which was often conducted in education under authoritarian or illiberal regimes, seems to work by creating self-censorship within learners’ minds.

It is, however, the second form of indoctrination that Wilson considers the educationally more serious:

I do not pretend that rational communication is not a very difficult matter. For there are great many forms of inculcating beliefs, a great many forms of indoctrination, other than the overt methods of brain-washing or rubber truncheons. Here is the mother who says, “Of course you can do what you like, dear, but I should be very *sad* to think that my daughter was having an affair with some man”: the housemaster who says: “We have complete religious toleration here, Bloggs, but of course I’ve always liked to have Christian boys as preferred”... In many cases the indoctrination is more effective if the indoctrinator is loved or admired: it is when the political individual *loves* Big Brother that he really loses his freedom.⁵

The two examples Wilson gives above describe a pseudo-liberal form of indoctrination in which an authority figure can be manipulative in conveying her moral view, putting some moralizing pressure on the learners in a more indirect way that they may not be able to resist. Of course, it is possible that the authority figure may not exactly intend to be manipulative, but her persona, morally and personally, is somehow presented to be powerful enough to command the learners’ mind in an irrational way. This may be what Wilson describes as a “more effective” form of indoctrination. Here the followers tend to think that they have accepted freely for good reasons when in fact they let their own wills and reasons be affected by the belief of the authority figure’s, not because they find a good reason to let that happen, but because they would like to gain approval from the authority figure they admire. In other words, in a more sophisticated form of indoctrination, learners are willingly, if not knowingly, indoctrinated into another’s beliefs or moral outlook by way of self-rationalization. According to Wilson, this form of indoctrination is educationally even more questionable since it encourages a culture of conformity in which learners slavishly takes others’ norm as their own without really making them their own.

Wilson’s key insight is that indoctrination involves the formation of learners’ moral beliefs by creating a certain process of the mind, such as self-censorship or rationalization, which is not completely irrational in itself. In other words, to accommodate the indoctrinated belief, learners must deliberately disguise from themselves their real reasons for holding the belief — for example, a desire to avoid disadvantage or to gain approval — and actively persuade themselves to believe it

for the sanctioned reason. Their minds play an active role as agents to be indoctrinated. But, according to Wilson, what makes this process of the mind irrational is that the belief they have is causally motivated, for example, by a desire to obey authority, rather than rationally motivated on the basis of reliable knowledge about the real world. Hence, the believers are not able to give relevant reasons for the belief or the reason they give will not in fact be the true motivators of the belief.⁶ In other words, self-deception is involved. The indoctrinated believers believe that they accept a belief because they know its legitimate ground when, in fact, they do not know. Thus, there seem to be two knowledge-distortions involved in indoctrination; one is a distortion about a belief itself — about how true the content *of* a belief is in relation to the world; and the other is a distortion about themselves — about how conscious they are in relating the belief to themselves.

Wilson's main focus, however, is distortion in the content of beliefs. For Wilson, indoctrination begins when the behaviors and beliefs we teach to children are not demanded by reality but have their origin in our own biases and fantasies. When the content of moral teaching is not based on truth and evidence, we diminish children's rational capacity to deal with the real world. But what does he mean by behaviors and beliefs demanded by reality? Wilson claims that children are to be educated "to adopt behavior-patterns and to have feelings which are seen by every sane and sensible person to be agreeable and necessary" and that "these behavior-patterns will be rational in the sense that they derive from reality rather than the values, fears, desires, or prejudices of individual people."⁷ For Wilson, then, indoctrination tends to be created by the general ways in which society is irrational and repressive. Since teachers themselves are subject to these distortions of reality, they must become personally alert to the ideological function of the establishment morality, lest they unknowingly pass on the irrational prejudices of society to children.

While Wilson is right to emphasize teachers' sensitivity to the political conditions that lead to indoctrination, it is clear that his view of indoctrination privileges a liberal view of the world. What is unclear is whether Wilson privileges the liberal view because it is a rational moral outlook or because it contains an anti-establishment morality. To put it another way, he does not make it clear whether indoctrination tends to be caused by the *irrationality* of the pre-liberal view that was currently dominant as the establishment's morality or by *any* establishment's morality that has a potential danger to force students' uncritical acceptance of it. By conflating these two concerns and demonizing the pre-liberal view, Wilson ends up characterizing indoctrination only as politically motivated, blind to a possibility of morally motivated indoctrination. In other words, his account of indoctrination describes political indoctrination by which students are considered to become mere victims of a distorted view of the world that is systematically or manipulatively delivered to their educational disadvantage.

