The Failure of Indoctrination: A Response to Wynne

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Wynne believes that the new approaches to moral education—such as values clarification and moral development—have failed or, at best, they have not been particularly successful. With this I agree. Wynne also believes that we should return to the "great tradition." With this I disagree.

Our agreement lies in a mutual rejection of relativism in ethics and in the belief that the new approaches, however unwittingly, tend to promote relativism. Our disagreements lie in two key areas: the reasons why the great tradition was abandoned and the nature of the distinction between indoctrination and education. Wynne believes that the tradition was abandoned because early studies about its effectiveness were misread. To the contrary, I believe that the tradition was abandoned because it failed. Wynne believes that "on the whole, school is and should be inherently indoctrinative..." To the contrary, I believe that indoctrination is incompatible with education and that the schools need not and should not indoctrinate. Furthermore, I believe that the tradition failed primarily because it indoctrinated instead of educated.

Why the Great Tradition Failed

One of Wynne's examples—honor thy parents—illustrates why the great tradition failed. As Wynne correctly points out, the tradition focused on conduct rather than on analysis and understanding. So long as the conduct of its trainees was satisfactory, their "education" was viewed as successful; that is, their conduct accorded with the 'vital common values that shape human relations in [our] culture.' And yet few students ever progressed to the stage of critical understanding, instead, finding themselves emotionally committed to practices whose justification they could not understand.

The traditional conduct appropriate to honoring elderly parents, for example, involved such things as taking them into our homes, providing for their economic support, and preserving their lives, no matter how debilitating, painful, and hopeless their physical condition might have become. Today such conduct usually would be inappropriate, often impossible, and frequently inhumane. The introduction of retirement programs and social security, the dispersion of family members throughout the nation, and the great advances in medical technology have generated many situations in which the traditional conduct would frustrate rather than promote the honoring of one's parents.

In much the same way, the continuation of medical care to prolong life became treatment to prolong a painful dying process. Nevertheless, people resisted the "death with dignity" movement because indoctrination, unlike education, had given them no tools with which to change their traditional conduct.

Indoctrination and Education

Indoctrination involves an uncritical acceptance of and deep emotional commitment to indoctrinated values. The victims of indoctrination are committed to the "what," but they do not understand the "why." Thus, even when traditional conduct is no longer appropriate, the victims of indoctrination remain emotionally committed to it. They have no basis of understanding on which to rationally modify their behavior. As a result they either become moral fanatics, or they go through a great deal of unnecessary turmoil in adjusting to the "new world.

Need the schools be "inherently indoctrinative?" Wynne believes they must for a variety of reasons, all of which display a misunderstanding of indoctrination. Let us examine them one by one.

- "Children born in America will almost inevitably end up being American adults." True, most children born in America will accept the basic American values. Some, as a result of indoctrination, will accept them uncritically. They will not be able to adjust their conduct to any new situations that might, and almost certainly will, arise. Others will accept the basic American values only after they understand and evaluate them, and if they can stand up to critical examination. If not, these critical thinkers will become moral reformers, helping to develop more adequate values.

- "Punishments for bad value choices are...forms of indoctrination." This is not always true. Punishment is not necessarily indoctrination if it is administered in a manner that allows and encourages a current or future questioning and understanding of the justification of the punishment.

- "It is ridiculous to believe that children are capable of objectively assessing most of the beliefs and values they must absorb." This is true, but the crucial question is whether they will be caused to absorb those values in a manner that will preclude their eventual critical evaluation—that is, by indoctrination—or in a manner that promotes the eventual critical evaluation of the absorbed values—that is, by an educational process.

- "The very idea of presenting pupils with a particular approach to moral education is inherently indoctrinative..." This is not so. It is possible to allow the pros and cons of various moral positions to be articulated by responsible advocates and to allow pupils to freely choose among them. In fact, this is exactly what an educator, as contrasted with an indoctrinator, would do. Of course, one does not discuss, say, the value of virginity in the 1st grade, but one can discuss it when the students are able to understand the issue, and one can allow them to decide such things as whether virginity should be preserved until marriage. (Allow? How can one prevent students from making their own decisions?)

