A TALE OF TWO CONTROVERSIES: COMMENT

by Thomas F. Green

Abstract. The educational controversies that Martin Eger discusses regarding moral education and the teaching of "creationism" arise from taking a single aspect of moral education and making it the whole, and from taking a single aspect of scientific work and assuming that it is the whole. The distinction between teaching science as application and teaching it as education is crucial in confronting these problems.

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Martin Eger has presented a thorough and intricate account of what he conceives as two different presentations of rationality in the context of education; one drawn from prevailing views about the conduct of moral education in the schools and the other from controversies over the "teaching of creationism." "If it is a good thing," he writes, "for children to consider all sorts of alternatives in moral decision-making, no matter how repugnant—stealing, cheating, betraying one's friends—all for the sake of developing critical reason and autonomy, then why, suddenly, when we come to evolution, is it far more important to learn *right answers* than to think critically?" (Eger 1988, 300). The reason that this stark contrast does not appear more transparently in public debate, he notes, is that the problems "are not handled by the same group of people" (Eger 1988, 301). Scientists scream at the introduction of creationism in the schools and moralists and laypersons at the introduction of other forms of moral education.

In these brief comments, I wish to make only two points. First, the problems he describes inasmuch as they arise from the practices of moral education follow from an impoverished conception of what moral education is about, both on the part of professionals and on the part of laypersons; second, the conception of rationality represented in

Thomas F. Green is the Margaret Slocum professor of education at Syracuse University, 259 Huntington Hall, Syracuse, New York 13244-2340.

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science arises from a similarly impoverished conception of what constitutes scientific education.

Stated simply, it is not a good idea for children, or for that matter anyone else, to consider all sorts of alternatives in moral decision making, nor is it good education for students to consider all sorts of answers in the study of science. The difficulties arise because a part of moral education has been taken in practice as the test of the whole and because a traditional and occasional part of scientific inquiry is assumed to provide the complete model of the educational process in science. The key lies in the important distinction Eger draws between the context of education and the context of application. Let us consider these items separately.

Moral Education

Certainly as mature moral persons we seek individuals who can and will think about their beliefs and reflect upon their behavior. In this sense we want persons who take responsibility for their own beliefs, and we recognize that this may imply that from time to time they will change their beliefs. We recognize that as they reach maturity they may have to alter their views about what is the useful, graceful, or fitting thing, even the efficient thing to do both in this case or that or as a general rule. We expect them to acquire skills in human behavior, such as skills of foresight that often take years of experience to acquire and for which rules cannot be given in advance.

All this is part of what we include, or ought to include, under the general heading of autonomy and efforts to avoid the dangers of indoctrination. However, when we speak of the dangers of indoctrination we are not speaking simply of the early (or even late) inculcation of beliefs. Our concern with the dangers of indoctrination is the possibility that these eventual signs of autonomy—taking responsibility for one's beliefs and entertaining the possibility of changing one's mind, for example—will be hindered at a later time. We are concerned about a way of teaching that prevents later thought. All this is beautifully illustrated in an interview with David Wagner, administrator and principal of Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wisconsin. He is quoted as saying "Ideally, we would like to open up their minds and hearts and pour Christian values and Biblical concepts into them—and then close them up again" (Wagner 1988). This is almost a perfect statement of what we mean by indoctrination in the bad sense. It is something by no means limited to religious advocates. Often parents would like to do the same thing.

In any case, we ought to distinguish between moral training and moral indoctrination of this sort. Moral indoctrination is always wrong

because it prohibits us from developing the signs of adult autonomy. It aims to close our minds. However, moral training is necessary, even necessary at all ages. Such moral training includes inculcating the idea that just because our choices are our own, that is, autonomous in that limited sense, it does not follow that they are also right or good choices. Having such a principle drummed in, as it were, may be indoctrination, but it is not bad indoctrination because it prevents no one from being free to think for themselves. Autonomy of choice is a good thing, but it cannot provide a model of the whole for moral education. Indeed, a person who does not understand that choices can be good or bad, or just plain stupid is not a person to whom we would admit had yet reached a stage of moral autonomy—*no matter how "autonomously" in some pedagogical sense such choices have emerged.*

Where does this child exist who is or ought to be free to make any choices whatever, on the assumption that the more independently the choices are made, the better they are? It seems to me that no such child exists, but, as Eger points out, we do have pedagogies that seem to assume this is true of every child. What is it about moral beliefs that gives children the right to eventually make up their own minds about them, even to change their minds about what their teachers have taught them? Should a child be open to choose whether cruelty is wrong, for example, whether cruelty to animals is to be tolerated? Certainly not! Can there be an argument about this? It is not clear what the argument would be about. When we say that children have a right to make up their own minds about their moral beliefs, we have in mind the *eventuality* that they will need to be adaptable. It does not follow that moral training at the beginning or even as adults has no place in their education. If youth were to return later to their teachers suggesting seriously (not just as an academic exercise) that cruelty and dishonesty are acceptable, it is not even clear what the argument would be about. How would one trust the argument? Can we have such an argument if honesty is seriously in doubt? How would we know that the argument is serious? Would it include the claim that it is all right to torture cats, or the very different claim that it is cruelty to slaughter animals? How would we know what would even count as a point to be made and accepted in the course of such an argument? The point I am trying to stress is that the very idea of a moral argument of this sort in the context of teaching is an idea that is resident to a long and worthy educational tradition. It cannot be maintained independently of that tradition.