Communitarianism can be taken as introducing an opposing view to Wilson's view of indoctrination. For communitarians, indoctrination is not necessarily to be avoided, but can be essential to moral education. In describing education as shaping

“the young person so that he or she may fit into some social role and function that requires recruits,”⁸ MacIntyre, one of the representative communitarians today, claims that in our relationship with other practitioners in a practice, we willingly subordinate ourselves to its rules and its internal standards of excellence as they are represented to us by masters who are its most competent and authoritative exponents.⁹ For him, in a practice “faith in authority has to precede rational understanding.”¹⁰

Following MacIntyre’s view, we can say that teachers’ moral authority over students is given only on the grounds of their mastery of the rules and internal standards of excellence in a particular moral practice. In this view, students’ obedience to and faith in teachers’ authority is educationally justified because their commitment is directed to the rules and standards of moral excellence to be mastered, rather than to the person of the teacher.

But why should we accept MacIntyre’s view that students’ mastery of the rules and standards of moral excellence is central to moral learning despite the danger of political indoctrination, especially given that the rules and standards of moral practice are widely admitted not to be universal but culturally specific and historically contingent? I think that Michael Sandel, another communitarian thinker, can give us an intelligible answer:

They (communitarians) say that certain of our roles are partly constitutive of the persons we are — as citizens of a country, or members of a movement, or partisans of a cause. But if we are partly defined by the communities....On the communitarian view, these stories make a moral difference, not only a psychological one. They situate us in the world, and give our lives their moral particularity.¹¹

Sandel gives us a fresh new aspect of indoctrination; we uncritically accept the roles and habits given by our community for good reasons. According to him, we come to know how to make sense of the world and ourselves in it by being indoctrinated into a moral outlook that may be illiberal or politically incorrect. This view also indicates that we may not be passive but active in being indoctrinated in the sense that we construct positive meanings through the process since it is exactly how we weave our lives with moral meanings and human values. To interpret it in stronger terms, we can say that, without indoctrination, we could not have been moral beings in the first place. For it gives us a focal point from which we can look at things from a moral point of view, colored with cultural, spiritual, and communal meanings and values. Thus, we are not the victims, but beneficiaries, of indoctrination.

What is so appealing about this communitarian view is that it assumes that the way in which we as children learn to relate ourselves to a particular view of the good life is not reasoning or critical thinking; it would be rather by way of being attuned to the social roles and expectations assigned to us by constant and reliable relations with adults around us over a long period of time. Thus, for communitarians, one’s uncritical acceptance of established beliefs and values can be a sign of her successful attunement to the social roles and expectations or moral rules and standards of excellence; self-deception is present only within the person who has failed to be attuned to them. According to a communitarian view, then, indoctrination is

educationally justified as long as the rules and standards of moral excellence are socially justified and accepted. I would call this moral indoctrination.

In MacIntyre's view, the initiation of students into a moral practice, i.e., moral indoctrination, is supposed to aim at their self-discovery in relation to the rules and standards of moral excellence in the practice. Thus, the pedagogical question now, for MacIntyre, is: "through what form of social engagement and learning can the errors which obstruct such discovery be brought to light?"¹² His own answer is to expose learners to the possibility of dialectical refutation of the established rules and standards they uncritically accepted earlier. This is why he defines the role of teachers not only as shaping "the young person so that he or she may fit into some social role and function that recruits" but also as teaching them "how to think for themselves, how to acquire independence of mind, how to be enlightened"¹³ To make these tasks feasible, MacIntyre suggests an idea of the learning community as one "systematically engaged in a dialectical enterprise in which the standards are sovereign over the contending parties"¹⁴ For, in his view, self-discovery is "first of all an initiation into the practice within which dialectical and confessional interrogation and self-interrogation are institutionalized."¹⁵

However, I think that the established rules and standards of morality are so tightly entangled with, and so deeply embedded in, our everyday modern life in which manipulative or non-manipulative social relations with others are no longer distinguishable from each other, that it would be very hard, if not impossible, to establish a focal point from which we can take a critical perspective on the actual practice of our moral conducts and judgments. On the other hand, even if we manage to articulate the established rules and standards as criteria against which to test existing practices and contradictory looking customs, we find ourselves too disenchanted to be innocently committed to those supposedly sovereign rules and standards without associating them with their ideological function in the society. In other words, the rules and standards of moral excellence in MacIntyre's sense, are either too close to or too far from our everyday experiences to become a source of teachers' authority in their moral teaching.