Moral Education

The "great tradition" failed because it indoctrinated conduct, hence it provided no means by which people could respond to unforeseen moral requirements. Today, it is possible to educationally inculcate moral understanding. Current pedagogical theory is adequate to the task. The current
Wynne’s article has several major difficulties: terminological, historical, prescriptive, and descriptive.

The terminological difficulties force us to ask: What does Wynne mean when he refers to a “moral value”? What does Wynne mean when he talks about “indoctrination” and “transmission”?

Unfortunately Wynne’s accompanying bibliography does not include the works of either Rokeach or Feather. Had he consulted these authors, Wynne might have developed clearer prescriptions for teaching values in the school. Rokeach, for example, offers the following definition: “A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.”

Rokeach’s definition assumes that values exist in a fairly stable, hierarchical form. In other words, some values are consistently valued more highly than others. If the school is to be an instrument for teaching or indoctrinating values, it is going to have to exercise a high degree of selectivity to determine which values to convey. Moreover it must be able to (1) justify its selection of values to the community at large; (2) justify itself as the appropriate institution, or at least one of the institutions of choice, to convey these particular values, and (3) design an effective means to propagate them. These tasks are not simple, although unfortunately, in his desire to return to the practices of the past, Wynne conveys the impression that they are.

As Feather points out, “... in Rokeach’s definition... values may refer either to modes of conduct or to end-states of existence—to means or to ends. The values referring to modes of conduct are called instrumental values, and they encompass such concepts as honesty, love, responsibility, and courageous. The values referring to end-states of existence are called terminal values, and they include such concepts as freedom, equality, world at peace, and inner harmony.”

Throughout his article, Wynne confuses instrumental with terminal values. Thus, the school might indeed teach instrumental values it believes should be encouraged, such as honesty, obedience, or politeness, albeit not without many difficulties inherent in such teaching. Teaching terminal values provides major difficulties, however, since they represent end-states in individual preferences. Someone who rates a world at peace as the most desirable terminal value may have a completely different school agenda than someone who rates social recognition as a highly desirable terminal value.

If the schools are to provide moral guidance, they will have to deal with the question that, as Timothy J. Cooney claims in Telling Right from Wrong, goes to the heart of the problem: “What is morality?” Even if we could answer that unanswerable question definitively, once we found the best morality, how should schools best teach it?

Assume for the moment that the schools follow Wynne’s prescriptions precisely; they accept the notion of the great tradition in education, and they begin teaching patriotism. How do they distinguish among patriotism? (It might be pointed out that Wynne’s description of the teaching of the great tradition by indoctrination characterized the German school system during much of its history prior to the Nazi takeover, and certainly during the Nazi era itself. One of the most shameful chapters in educational history is how German educators at all levels—from kindergarten to the best universities in the world—quickly, even eagerly, caved in to the Nazi madness.)

Let us assume further that, despite the school’s strong efforts at indoctrination, some deviant, bright student happens to read what Mencken wrote: “I enjoy democracy immensely. It is incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing. Does it exalt dunderheads, cowards, trimmers, frauds, cads? Then the pain of seeing them go up is balanced and obliterated by the joy of seeing them come down. Inordinately wasteful, extravagant, dishonest... is rascality at the very heart of it all? Well, we have borne that rascality since 1776, and continue to survive.”

The bright student might ask his teacher, who is trying to indoctrinate him in the values of patriotism in the great tradition, the following question: “Sir,” (we might as well imagine in Feather’s definition of the term, “... in Rokeach’s definition... values may refer either to modes of conduct or to end-states of existence—to means or to ends. The values referring to modes of conduct are called instrumental values, and they encompass such concepts as honesty, love, responsibility, and courageous. The values referring to end-states of existence are called terminal values, and they include such concepts as freedom, equality, world at peace, and inner harmony.”

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