

How to Make Our Ideas of Indoctrination Clear

Eric Bredo

University of Virginia

INTRODUCTION

One reason that philosophers have been so involved with clarifying concepts is that they are heirs to the Platonic notion that, if we only had a clear conception of what is really good, we would behave better, because we would know what to seek. Today, we are less prone to think that there is a single correct conception of anything. We have given up on solving problems of conduct by seeking “clarity,” because it has become evident that the result will be based on presuppositions that favor one interest or another. As a result, discussions tend to oscillate between stale agreement among those who already agree, and pitched battles when a new group enters the scene.

The first scenario seems to have prevailed in the indoctrination debate. Ivan A. Snook, one of its leaders, seemed to concede as much when he wrote, “I would not wish to continue the debate on indoctrination though I still believe it to be an important notion. I believe we are as clear about it as we could ever be.”¹ Then, just when one thinks that the topic is completely dead, feminists and communitarians enter, suggesting that the old consensus was based on the prejudices of Enlightenment-oriented, Anglo-American males. These points seem relevant to Barbara Peterson’s essay, “Reason-Giving Versus Truth-Seeking: Reconceptualizing Indoctrination in Education,” because Peterson can be seen as offering a feminist critique of Enlightenment-oriented males, like Snook, Thomas Green, and Harvey Siegel, who were influential in the last round of debate.

PETERSON’S ARGUMENT

Peterson’s definition of “indoctrination” as “the willful and intentional act of teachers to get students to hold beliefs in such a way that they are unlikely to question the truth of such beliefs in the face of opposing evidence or counterarguments” is quite similar to Snook’s. She also agrees largely with Green’s view that indoctrination is an intentional effort to get students to hold a belief as though it were supported by evidence that would make it “secure against the threat of change by the later introduction of conflicting reasons or...evidence.”² She further agrees with most of Siegel’s conception — indoctrination seeks to get a student to hold a belief in such a way that it is “impervious to negative or contrary evidence,” or without “regard to [its] truth or justifiability.”³ What Peterson seems to like about these views is that they agree that indoctrination closes off future inquiry into truth.

Despite all this apparent agreement, however, Peterson objects to the notion that indoctrinated beliefs are held in a “non-rational” or “non-evidential” manner. This apparent verbal quibble quickly turns into the large objection that all of these other definitions are unclear about their basic conceptions of rationality and truth.

Green’s and Siegel’s conceptions of rationality are held to be unclear because they do not distinguish between having a relevant but “insufficient” reason for a

belief versus having a relevant and “sufficient” one. For Peterson, a “sufficient” reason is one that is based on “*all* the relevant and available evidence and arguments” (emphasis in original). In other words, Green’s and Siegel’s conceptions do not distinguish between having a reason and having a reason that makes sense in the total context of belief.

Green’s and Siegel’s accounts of truth also are held to be inadequately clear. I found Peterson’s argument a bit unclear as well, but her point seems to be that rationality tends to be prized in these accounts because it is useful for getting truths that mirror or represent something else. Since Green and Siegel also conceive of “truth” as the conclusion of a “rational” inquiry, this makes it difficult to know whether truth is merely the conclusion of a rational inquiry, or something prior that this conclusion is supposed to represent.

All these difficulties could be resolved, Peterson suggests, if we adopted a Peircean conception of truth and inquiry (as interpreted by Cheryl Misak). According to Peirce, truth consists of those beliefs upon which a community of inquirers eventually is “fated” to converge. Peirce further treats truth as an ideal to be continually pursued, rather than something that can be grasped once and for all. Peirce’s definition of truth, Peterson argues, allows us to distinguish indoctrination from nonindoctrination more clearly than the accounts of either Green or Siegel. Among other things, the Peircean conception of truth leads to considering non-indoctrinated behavior as that which adopts an open-minded attitude of continual “truth-seeking,” rather than one of mere self-justificatory “reason-giving.”

