

A COMMENTARY ON
LAURA PURDY'S

In Their Best Interest?

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Laura Purdy's main purpose in writing *In Their Best Interest*, she tells us, was to make the case—or a case, in any event—against equal rights for children. In the process, she devotes considerable attention to making a case for universal, compulsory education. From there it is only a short step to advocating that public schools shoulder the burden of providing children with moral education. She does not trust parents to provide the moral bearings children need to function successfully in a complex world. She does not think that children can learn enough from their own experience and from their own mistakes to keep them from getting over their heads in trouble. She therefore contends that the public schools make up for the gap between what parents provide in the way of moral counsel and what the children need. She sees this as a middle path between libertarianism and protectionism, between equal rights and no rights, between allowing children to learn from their own experience and indoctrination. In exercising their rights, children should be given “monitored aid,” which is to say “supervised practice in making decisions, starting with relatively small matters and moving on gradually to more significant ones” (p. 161). Children taking this route are thereby provided with progressively more responsibility before they are expected to deal with the structurelessness of the adult world” (*Idem*). Hence, her argument that universal, compulsory education is our best bet for making sure that everybody is exposed to the “perspectives, knowledge, skills and strategies necessary for dealing with values” (p. 157).

I am not inclined to contest these points, for it is only subsequently that my worries begin to mount up. What I am concerned about, in a word, is Laura Purdy's *complacency* as to how the moral education she calls for will take place. She acknowledges there will be mistakes, but she calmly and confidently assures us that “the worry about mistakes is overblown” (p. 165). What will safeguard the child? On the same page she tells us that “emphasizing critical thinking in both family and school ... should serve to allay any remaining fears about mistakes or indoctrination.” Now it is probable that all of us, at one time or another, have called for critical thinking in the schools to protect children from indoctrination, but I dare say the call has usually been made with full knowledge that critical thinking is an incredibly weak reed for such a purpose, although it is better than no reed at all. But anyone aware of how weak and fragile critical thinking is when contrasted with the powerful forces of, say, prejudice is hardly in a position to exude confidence. The ordinary critical thinking course bounces off prejudice like a raindrop off an oily, slick roadway.

It is not that Laura Purdy has in mind, for school children, a superficial or watered-down version of critical thinking. Instead, she reassures us, the critical thinking materials to be used would employ “the kind of material that is now routinely taught in college in informal logic or critical thinking courses... The goal is to help individuals reason constructively” (*Idem*). We must stress the importance of justifying beliefs and teaching about what counts as justification, she continues. It is not that a single, clear standard for every knowledge claim is needed. Rather, she says, children would need to be taught a variety of strategies and tests that would enable them to judge the relative variety of claims. The goal would be that “every significant claim to knowledge would be accompanied by discussion of the warrants for its belief.” (*Idem*.)

This latter statement is about the most rigorous that Laura Purdy gets in describing the criteria for the critical thinking course she recommends. If it still leaves us unconvinced, it is, perhaps, because she seems to be equating education with learning to assess *knowledge* claims, whereas, in fact, education in the future is much more likely to entail the enhancement of *thinking* and the strengthening of *judgment*. If I am right on this score,

the course to be mandated at all grade levels will need to be much more powerful than anything presently on the critical thinking horizon: it will have to be philosophy. And to give her her due, Laura Purdy does remark, in concluding the passage I have been referring to, that thorough-going education would mean infusing philosophy throughout virtually the entire curriculum. It is unfortunate that she does not amplify this isolated comment.

Critical thinking by itself is not in a position to provide children with much of the sort of thing they need in the way of moral education. It can be helpful with minor problems such as the identification of ambiguities and inconsistencies, but it is beginning to exhibit uncertainty with regard to the fallaciousness of some of the fallacies. It provides students with a rudimentary skeptical mechanism, but this is hardly sufficient to overcome any of the harder cases, such as a power-hungry racism, eager for “ethnic cleansing.”

