

Critical Thinking and the Unity of Virtue

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Two prominent features of the current educational-theoretical landscape are the mountains of literature on critical thinking and on moral education. Between them lies a fertile wilderness, where the streams fed by those mighty sources vanish in a lush tangle of confusion. Those who sit on the mountains above look across with suspicion, and are hesitant to descend from the security of the high ground and meet each other below in the darkness of a jungle floor where friends and enemies may be hard to distinguish. From the vantage point of these heights it is not easy to detect, through the overgrowth of supposition and forgetting, the paths of previous expeditions and the neglected remnants of their outposts, the bodies of thought once laid out so carefully, lying long since in a vegetative state. Little notice is taken, and not much made, of the fact that the dominant aim of higher education, from its birth in fifth-century Athens onward, was *good judgment (phronesis)*, which was understood to be a product of both virtue and reason and the consummation of both.¹

This philosophical amnesia is not universal, but it persists to a remarkable degree at a time when learning theory and classroom practice are making strides toward bridging this divide. Changes in classroom practice are occurring largely because teachers in even the most elite suburban school districts have come to accept the idea that social and emotional learning must be promoted more vigorously than in the past, as a foundation for student achievement and to maintain an atmosphere of civility and mutual respect. They report that since the mid-to-late 1980s children coming to school have changed for the worse — that they are aggressive, disrespectful, and unmanageable — and there is more than enough reason to accept these reports and attribute the change to immense and growing deficiencies in the care and upbringing of children.² The difficulties entailed by this have provided the impetus for experiments with “character education,” “pro-social,” and “core values” programs in countless school districts, many of them launched through attempts to build community consensus around lists of “core values.”³ These initiatives have been guided in varying degrees by research on social and emotional learning, and many of them have the dual aim of cultivating habits of kindness and civility while also promoting capacities of reflection, judgment, and self-management. They aim to make children more *thoughtful*, which is to say both more considerate in a moral sense and more inclined to think things through before acting.⁴

We are thus, in practice, in a period in which the necessity of initiating children into a common morality — into norms of civility, mutual respect, and thoughtfulness — is being reasserted, and is understood by many participants in this movement as a preparation for intelligent *self-governance*. Without casting this in the language of classical virtue theory, they recognize more or less clearly that the moral and intellectual virtues form a natural unity, that none is unqualifiedly good without the others. This is not yet a commitment to a synthesis of moral education and full-fledged instruction in critical thinking, but there is movement in that direction.

All of this inclines me to the view that there are both philosophical and practical reasons to examine what may be at stake in attempting a curricular synthesis of moral education and instruction in critical thinking. There are at least *prima facie* tensions in this project of instructional synthesis, arising from the objections that may be lodged against each side of this instructional divide by the other, and my strategy here will be to enumerate these, identify the tensions which this enumeration yields, and take stock of the moral tradition's attempts to grapple with them. All six of the objections I shall consider are essentially *moral* in nature, so my inquiry here will be limited to the moral aspects of the envisioned synthesis of moral education and critical thinking. I leave investigation of the political, developmental, and instructional aspects of this synthesis to other scholars, and for other occasions.

The objections or problems which I shall survey here I shall call: (1) the problem of indoctrination; (2) the problem of foreclosed options; (3) the problem of force; (4) the problem of skepticism; (5) the problem of local variation; and (6) the problem of free-riding. The problems of indoctrination and free-riding together give rise to a bind or paradox, which I shall call the *paradox of progressive morality*.⁵

Indoctrination. A common fear about moral education is that it will inevitably be indoctrinating, in the sense that it will establish beliefs which are not all evidently true, and will do so in such a way that those beliefs are not easily dislodged at any later time. It is commonly assumed that the powers of reason take time to develop in children, and that until those powers have developed, their beliefs remain vulnerable to manipulation. It is also sometimes assumed, as Plato and Aristotle did, that what we have been habituated to in our youth tends to exercise an *enduring* influence on what we desire and take to be good. A third assumption, also evident in the thought of Plato and Aristotle, is that children become neither good nor responsive to reason without an upbringing that surrounds them with good models and guides them toward good habits. On these assumptions, moral habituation may be supposed to be both a prerequisite for critical thought and an obstacle to its unfettered employment. It seems evident that one will not be in a good position to judge the conception of the good one has been raised in, since one will tend to see what one has grown accustomed to as good.

Foreclosed Options. A second and related problem or concern is that in suppressing alternative conceptions of the good, moral habituation restricts life options. The child's so-called "right to an open future" is breached.