For example, a teacher cannot expect her students to take seriously the authority of the quasi-objective rules and standards of moral excellence when she herself is not a committed master of those moral rules and standards. But by being committed to them, it is hard for a teacher to be psychologically detached enough to be critical of the rules and standards governing her teaching practices. On the other hand, even if she manages to detach herself intellectually from them, her criticism would be likely to remain internal to a particular view of the good life to which the original rules and standards of moral excellence are subordinated, making the view more coherent and consistent. Note that the particular view of the good life the teacher is committed to is epistemologically incommensurable with another view of the good life, according to MacIntyre. Thus, to those with a different political interest, this teacher looks committed to political indoctrination, whether she admits or not. She would look even more so, if "dialectical and confessional interrogation and self-interrogation are institutionalized" as MacIntyre says.¹⁶

Thus, with the help of Foucault's bleak picturing of the dark relationship between knowledge and power that is supposedly so ubiquitously and pervasively penetrated into every corner of the modern individual's way of looking at life, moral indoctrination Moral and political indoctrination now look closely associated with each other in the eyes of modern individuals. Hence, to find a way to walk a fine line between them seems to be a pressing challenge for any serious teacher in moral education.

CONCLUSION: AUTHENTICITY AS A NEW SOURCE OF MORAL AUTHORITY

The kind of predicament I described above, which a politically sensitive and morally committed teacher today may often encounter as a moment of puzzlement or disturbance, is well described by David Edward Cooper:

The thought which may strike the teacher is not that he cannot subscribe to, or authoritatively transmit, various beliefs and values, but that he has slipped into, fallen into, unreflective acceptance of them. They have become part of the school's furniture; they go with the job like the free stationery....He may not be able to think of reasons against what he has come to accept: what disturbs is that he has simply taken so many things on board, not worked them out for himself. Even if he does have a basis from which to criticize the beliefs and values he has accrued, this basis will itself consist of presuppositions and conceptions that can fall victim to the same worry....Would he not have accepted very different ones, had he been trained the other side of the mountains? — and, if so, what has been his responsibility for his outlook?¹⁷

What seems to bother Cooper's imaginary teacher is neither general ways in which our society is irrational and repressive nor his inability as a teacher to do "dialectical and confessional interrogation" for the learning community. It is rather a deep self-doubt about almost-natural and global ways in which he helplessly falls into the uncritical acceptance of established beliefs and values. He realizes that all the beliefs and values he has acquired have been acquired through inheritance, training, received opinions, everyday chatter and so on. Since this problem is global, embracing all beliefs and values, it would be hard for him to distinguish his own beliefs and values from those that he unreflectively slipped into.

Of course, it is not a problem that teachers alone confront. Cooper continues:

But although tinkers and tailors can feel it as well, it is more appropriate to introduce it in connection with teachers, for, in a peculiarly important way, they are transmitters, as well as recipients and inheritors of beliefs and values. The teacher confronts not only his relation to his beliefs and values, but his pupils' relation to theirs, since he is instrumental in shaping it. It is this latter relation, indeed, which is often the more vivid one for teachers, and which they discuss under a heading like "indoctrination." But it is bizarre if a genuine concern for the authenticity of one's pupils' views remains accompanied by a sanguine indifference towards the ways in which one's own views have come about.¹⁸

Here, Cooper makes an interesting connection between the problem his imagery teacher faces as a person and the problem he faces as a teacher. When the teacher finds out how uncritical and unreflective his relation to his beliefs and values is in his everyday life, he also realizes how unavoidable it would be for him not to indoctrinate his students in his teaching. Cooper's characterization of indoctrination above makes two important points. First, it suggests that indoctrination may not so much have to do with (false) beliefs and values per se, as in Wilson's account of it, as to do with learners' (wrong) self-relation to them. Second, it draws our attention

to the teacher's own relation to his beliefs and values as critical to the shaping of his students' relation to their beliefs and values, not quasi-objective rules and standards of excellence as in MacIntyre's account of it.

