Toward Promoting Humanity: Intellectual Virtues and Moral Responsibility

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I am more than sympathetic to the overall thesis of Thayer-Bacon's address to this heartbreaking situation. Indeed, I have had a hard time responding to this paper. In part because I agree with its sentiment, and also because its topic is depressingly real, presently concrete, and yet in a way ever-present. Accordingly, in the following brief response, rather than being critical of it, I want to extend Thayer-Bacon's thesis. That is, I will attempt to give an equivalent description of her call to respond that I think she will agree with. To be precise, I bring some epistemic elements of the situation to the front of the discussion with the goal to add some light to some dark places. Further, I end on a hopeful note.

There are two main issues that "Vulnerable Children and Moral Responsibility: Loss of Humanity" is asking us to consider: (1) the injustice of the *Governmental Reaction* to the situation, and (2) the injustice of the *Situation Itself*. Thayer-Bacon's address is a call to the whole person—indeed to the whole world. Accordingly, the whole of philosophy might need to respond. With this holistic response in mind, the aesthetic reply to her address might point to the utter ugliness of the situation or the potential beauty in the lives that are dealt with, while the metaphysical response might point to issues of freedom or perhaps the modality of the state of affairs. I take her own paper as an ethical response to the situation that gives care and context priority. For my part, I give an epistemic or what could broadly be thought of as an axiological response to her address that attempts to give care and context priority as well. Though there is

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always more to say, I argue that the possession of intellectual virtues are lacking in the governmental reaction to the situation, and that the same can be said to the situation itself.

To begin, Thayer-Bacon cites Audrey Thompson's 1990 PES paper, and I too laughed at the example used therein: *What do we do when a baby has a loaded gun?* Though there are babies and guns in the present problem addressed, it is different, and reading Thayer-Bacon's address to this horrendous situation makes me cry. As a relatively new parent, I genuinely feel for the mother and child in the photo, and for the many that are not.[1] Separating children from parents in this situation is cruel to the unknowing children, saying nothing about how the parents are affected—this is as clear as it gets of an example of an epistemic injustice.[2] The child is morally hurt by having epistemic access to their parent severed. Further, if there was ever a good deterrent not to do something, threatening to take away one's child would be it (if only the individuals directly harmed by the policy *knew* about the policy). Nevertheless, the ends don't usually justify the means, and especially when the ends are highly circumspect to begin with. To put it simply, the zero tolerance policy of "taking away your children" does not attempt to teach or inspire. However, as has been argued, "A principled ethical approach alone will not solve the problem ..." Also, as noted, ethical care theory cannot address social problems on a large scale or in a timely manner. The question then is: *What can we do?*

As citizens we can write letters, go to rallies, talk about these issues, etc. As educators and philosophers of education there is a need to think through these issues of injustice with an aim to change how education is perceived and practiced. In this manner, in the preface to *Experience & Education* John Dewey writes:

It is the business of an intelligent theory of education

> to ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist and then, instead of taking one side or the other, to indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties.[3]

Both the governmental reaction and the situation itself fail to see that education in general is constitutively larger than usually perceived. Later in the book, Dewey continues:

> Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing [they are] studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned.[4]

In this same way, Thayer-Bacon shows us that the vulnerable children in the situation are learning things (for better or for worse) about the world, and it is our responsibility to correct, shape, and lead this. However, it is not just a moral responsibility, it is also an epistemic one, as I will argue below. Or perhaps, better yet, it could be said that there is an axiological or educational responsibility.

Virtue epistemology is epistemological evaluation that gives 'intellectual virtue' a primary consideration in its analysis. It has been inspiring to social epistemology, feminist epistemology, applied epistemology, philosophy of education, value theory, social philosophy, philosophy of mind, cognitive science, psychology, and political philosophy (amongst other domains of inquiry). It is not only theoretically appealing, but also practically beneficial, and is ripe to describe the "collateral learning" that Dewey and Thayer-Bacon point us toward.

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Pioneer virtue epistemologist, Linda Zagzebski describes epistemology as "the study of right or good ways to cognitively grasp reality."[5] This way of characterizing epistemology widens the scope of epistemological analysis to include not only excellent epistemic character traits (i.e., virtues) such as intellectual courage, open-mindedness, attentiveness, tenacity, curiosity etc., but also other important normative values such as understanding, wisdom, care, and motivation. Given the various epistemic and moral values that are considered in virtue epistemology, it can be thought of as axiological in nature, where axiology is *The Study of Value*. The education of intellectual virtues and value is much like the way moral virtues are explicitly educated in the general Aristotelian method: one learns from example, develops habits, and eventually becomes the virtues or values they practice. Nevertheless, these values are "educated" for better or for worse whether they are targeted or not. So what kind of virtues and values are being practiced at the US/Mexican border?

As Thayer-Bacon points out, fear is a big component of pushing such zero tolerance policies, but let us try to focus on the intellectual *virtues* of the members whom are responsible for the governmental response. We should ask: are they being intellectually courageous, open-minded, attentive to detail, intellectually tenacious, curious etc.? Though this is an empirical question, on the face of it there seems to be a lack of possession and practice of such intellectual virtues. If true, and if virtue epistemologists are correct, then the governmental response is not grasping (or coming to know or to understand) the world as best as they could. Put another way, they are not being educationally responsible.

Thayer-Bacon writes, "The students [or people] protected by the [zero tolerance] policy continue to be white children [or people] from families with higher income levels and access to legal protection." I can imagine someone (on this side of the border) thinking that this is indeed

good, and that such policies are doing their job well (i.e., they are protecting the people who "deserve" protection). Such a response reminds me of Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*: "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger."[6] The question then is how do we get such people to—*listen* to *reason* and *care*? What do we say to someone who says, "Who cares?" How do we get more people to desire or value intellectual virtues and the education of the whole person and the whole cosmopolis?

I do not have a full answer, but I want to leave us with some hope. As Thayer-Bacon and Dewey remind us: We cannot forget about collateral learning; We cannot forget that education and schooling are distinct; We cannot forget that ethics and epistemology are intricately connected; We cannot forget that education is political, and that political work is educational (or at least has an impact on the way education is conceived and practiced). Further so, the more secure cognitive contact with reality that we have the better we can respond practically and morally. We have all been vulnerable children, and like all vulnerable children (and like all people in general) there is always a metaphysical need to learn and grasp the world. For an education to go well an explicit valuing of education can help the educational process, and this valuing is lacking at the border. In this way, *the need to learn* should be elevated to *a love of wisdom*. If true, then learning about value and grasping reality are intricate parts of desiring, achieving, and promoting humanity.

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1 Cf. John Moore, "Image #973097552," 2018, photograph, *Getty Images*.
2 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
3 John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York, NY: The Kappa Delta Pi Lecture Series, 1938).
4 Ibid., 48.
5 Cf. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See

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also Linda Zagzebski, "The Search for the Source of Epistemic Goods," *Metaphilosophy* 34, no. 1-2 (2003), 8.

6 Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1992), 338c1-2.