

COMMENTS ON EGER'S "A TALE OF TWO CONTROVERSIES"

by *Daniel R. DeNicola*

Abstract. This commentary on Martin Eger's "A Tale of Two Controversies" focuses on three criticisms: first, the shifting status of the claims of creationism in the article; second, new developments in moral philosophy which run counter to Eger's discussion; and third, the inadequate treatment of pedagogical and curricular principles.

Keywords: creationism; Eger, Martin; moral theory.

Martin Eger has told us a tale of two controversies set in a bewildering array of conflicts—conflicts of creationism versus evolution, facts versus values, positivism versus the "new philosophy of science," traditional moral theory versus the formalistic, critical thinking approaches, general versus professional education, and so on. He strides through this welter of conflicts and controversies, dissonance and dichotomies in hopes of bringing us closer to consistency. (Presumably, the "us" is the academic community, although creationists might be encouraged to adopt more "open minds" about the alternatives in moral education just as well.) "Dissonance," he writes, "in regard to rationality is serious any time," and he is even moved to suggest "a theoretical study of the causes of incoherence" (Eger 1988, 317). Whether or not dissonance is always "serious," Eger has presented a provocative challenge to academics that suggests we may be speaking out of both sides of our mouths.

The many juxtapositions and syntheses of Eger's paper are interesting and all deserve comment. I shall confine my comments to three topics: first, the status of the claims of creationism in the paper; second, his presentation of the trends in contemporary moral philosophy; and third, his treatment of educational "contexts" and the curriculum.

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[*Zygon*, vol. 23, no. 3 (September 1988).]

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THE STATUS OF CREATIONIST CLAIMS

Eger introduces the creationist viewpoint without definition or elucidation. Understandably, he assumes reader familiarity with the outlines of creationism as it was advocated, for example, in the 1981-82 Arkansas trial. However, this omission becomes detrimental to his discussion when it permits a confusing shift in the status of creationism in relation to evolution. The fault is not Eger's alone. Creationists themselves often contribute to and exploit this confusion. Yet given his concerns in this article Eger should not feed this uncertainty. He should not sanction or allow to pass unnoticed shifts in what is claimed for creationism. Where he wants to spotlight this uncertainty and raise doubts about an abrupt dismissal of creationism from the curriculum, he should at least be clear about alternative statuses, and alert to their differing implications.

Instead he waffles (or permits those whose views he presents to do so). For example, at times he seems to regard the issue between creationism and evolution as simply a matter of "methodological pluralism" (Eger 1988, 310), as tension between uncomfortably divergent but legitimately coexisting ways of doing science. Elsewhere he presents creationism as a scientific precursor of the evolutionary paradigm, noting that "Creationism, after all, bears the same relation to evolution as does the Ptolemaic system to post-Newtonian astronomy" (Eger 1988, 319, n. 13). In the end, he finds creationism to be part of a larger critique or rejection of the whole enterprise and vision of science itself, a view offered by those who "have strong misgivings about a 'scientific world view'" and adopt a "hermeneutic of suspicion" (Eger 1988, 314).

These differences matter for Eger's arguments. How does he wish us to understand creationism? Sometimes creationists begin as if their game were science—pointing out geological and evolutionary anomalies, critiquing theory and suggesting alternative explanations. Then, convinced they have quickly accomplished a *reductio ad absurdum*, they make the breathtaking leap home to creationism. At this point we learn that the game is not science at all. It is one thing to advance critiques of evolution based on evidence, but it is quite another thing to demonstrate the plausibility of creationism. The leap is a *non sequitur*.

Eger's argument seems correct that in teaching evolution and geology (in both the professional and general education contexts) one might well present some of the anomalies and problems for evolutionary theory. It also seems reasonable that biology teachers should be prepared to respond to "the classic challenges of evolution" (Eger 1988, 303), but that is very different from saying that creationism should be

taught as a serious scientific alternative. Eger is probably correct that some scientists, alarmed by the threat of being required to teach creationism as a serious alternative, are discounting prematurely and arbitrarily what are legitimate critiques and questions about the current understanding of evolution.

However unsupported the leap from critiques of evolutionary theory to creationism may be, Eger seems to set the two on equal footing, as if to discuss the former is to present the latter. At times he seems to advocate that creationism is simply an alternative scientific position to evolution, a competing Kuhnian paradigm. But surely creationism and evolution are not related as, for example, Newtonian and Einsteinian physics. In fact the creationists' game is *not* science.

Creationism is framed within a viewpoint which is in opposition to science itself, not just to evolutionary theory. Eger dismisses without much discussion one critical indicator of this: the issue of falsifiability. Creationists are generally unable to describe evidence which would in principle falsify the creationist position, evidence they would be prepared to accept as conclusive. (They have as a fail-safe the argument that God could have created the world with the *appearance* of a lengthy preexistence.) This is a stance which goes beyond the faith and commitment required of an adherent to a scientific paradigm.