Despite radical differences in their views of indoctrination, Wilson and MacIntyre seem to have something in common: emphasis on teaching young students to think for themselves. But, it is notorious how vague this term is; it is sometimes rephrased as "deriving values from oneself" or "making beliefs one's own," either of which seems not very helpful. Yet, it would not be far-fetched to say that, for a liberal like Wilson, it would mean "choosing (a moral outlook) for oneself" while, for a communitarian like MacIntyre, it can mean "discovering oneself" (within her traditional moral outlook). No matter how differently "thinking for oneself" would be defined to them, they seem to be as one in making teachers' personal moral outlook or character less important or even indifferent to their teaching in helping students to think for themselves. In this sense, we can say that Wilson and MacIntyre share a modern view of the nature of teaching: that teaching is honorably supposed to be a means to the good it serves — the goods of the learner and of the community, never to be a self-serving or self-regarding profession.¹⁹

However, I suspect that this honorable view of teachers' role may presuppose a misguided picture of the teacher as a person. Wilson pictures a liberal teacher as a heroic protector of her students from repressive traditional morality that illegitimately affects students' free minds. MacIntyre expects a communitarian teacher to play the role of the master in the rules and standards of moral excellence. In other words, both views assume some confidence in the teacher as a person; she is supposed to be mature enough, or at least, to be presented so in front of her students, to be able to choose for herself or discover herself with her own personal life. However, it is neither clear whether this assumption is true nor what its educational, if not professional function, may be.

Viewing a teacher's own relation to her beliefs and values as relevant to her moral teaching, Cooper suggests a different way of securing the teacher's moral authority. According to him, we teachers may not be as free as we think we are of both indoctrinating and being indoctrinated. Indoctrination takes place always and everywhere despite ourselves. But, for Cooper, we should not let this brutal fact of life be the source of our despair: we must learn how to acknowledge this aspect of our personhood, facing up to the psychological arbitrariness and genealogical contingency of our beliefs and values. This is exactly what Cooper means by "thinking for oneself" in terms of authenticity as an antidote to indoctrination.

The term authenticity has its origin in the philosophical tradition of existentialism and a rich history from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Sartre. But, following Cooper's formulation, I simply take the term as concerning how truthful one is in relation to her beliefs and values. By making her own relation to her beliefs and values part of the focus of her moral teaching, an authentic teacher has two advantages over liberal and communitarian teachers, as far as her moral authority is concerned. First, the teacher can be more conscious of how she herself came to have the beliefs and values — unearthing not only their psychological but also their

genealogical origins — so that she can make her unintended political indoctrination the focus of her moral teaching. Second, by making this self-knowledge constitutive of her teaching, she is more open to her students as a person and thus more likely to gain her students' genuine trust. This trust would, in turn enable her students to be more conscious of how they themselves developed their beliefs and values. This open space between the teacher and her students is exactly where significant moral learning occurs.

I think this trust, initiated and built up by the teacher, is the only reliable ground on which to explore the fine line between moral and political indoctrination. For moral learning based on trust alone will enable students to have courage to open themselves to unfamiliar views and values by dispelling any suspicion about political indoctrination. This shows how teachers' authentic relation to themselves, if properly appreciated by their students, can be a good source of moral authority.²⁰

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1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 25.
 2. David Carr discusses this issue at length in his recent book, *Making Sense of Education* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003). See chap. 3.
 3. Cora Diamond, a Wittgensteinian philosopher, also makes the same point in her book *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). See chap. 11, "Anything but Argument?"
 4. John Wilson, "Indoctrination and Rationality," in *Concepts of Indoctrination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 17-18.
 5. John Wilson, "Education and Indoctrination," in *Aims in Education* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), 32.
 6. *Ibid.*, 18.
 7. *Ibid.*, 34. Emphasis added.
 8. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Idea of an Educated Public," in *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures*, ed. G. Haydon (London: University of London Institute of Education, 1987), 16.
 9. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 31.
 10. *Ibid.*, 71.
 11. Michael Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 5-6.
 12. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 200.
 13. MacIntyre, "The Idea of an Educated Public," 16.
 14. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 200.
 15. *Ibid.*, 201.
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. David Edward Cooper, *Authenticity and Learning: Nietzsche's Educational Philosophy* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Gregg Revivals, 1991), 4-5.
 18. *Ibid.*, 15.
 19. Christopher Higgins makes a similar point in "MacIntyre's Moral Theory and the Possibility of an Aretaic Ethics of Teaching," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003).
 20. This work was supported by the faculty research fund of Konkuk University in 2003.