Force. A third concern is that moral habituation necessarily involves *force*, and is thus morally suspect, particularly in government schools. If moral habits must be cultivated without the benefit of children being antecedently reasonable, then a substantial reliance on force may seem inevitable. Peter Simpson's work on Aristotelian educational theory exemplifies exactly this line of thinking in insisting that in the Aristotelian account of becoming good, habits of good conduct can only be established by force, since they cannot be established by rational persuasion.⁶

Skepticism. Coming at this from the other side, one might worry that children are all too easily initiated into the deadly game of logic, that once immersed in its

culture of criticism, they can all too effectively wash themselves and each other in a “cynical acid” which eats away even the sturdiest moral fibers, denuding them of the sheltering fabric of culture, community, and tradition.⁷ One need only imagine that the attitude of the critical thinker is to believe just what there is adequate reason to believe, and that there are no rational foundations for morality, or none that can be easily discovered.

Local variation. A fifth problem is that even if there are rational foundations for morality *generally*, there will almost certainly be legitimate local variations, since some problems of social coordination will have no uniquely best solution. Different interests may be balanced somewhat differently, leaving the members of each of the various moral communities pained in one way here, in another way there. What is local in this way appears, and is in some sense, arbitrary. This renders it vulnerable to critical scrutiny, however valuable and irreplaceable it may be.

Free-riding. Even if there were easily discernible foundational arguments for morality generally, and for any merely local rules, one might fear that instruction in critical thinking will embolden children in their embrace of self-interested arguments to free-ride on public morality, to take advantage of the self-restraint of those who accept the demands of morality. The idea of morality as a system of conduct-guiding norms is that it provides reasons for action that take precedence over all others. Its norms are solutions to problems of social coordination which yield mutual advantage when complied with, and this mutual advantage provides us all with reasons of prudence to prefer life in a community constrained by such norms. Some people may understand how this provides a rational foundation for morality but not fully accept what it demands, namely that we all accept the reasons of morality as compelling reasons, even when the reasons of prudence counsel a different course. The price of morality’s benefits is accepting *limits on our liberty to govern ourselves by our own reason*, but how rational will this seem to one who is encouraged by instruction in critical thinking to think for herself?

The situation in which “everyone is governed by his own reason” is inevitably “a condition of war,” says Thomas Hobbes, but the “fool,” without denying the existence of a social covenant, “questioneth whether injustice... may not sometimes stand with that reason which dictateth to every man his own good. [He questions whether] it be not against reason [to violate the covenant].”⁸ “The force of words being...too weak to hold men to the performance of their covenants,” and virtue being too rare, we must authorize a sovereign to establish moral law by force of arms and the suppression of academic freedom, says Hobbes.⁹ If we are to find some principled grounds on which to resist the repugnantly illiberal aspects of this Hobbesian solution, we need to show either that habits of virtue, and the sentiments, perceptions, and inclinations that comprise them, are robust and resistant to any corrupting influence that critical reason might have, or that critical reason can be counted on to counsel fair play and adherence to moral norms.

Surveying this list, we find three forms of the concern that moral training compromises individual freedom and three forms of the concern that the liberating capacity of critical reason undermines fidelity to common morality. At least four of

these concerns were on the philosophical agenda at its outset, and have been perennially at the heart of philosophical concern with education, the problems of *local variation* and *foreclosed options* being the exceptions. I will set these exceptions aside in what follows, and begin my discussion of the others with some brief remarks on their place in the philosophical tradition.

When Thrasymachus argues in Book I of Plato's *Republic* that laws aim at the advantage of the rulers alone, while those who have made the laws "declare what they have made — what is to their own advantage — to be just for their subjects," he confronts Socrates with a problem of indoctrination which the Socratic *elenchus* cannot answer, but which Plato hopes to.¹⁰ The *elenchus* is a mode of dialectical reasoning which can drive out the contradictions in a set of beliefs, but it offers no hope of arriving at a consistent set of *true* beliefs unless one has begun with beliefs which are weighted toward the truth to begin with. In the face of systematic error, which could arise from systematic deception, it is powerless, and this points up the desirability of having some basis for judging a society which is independent of what is taught in it.

Thrasymachus' consistent disdain for conventional morality may also be considered an expression of moral skepticism, to be answered by Plato's theory of moral knowledge, while the challenge from Glaucon that follows in Book II shows how the free-rider problem arises even among those who accept the rationality of entering into a social covenant to create and enforce a common morality. It is in hopes of answering this free-rider problem that Plato spends the better part of Books II-IX trying to show that virtue is not simply an instrumental good, related to happiness only unreliably through external sanctions, but an internal good of the psyche, without which no one can be happy. It is, at least in part, in hopes of answering this problem that Rousseau later hopes to convince us that Emile can *without benefit of instruction* discover natural moral law (along with the laws of physics), and the existence of God and the afterlife (that is, the essential elements of "natural religion").