But how does one know that one is getting nearer to a truth, if truth is an ever-receding ideal? Peterson suggests that we can be “substantially certain” that a belief is true if it is supported by all available evidence, experiences, and reasons. We should also feel comfortable accepting a belief about which people disagree, if we find their arguments unconvincing after carefully considering them. This basis for accepting beliefs is all right because it is consistent with Peirce’s epistemology, which is only one of many.

COMMENTS

Adapting Charles Sanders Peirce’s ideas to the indoctrination debate seems to be a wonderful idea, which I heartily applaud. I believe it needs to be done in a more careful and thoroughgoing manner, however.

Peirce’s “first rule of logic” states that there is only one thing that is really needed to reach the truth: a sincere desire to find it. Finding truth is not merely a matter of following some method, such as deductive logic. The continual and sincere quest for the truth is more important than any particular method because it will lead eventually to finding new methods or adapting old ones, rather than being trapped by them. I take something like this attitude to be Peterson’s core insight when she objects to logical language, like that which speaks of holding a belief in a “rational” or “truth-regarding” manner. She seems to be arguing that thinking should be less mechanical, and that “rationality” and “truth” should be considered in broader and more practical ways. This may be similar to John Dewey’s informal conception of

logic as “the systematic care, negative and positive, taken to safeguard reflection so that it may yield the best results under the given conditions.”⁴

While Peterson adopts some aspects of Peirce’s thought, others are overlooked or distorted. Peterson’s version of Peirce seems to turn him into a touchy-feely kind of guy rather than a tough-minded scientist, mathematician, and logician. As a result, his universalism and experimentalism are lost. His pragmatic emphasis on beliefs that lead to new and more satisfactory ways of thinking, rather than merely being consistent with a mass of current belief, is also underemphasized. Albert Einstein’s theory was prized because it explained new phenomena, such as light’s being bent by a gravitational field, even though it was only approximately consistent with old beliefs.

Peirce’s approach to “fixing” or “settling” belief is also underemphasized. Peirce discussed four methods of “fixing” belief: tenacity, authority, a priori reasoning, and experiment. Peterson’s approach seems to emphasize tenacity, while Peirce emphasized experiment (though he recognized that each has its uses). When an Italian scientist doubted Isaac Newton’s claims about light, Newton took a prism to the Royal Society and showed what he claimed was true. *Exunt* Italian. Some things may not be so clearly demonstrable, but the proper conclusion would seem to be that the matter remains uncertain, rather than that one’s own view is probably correct.

The pragmatic method also gives a better way of considering which view of indoctrination is preferable, for reasons other than clarity in the abstract, whatever that might mean. The practical difference between the Green/Siegel and Peterson conceptions of indoctrination, for example, seems to be that the former do not want to admit any falsehoods, while Peterson does not want to eliminate any truths. Both may be good, but their goodness depends on the situation. If near retirement and betting my account, I might prefer Green and Siegel’s approach, while if starting out I might find Peterson’s more attractive. The issue is not which view is clearer in the abstract, but what each is good for. The implicit Platonism in Peterson’s argument is unnecessary.

This point applies to debate between logic-chopping males and sensitive females, and also to the notion that every group must have its own epistemology. Identifying what each approach is good for turns the argument from a necessary collision between groups to a choice of methods for achieving different aims. Considered practically, we do not have to be stuck between a single formal method versus an arbitrary preference for diverse methods, since different methods are good for different things. The way to become clear about our ideas of indoctrination, then, is to see what aims they serve well or ill — not to search for their essences in the abstract, or to fight about whose usage should dominate. This is what I believe Peirce meant as the way to make our ideas clear.

1. Ivan A. Snook, “Contexts and Essences: Indoctrination Revisited,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 21, no. 1 (1989), 64.

2. Thomas F. Green, "Indoctrination and Beliefs," in *Concepts of Indoctrination*, ed. Ivan A. Snook (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 35, quoted in Peterson.
3. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 80, quoted in Peterson.
4. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1910), 56.