Eger ultimately divulges the anti-scientific framework of creationism, the "hermeneutic of suspicion," but this is late in coming. For most of the article he discusses the controversy as if creationism were an alternative scientific position, unfairly discounted by adherents of a new scientific paradigm. At the end of Eger's discussion, one wonders what Eger sees as the difference between science, pseudoscience, and an anti-scientific outlook? Must we treat all these as alternative paradigms worthy of serious classroom discussion—if we are consistent about our scientific and moral education?

TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY MORAL THEORY

Eger has described contemporary moral theory as becoming similar to the conventional account of science: formalistic, rationalistic, focused on critical thinking, and the free choice among alternatives. He cites such thinkers as John Rawls and Alan Gewirth, and such moral education programs as those of Lawrence Kohlberg and John Wilson. He mentions such procedural approaches as values clarification and critical thinking and decision making. While noting that these theories and applications have received critiques, Eger asserts that they have become so influential as to be definitive of contemporary values education. In this he is surely correct.

It is curious, however, that Eger ignores the most famous critique of Kohlberg—that introduced by Carol Gilligan's *In Another Voice*. While it is too complex to receive a full summary here, this criticism, focusing on the gender bias of Kohlberg's empirical studies, ultimately leads us away from verbalized responses to stylized dilemmas, away from a narrow conception of rational thinking to a more contextual, less technique-centered understanding of moral thinking and behavior.

Moreover, the most interesting recent work in ethical theory runs counter to the account given by Eger. This includes the work of such writers as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, Michael Stocker, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Wollheim, and others. Each of these philosophers develops a rich and complex presentation, and there are certainly significant differences among them. However, collectively their ideas define a powerful trend. The movement they suggest is this: from abstraction and formalism to context and developmentalism; from an ethic of principles to an ethic of virtues; from the presentation of dilemmas to the telling of life stories; from the moral agent as a transcendental deliberator to the agent as a situated, responding individual; from a fixation on the self-expressing choices of free will to a recognition of the self-defining impact of matters outside one's choice, such as genetic endowment, culture, and luck; from a metaphysics of atomistic individuals, identical in all morally relevant respects, to a metaphysics of acting and responding agents in a changing social and cultural context of mutually self-defining roles and relationships. By and large, it is too early for this work to have spawned influential curricular programs (although there are school programs that focus on "educating character" rather than on the techniques of "dilemma busting"—e.g., the efforts of James Fowler).

Obviously, this new picture would emphasize the importance of context, community, and tradition in moral education, the importance of certain traits of character (virtues) over technique. This would cast a new light on Eger's arguments. The critical attitude and choice among alternatives would be emphasized less. Moral thinking would look less like the positivistic conception of science and more like the portrayal of the "new philosophy of science." The emerging situation may remove Eger's worry over inconsistency. We may find instead a convergence on an understanding of rationality that is historical, contextual, and communal. In any event, Eger's discussion of moral thinking seems narrow and dated.

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

In comparing these two controversies, Eger dismisses the issue of "fair play," and finds at bottom an epistemological issue—an issue about the

nature of knowledge and rationality. However, does it not seem that curriculum theory may be relevant as well? Might it not be the case that curriculum selection operates on principles that are more restrictive than the epistemic? Curriculum definition requires selection; not all worthy topics can be discussed.

Eger states that "any successful justification [for excluding creationism but including far-fetched moral alternatives] would have to rest on a relevant distinction between the study of science and the study of morals" (Eger 1988, 311). Surely this is false. There may be principles of curriculum selection which require including one set of ideas but excluding another set, even though the sets are epistemically brothers. For example, such principles as level of difficulty, learner "readiness," timeliness, personal interest, social need, range of application, and others might be employed.

Eger seems over all to give short shrift to the educational issues. This is evident in his treatment of the distinction between general education and professional training. He finds parallel distinctions between the context of education and the context of application, the former being the context where "the learner's orientation to the world" is the concern, the latter being the context focused on developing expertise. Yet he draws a further implication which is too strong: He equates the former of the pairs with concern for the individual; the latter with concern for the social. Surely both general education and professional training respond to both individual and social interests.

CONCLUSION

Eger's concern about inconsistency may be well placed. A clearer conclusion would require a fixing of the status of the claims of creationism. Nevertheless, he is correct on the need to study the "narrowing of the gap," to compare developing conceptions of rationality in philosophy of science and in ethics. However, this would require a more up-to-date account of contemporary ethics and the picture of rationality it provides. Even the preliminary conclusions drawn might then be different. Finally, more respect needs to be given to the educational perspective. Pedagogical and curricular principles have their own role in determining classroom practice, not only in selecting what material should be taught but in mediating between the truths as known to the experts and as presented to students. The scientific point of view and the moral point of view are here being discussed from the educational point of view, and this last needs greater attention in Eger's essay.

REFERENCE

- Eger, Martin. 1988. "A Tale of Two Controversies: Dissonance in the Theory and Practice of Rationality." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 23:291-325.