Thrasymachus represents the problem of force no less than the problem of indoctrination, and Plato affirms in response that in the best kind of city children are educated by "persuasion" embodied in music and poetry, and not by "force," as they are in deficient cities.¹¹ In the *Republic*, as in the works of John Locke, the resistance to using force in education rests in the idea that reliance on force tends to undermine the development of responsiveness to reason, and the idea that force need be used only sparingly since children are quite ready to imitate those who are praised and admired, and quite inclined to adopt the standards and way of life of those who take care of them.¹²

What this brief historical introduction begins to reveal is that the problems of indoctrination and free-riding are the most challenging. The problem of force depends upon failing to recognize the ways in which children are drawn to the good without force or rationally compelling argument. Plato, Aristotle, and Locke all had a reasonably good understanding of how this occurs. Moreover, what may seem the obvious adequate response to the problem of indoctrination is not adequate. That

response would note the reference to establishing “beliefs which are not all evidently true,” in my statement of the problem of indoctrination, and would hold that there is no problem if we take care to inculcate only beliefs which are evidently true. I think there is a lot of good sense in this response, and can report that in my experience, school districts typically do attempt to exercise such care when they pursue initiatives in character education. Non-violence and mutual respect are on the list, but beliefs about sexual orientation, gender roles, and what constitutes a family are not. When the various constituencies in a district are brought to the table, their initial apprehensions about “whose values” are to be taught give way to a consensus that is remarkably stable across districts. However gratifying such success may be, however, we have to make some allowance for our collective fallibility. Recognizing our fallibility and making allowance for the possibility of moral progress should lead us to embrace the ideal of a moral community that is held together by norms that are open to public evaluation and revision — a community that chooses fundamental law for itself, and makes moral progress by revising it over time. Even if we take care to find common ground in what we teach, if we teach it in a way that precludes any possibility of thinking beyond it, then the ideal of a progressive common morality is compromised, and a form of the problem of indoctrination remains. The problem of skepticism is also an easier one than the free-rider problem. Although it is periodically fashionable to profess moral skepticism, the contractarian view that it is mutually advantageous and therefore rational to impose on ourselves duties of mutual respect, or at least self-restraint, is not only an attractively cautious position in theory, but one which is easily grasped as self-evident in practice. On the other hand, the free-rider problem would remain unsolved, even if the problem of skepticism were solved.

Taken together, the problems of indoctrination and free-riding create something of a bind or dilemma, a *paradox of progressive morality*, if you will:

1. Either one’s capacity to critically evaluate the morality one is habituated into is limited by the perceptions and sentiments one acquires in that habituation, or it is not.
2. If it is limited in this way, then no consistent system of morality is open to internal public scrutiny, and no one brought up in it has any rational assurance that it is not deficient.
3. If it is not limited in this way, then the perceptions and sentiments which incline us to give the reasons of morality priority over others can be undermined by critical thinking, resulting in moral free-riding.

The problem, in short, is how morality can both command our fidelity and be open to effective public scrutiny and appropriate revision. It would seem that it can only have either one of these properties at the expense of the other.

The classical and modern traditions share a common aspiration to solve the free-rider problem by means of a theoretical demonstration that it is rational to be moral, but divide on the questions of whether the requisite moral knowledge can be easily acquired, and whether it can be acquired independently of one’s prior moral beliefs. To the extent that it can be acquired *easily* and *independently* of one’s prior moral

beliefs and perceptions, a solution to our paradox may be found in the possibility of us all having moral knowledge.

The Platonic and Aristotelian view is that moral habituation and true moral belief are an essential foundation for becoming reasonable and acquiring moral insight, and that such insight is a rare achievement. Thus, few people become fully virtuous, on their view. Those who do will understand why a happy life requires virtue, and their reason will confirm the perceptions of what is good that they have grown comfortable with.¹² But most people will never have the capacity or knowledge to judge the moral code of their city, and the preservation of their merely habitual virtue will require some modest enforcement of laws which embody natural moral law.

By contrast, the view that emerges in the early modern period is that faith and reason converge, but may do so quite independently of one another. According to the doctrines of natural reason and natural religion, human beings possess, as a gift of nature, a faculty of reason by which they can easily discover within themselves a knowledge of God, moral law, and the afterlife. Such knowledge would give us all assurance that virtue pays, and provide an independent measure of human laws and customs. The prospect of it encouraged the hope that religious toleration would put an end to the Reformation wars by suggesting that the nations of Europe could avoid the conflict generated by imposing religious orthodoxy with reasonable assurance that Christians of every sect would be bound together in peace by the elements of natural religion evident to them all.