Considerably more effective would be mandated philosophy courses taught every year by highly trained teachers, with the aim being to get students to *do* philosophy and not merely to study it, learn it, or know it. As philosophy, it would contain a variety of strands derived from philosophy’s sub-disciplines, such as epistemology, aesthetics and logic, but most certainly ethics. To do philosophy is to convert the classroom into a community of deliberative inquiry through the study and discussion of age-appropriate texts. Children who learn to engage in mental acts and perform thinking skills in accord with the procedural rules of dialogical inquiry have an increased likelihood of becoming reasonable children, thereby achieving one of the major aims of education. While they learn much from the texts and the teachers, they learn a great deal from one another, as they seek to emulate each other’s cognitive performances. When we talk, as Ms. Purdy does, of the middle path between libertarianism and protectionism, it may not occur to us, as it seems not to occur to her, that peer-based inquiry is a middle path between the studying by the child as an isolated individual and the studying by a classroom full of students busily committing to memory what the teacher has instructed them to memorize.

Ms. Purdy talks about getting students to understand what counts as justification and, presumably, she understands this to be a slow and gradual growth of understanding, beginning with very simple cases and moving on to more difficult ones. However, the path is not necessarily so gradual. Students learn to employ reasons for their opinions, and they learn to distinguish between reasons that are strong and those that are less strong, but there is a great deal of intuition mixed into these judgments, and what the remainder of the classroom community thinks has a lot to do with it. Children and teachers alike have to get over thinking that, “Because I said so” can be the last word in substantive matters as it can be in procedural ones. Once that obstacle has been removed or diminished, there is virtually no limit to the size or importance of the problems children can profitably entertain. And so, even though the level of difficulty of the questions posed by the curriculum may be a gradually increasing one, in point of fact students will be found venturing at almost any age to deal with questions considerably more difficult than one might expect them to entertain.

This brings me back to the pair of comparisons I have been touching upon: on the one hand, between philosophy and critical thinking; on the other hand, between judgment and belief. Consideration of these contrasts is inevitable once Ms. Purdy so confidently entrusts moral education to the fumbling hands of critical thinking.

I say “fumbling” because critical thinking seems to me to have an identity-crisis which does not allow it to take on the sort of responsibility Ms. Purdy thrusts on it. Did I say there is only one such crisis? There may well be more.

There is, for example, the distinction between weak-sense and strong-sense critical thinking as drawn by Richard Paul, where the weak version consists of nothing more than value-neutral cognitive skills but the strong version, far from being value-neutral, attempts to take on and correct the vicious opinions and twisted ideologies that can underlie the pieties of education without oral education. Another example is my own proposal that critical thinking cannot be considered by itself to be capable of producing higher-order thinking in the schools, but must be complemented by creative thinking and caring thinking.

I have in mind, however, still another example of the tug-of-war that preoccupies some of the people in the critical thinking field. Let me call them, for convenience, the exponents of Critical Thinking A and the exponents of Critical Thinking B. Simply put, the position of the A group has its roots in the skeptical tradition and advocates critical thinking in order to protect the student from being inculcated with dogma by armoring him or her with appropriate reasoning and inquiry skills. On the other hand, the exponents of Critical Thinking B aim to teach us not what not to believe, but what to believe, and they cling to Robert

Ennis's classical definition of critical thinking as "thinking that helps us decide what to believe and do." Now, I feel sure that Robert Ennis conceives of this definition as one which would encourage teachers to encourage children to think for themselves, but it can also be read as going far beyond a hygiene of thinking, and as countenancing instead getting children to believe and act in certain ways. It would not be surprising, therefore to find Critical Thinking B with its emphasis upon belief and action, much more connected with commonplace notions of moral education than Critical Thinking A, with its stress upon the strengthening of judgment.

Now, I am not trying to lampoon critical thinking. There are probably no disciplines of which it could not equally be said that they are confronted with identity crises. Besides, critical thinking, even in the primitive or rudimentary versions of it that are to be found nowadays in the classroom, has begun to demonstrate that it can have a wholesome effect upon the minds of both students and teachers.

What I am getting at, instead, is that the task of providing students with an adequate moral education goes so far beyond the purview of critical thinking and is, indeed, so huge, so vast, that it virtually cannibalizes the whole of education. This is so, in part, because every item of information to be acquired in a standard education has a suppressed value dimension that often can be grasped only by a morally literate mind. It is so even more in the sense that the aims of education are necessarily moral aims so that whether they are set by professional educators or by the society at large, they can emerge only from the inquiries of a morally sensitive community.