What is it that leads to this apparently morally vacuous approach to moral education in the schools and seems to excuse it as a form of rationality? The problem rests precisely where Eger places it, namely with the victory of formalism in the theory of moral education. "In the

public schools," writes Eger citing Lawrence Kohlberg, "there is growing pressure to 'do something' about the much discussed moral vacuum, and, at the same time, to satisfy our religious and cultural pluralism—a feat that can be performed most easily by teaching morals with the barest of content!" (Eger 1988, 307). The answer, then, is to find a form of pedagogy that allows us to assess not the moral conclusions or actions of children but the reasons they offer, and to do that on the basis of a moral theory about what constitute morally adequate reasons. These turn out to be reasons that are increasingly general in the cases they cover and increasingly universal in their logical form—a kind of neo-Kantianism. Furthermore, the pedagogy for eliciting these reasons typically involves confronting dilemmas or choices involving rank-ordering. In short we get a formalist moral pedagogy. It is this kind of pedagogy, typified by the followers of Kohlberg that Eger points out seems to resemble a scientific kind of rationality. Indeed, this pedagogy intends to surmount the problems of pluralism and particularity for education in an institution that is supposed to be public and neutral and to give moral inquiry the rational appearance of scientific inquiry.

However, there is another point Eger makes that is absolutely essential to the full picture. He writes: "While there are differences between the proponents of the several values education philosophies, it is important to keep in mind that concerning these two critical elements—'criticism' and 'alternatives'—the consensus is rather close to unanimity" (Eger 1988, 296). The rational picture of instruction that many of us had developed in the context of other views of instruction, this view of instruction as requiring a due respect for the student's sense of reason, is adopted in an entirely different context, namely to the rudiments of moral education, to produce a morally impoverished and, one might even say, a morally indefensable, view of moral education.

It amounts to the view that the moral life is a life that consists simply of making hard choices in dilemma situations (that fortunately occur rather rarely in life anyway) or a continual exercise in rank-ordering things.[1] Think of all that is deleted from this picture—how the virtues are formed, how the institutions within which we live exist and change, how traditions persist but how they can be valued and also rejected. It is hard to imagine any view of moral education that does not include serious attention to prudence, to how things work, to the coming into possession of powers of foresight, and even acquiring standards of skill that involve caring not simply whether one does the right thing but whether one does good things well. It is equally implausible to suppose that a view of moral education can be adequate that does nothing to

cultivate a social identity and hence a social memory. To suppose that we can have moral education independently of history is to suppose what even on the surface is hardly capable of defense.

Compared to the richness of what ought to be present in a philosophy or program of moral education, it is easy to see that the victory of the formalist pedagogy not only produces the social controversies that Eger describes, but also to see why one's sentiments are so easily alligned with the parents and not the professionals even in those cases where the parents' views can be described as bigoted. What we need is not so much an inadequate model of rationality that produces Eger's "Two Controversies" but rather an adequate understanding of what moral education involves and how it differs from, and perhaps how little it can gain from, moral philosophy.

Tradition

I am not a scientist nor am I as familiar with science teaching as Eger. However, I find it refreshing that he appeals to the fact that science is a tradition or has its traditions. This, it seems to me is no better stated than in Edward Shils's *Tradition*:

> Minds of the first order create new theories. In "normal science," in Professor Kuhn's popular distinction, second-order scientists work within a framework given by an accepted general theory or "paradigm." Paradigms are traditions of a limited life-span. The great scientist is in this respect like the founder of a great religion. Both are said to annul the tradition which has been presented to them. Both are aware of the inadequacy of what has been received and they aim to supplant the inadequate account by one which is fundamentally more adequate. In neither situation is the annulment of tradition complete. . . .The fruitfully productive scientist is thus not at war with tradition in general, insofar as he is attending to his business. In the field of his scientific work he is warily engaged in a complicated encounter with tradition. He cannot be oblivious to it, he cannot act without it, and he cannot just submit to it (Shils 1981, 105-106).

These things that Shils says about tradition in science can also be said about tradition in moral philosophy and about traditions of rationality generally. I presume that creationism does not fall within the tradition of science and for that reason it should probably not be taught as a part of science. However, Eger draws another distinction of considerable importance which might give a different cast to the picture. He distinguishes between viewing sciences as taught within the context of education or taught within the context of application. When science is taught within the context of application, I understand, it is presented as activities in which "laws and explanations are seen as tools for the solution of predefined classes of problems" and not with a concern "for

the effect of subject matter on the learner's orientation in the world, on their actions in society" (Eger 1988, 313).

I wish he had elaborated the important aspects of his argument more at this point. I say this because the forms of rationality that are taught or can be taught within the schools cannot be construed as independent of traditions of rational inquiry (science or philosophy or religion) but neither can they be provided a place except within some distinction between application and education, which Eger depends upon. I am not sure how to elaborate the implications of this suggestion, and I do not suppose that in doing so the social disputes that he has so ably observed over the years would be calmed. Yet I am sure that in these respects he has pointed us in the right direction for an understanding that is fruitful, tolerant, and consistent with the values we seek to preserve in educational practice.

NOTE

1. See Pincoffs (1986) for a discussion of how modern moral theory has been constructed around the image of the moral life as a life filled with quandaries and how this has falsified especially the tasks of developing an adequate philosophy of moral education.

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