I am not sanguine about the prospects for making good on this idea that there is easily, and thus widely, attainable moral knowledge which not only provides an independent measure of the soundness of whatever moral code one has grown up with, but also a compelling motive to be moral. If such knowledge is not widely attainable, what possibilities for escaping the *paradox of progressive morality* remain? I leave you with four.

First, one might argue that allowance for fallibility in our identification of fundamental moral principles is misplaced, that what we think of as moral progress, and wish to leave room for, is progress in the consistency and sensitivity of application of the same fundamental principles which have been transmitted already through many generations. On this line of argument, there is no harm in people being forever bound in their sentiments, conduct, and perception of the good by the correct fundamental morality they are brought up in. That would prevent them from exploiting opportunities to free-ride, while a training in critical thinking and moral case analysis would presumably develop their capacity for advancing moral progress through sensitive and creative application of the fundamental principles they have learned.

Second, one might hypothesize that reason can outstrip the sentiments, that what we rationally judge to be best will not always be possible for us emotionally. If this is true, then critical thinking may be able to provide evaluations of one's moral mother-tongue sufficient for moral progress, even as it remains the language of one's

heart. Progress would be *intergenerational*, not *intragenerational*, and the sentiments of each generation would bind its actions, if not its tongue.

Third, if a moral community is able in this way, or some other, to reach better collective judgments about matters of moral concern, it might bind itself under new laws, whether written or unwritten, thereby creating for itself the motivation to act in a more enlightened way.

Finally, if children are initiated into habitual practices of giving and taking reasons, including moral reasons, they will become both morally serious and committed critical thinkers, motivated by conceptions of themselves as both moral and devoted to the truth. Being motivated in this way will preclude free-riding, since selfishness and making an exception of oneself will be incompatible with a desire to be moral. If thoughtfulness about what counts as a reason has been cultivated, it is difficult to see how the perceptions and sentiments formed by such an upbringing would preclude an examination of fundamental morality and a potential for moral progress. On this alternative, one pictures the intellectual virtues themselves as originating in training or habituation in accordance with norms of reason, and one pictures training in the habits of virtue as also including a training in the practice of giving adequate reasons for what one does and respecting the adequate reasons that others give.

This final suggestion is in some ways the most attractive, and most suggestive of a course that instruction might take, but I must now leave and commend the subject to you.

1. See Randall Curren, "Practical Wisdom," in *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.J. Chambliss (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 496-99.

2. See, for example, Laura Mansnerus, "Kids of the 90's: A Bolder Breed," *The New York Times*, Sunday, 4 April 1993, section 4A ("Education Life"), 14-17.

3. See Maurice Elias et. al., *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997), for an overview of various initiatives, approaches to emotional and social learning, and the research being relied upon.

4. The mission statement of an elementary school that I have worked with through the past two years provides a good illustration of this. It declares the purpose of its program to be "to maintain a caring community which nurtures students' emotional and cognitive capacities for self-management, good judgment, and social success." The cognitive aspect of this mission is regarded as entirely consistent with the more specific goal of promoting virtues such as honesty and kindness.

5. This will bring to mind the "paradox" that Richard Peters addresses in "Reason and Habit: The Paradox of Moral Education," in Richard Peters, *Moral Development and Moral Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 45-60, but his is simply the problem of how one can become responsive to reason if one is first taught to act from good habits. As he notes, this is ultimately an empirical (developmental) question, and I shall not address it here. Corresponding more closely to the *moral* dilemma that I shall identify is the *political* dilemma identified by Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 115. Critical reason must be part of civic education if we are to safeguard ourselves against political corruption, but it also seems to undermine liberal patriotism and promote cynicism and political apathy.

6. Peter Simpson, "Making the City Good: Aristotle's City and Its Contemporary Relevance," *The Philosophical Forum* 22 (Winter 1990), 149-66.

7. The phrase is Oliver Wendell Holmes's.

8. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), Part I, chap. 16, par. 4, and chap. 15, par. 4.
9. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14, par. 31; chap. 18, par. 9, and chap. 46, par. 23 of the original Latin version.
10. The passage quoted is from Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 338e.
11. *Ibid.*, 401b-402a; 548c.
12. See John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 31-85; Plato, *Republic*, 401b-402a, 548c, and 590c-d.
12. See, for example, Plato, *Republic*, 402a.