Just as we provide an impoverished moral education if we teach students ethics alone, divorced from the rest of philosophy, so we get an impoverished moral education if we provide critical thinking alone, divorced from ethics and literature. But does this mean that an adequate moral education would be provided if philosophy were mandated for every year of grade school? Certainly not if the community of inquiry pedagogy were lacking, for it is that pedagogy that provides the element of moral practice insofar as this is practicable within the context of the schools. It is this practice that enables children to discern the connection between emotions and values, between values and criteria, between criteria and judgments, and between judgments and actions. It would be furthermore inadequate if the other subjects were to be taught, as they are now, in a manner indifferent to or hostile to the questioning of assumptions characteristic of philosophical inquiry, for many of those assumptions are moral assumptions.

Philosophy is needed even more than critical thinking because the practice of philosophy is more likely to result in the strengthening of judgment. If we want to encourage children to think for themselves, yet guard them against using that liberty to go off the deep end, the restraint should lie not in our judgment but in *theirs*.

I have been suggesting that it is not philosophical ethics in the argumentative tradition that children need, but the moral force of the community of deliberative inquiry, where they can see what it means to reason together to build on one another's ideas, to share one another's values. But more than that: they must learn the time-tried tools of ethical inquiry, the techniques and stratagems and exercises which provide practice in working with means-end and means-consequence relationships, in generalizing, instantiating and universalizing, in distinguishing differences of degree from differences of kind, in telling better reasons from worse, and so on.

Now, just to be introduced to these tools as isolated decontextualized tools, alienated from their settings, would not demonstrate to children how such tools actually work. One of the roles of the narrative-qua-text, in Philosophy for Children, is to show the tools as they are at work, under particular circumstances. The narrative setting is, therefore, another indispensable in moral education.

We can distinguish two approaches to moral education through literature. One is the lie of moral theorists exemplified by F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling and Martha Nussbaum, who insist that the literary work is incomparable for demonstrating the interplay of feelings, motives, values, intentions and other nuances of human dialogue, and who insist that there is no better way of acquainting oneself with the elements of morality than by immersing oneself in the particular situations that literature depicts. The other approach, widely popular and with a lengthy tradition, is, perhaps, best exemplified by William R. Bennett. Bennett argues for "moral literacy" as the fourth major component of moral education, the other three being precepts (i.e., rules), examples and habits. Our culture already possesses a great heritage of moral literature, the reading of which will enable

children to identify the virtues which we most admire, and out of which we will construct our character. These virtues are traits like honesty, compassion, courage, perseverance, loyalty and responsibility. We need only read these stories to our children, or let them read them for themselves, and these youngsters will be transformed into morally literate beings. No professional teachers of critical thinking are necessary, no communities of one's peers for the purposes of moral discussion, no stories involving the children of today. Just the small child in our lap listening to the heroic deeds of yesterday's adults.

I am not attempting to ridicule the notion of moral literacy, which I would agree to be an important component of moral education. Neither am I ridiculing the importance of character and the particular traits with which it is studded. But these traits are abstract concepts, and traditional oral education can exhort us to believe in them, but it cannot teach us how to acquire them if we do not understand them well enough to operationalize them, just as our assenting to certain terms as aptly descriptive of a good salad (e.g., tangy, zesty, etc.) need not result in our knowing how to make such a salad.

There is nothing wrong with a moral education spelling out a group of concepts as candidates for discussion in the classroom. How else but by such examination are the students to discover the justifiability of such alleged virtues or, more pertinently, the circumstances under which they may or may not serve as moral ideals? Nevertheless, the concepts that traditional moral education calls "virtues" are always substantive, ever procedural or methodological, and students who are asked to engage in ethical inquiry need both types. They need to consider the relevance to moral education not just of traits like honesty, compassion and courage, but of matters like emotion, reasoning, intention, imagination, consequences, judgment and even character itself. They need to discuss how to operationalize the substantive values that are commended to them for consideration.

It is, thus, by doing philosophical inquiry generally that children prepare themselves to do ethical inquiry, and by doing ethical inquiry with regard to instrumental and procedural consideration they prepare themselves to give serious attention to substantive values. We are a long way from even a token adoption of this regimen, but in the meantime, it would help if Ms. Purdy, Dr. Bennett and others would acknowledge that the problem of moral education is a lot more complicated than they make it out to be.

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