

Discussion / Débat

Programmatic Definitions in Education: The Case of Indoctrination

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A satisfactory educational theory needs, among many other things, a clear, coherent, and comprehensive conceptual framework that makes all the distinctions and connections its subject requires. To the extent its concepts are blurred or confused, the theory is inadequate or primitive; it cannot provide an appropriate logical geography of the subject for the educational researcher, the policy maker, or the practitioner. To the extent that the distinctions and connections are arbitrary, the theory is either idle and irrelevant to its subject, or serves external non-educational ends. Conceptual refinement and accuracy, then, are not merely desirable frills but necessary aspects of adequate educational theorizing.

Talk of conceptual accuracy or correctness, however, raises philosophical eyebrows. Since our conceptual framework offers a particular perspective on the whole educational enterprise, we must ask the following questions: Where does one get one's criteria of correctness or accuracy? To what extent and under what circumstances is one justified in reforming our common understandings of the meaning of concepts central to educational discourse?

I don't intend comprehensively to answer these very important questions but rather to offer a stepping stone and a methodology for answering them. That stone is provided by J. L. Austin in the following statement:

Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method. (1961, p. 130)

Austin goes on to admit that

people's usages do vary, and we do talk loosely, and we do say different things apparently indifferently. But first, not merely as much as one would think. . . . Certainly, then, ordinary language is *not* the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it is the *first* word. (1961, pp. 131–133)

Austin is not saying, then, that there cannot be genuine disagreements when usage is loose, only that loose usage is not the rule. In recognizing that ordinary language, with all its imperfections and errors, is the first word (that is, the only foundation of all our thought and thus of our self-criticism), we put the onus on those wanting to deviate from ordinary usage in order to defend their stipulations. Paul Komisar has, in my view, described accurately the conditions under which one should consider seriously programmatic definitions of important educational concepts.

Language is too much a pattern of connections to fall before the mere voicing of a formula that isolates but one of its elements. We might take this as our policy: when someone (1) proposes a change in the meaning of a term, (2) works out a full account of the application of this newly defined term in all kinds of situations, (3) traces out the effects of the change on related terms, and (4) divulges the advantages and disadvantages of the new way of speaking, then and only then will we call this a stipulative definition and lend the stipulator our ear. (1968, p. 66)

One of the most central distinctions in educational theory is between education and indoctrination. The distinction is required by the knowledge criterion of education and by our commitment to an open, liberal society. Indoctrination violates the knowledge criterion of education and lays the foundations for closed, illiberal societies.

Those who wish to legitimize indoctrination, and especially religious indoctrination, commonly resort to systematic changes of the meanings of key terms in the ordinary language of education—the kind of change both Austin and Komisar consider unwarranted or arbitrary. Although people may try to change the meanings of words out of ignorance, confusion, or as a result of some pathological state of mind, the changes with which we are concerned are intentional and usually employed to buttress weak arguments or to substitute for sound argument. The aim of such programmatic changes is usually moral edification motivated by strong religious or other ideological commitments.

A clear example of such programmatic discussion of indoctrination is to be found in E. J. Thiessen's paper "Initiation, Indoctrination, and Education" (1985). The purpose of that paper comes out at the end of its argument, a case of the proverbial tiny dog dragging an immense tail. Thiessen, like all other philosophers of education seeking to maintain traditional religious teaching

in the public schools, rejects the content criterion of indoctrination. He concludes with the claim that since

science and religion share several similar non-rational features . . . [t]he resulting use of non-rational methods in teaching science and religion should lead us to conclude that indoctrination is unavoidable in both cases. It is thus surely arbitrary to introduce a content criterion of indoctrination so as to exclude science from the dangers of indoctrination when it shares *the very same non-rational features* that characterize religion. (p. 244, italics added)

Thiessen, like other defenders of religious indoctrination (Hudson, 1973; Snook, 1972), rejects the content criterion of indoctrination. In this paper I plan to show how the programmatic character of Thiessen's arguments alters the meanings of key terms arbitrarily. There are numerous errors in Thiessen's paper. I plan to discuss only his programmatic definition of "initiation," his acceptance of the method criterion of indoctrination and, more importantly, his confusion of doctrines with the non-rational foundations of science and common sense. Although he has abandoned the common stepping stone of ordinary language, he does not meet any of the conditions required for serious stipulative definitions.

EDUCATION AND INITIATION

It is a well known fact about the human condition that no one is born, as it were, at one's destination. We do not emerge in the world as little thinking *homunculi* who can perform such intellectual acts as doubting, promising, thanking, commanding, questioning, judging, imagining, approving, documenting, and the like. We *acquire* these language games by participating in the ordinary activities of the human community within which we are born—not by education. Like any other high-level intellectual engagement, education has its prerequisite foundation; and the acquisition of this foundation is the result of primary socialization—not the result of education.

We teach this foundation not by furious ratiocination but by putting the young in our ways of doing things. As I have argued elsewhere, apprenticeship is the most appropriate model for teaching this foundational equipment to the young, not intricate and sophisticated rational engagement. The apprenticeship model puts

severe restrictions both on the educator and the community. The educator must exhibit in his life all the virtues he intends to impart to the young, instead of merely paying lip service to some abstract principles. And the society must be a genuine moral and intellectual community where the various human excellences are regulative of its form of life. (Kazepides, 1986, p. 332)

Now, it is crucial to understand the fundamental difference between the

acquisition of the prerequisites of educational development (what earlier I referred to as primary socialization) and education proper, that is, the acquisition of worthwhile understanding. I don't think there is one single word that characterizes this complex early transaction between the generations; we might call it teaching or training, facilitating or guiding, introducing or imparting, interacting or sharing, initiating or enculturating, or something else. The appropriate characterization will depend on the particular features of the situation and the conceptual finesse of the speaker or writer. We must not confuse it with the refined cognitive acts of educational engagements.

Peters (1965 and 1966) saw education as initiation into worthwhile activities connected with knowledge and understanding in order "to draw attention to the enormous importance of the *impersonal content and procedures* which are enshrined in public traditions. Initiation is always into some body of knowledge and mode of conduct which it takes time and determination to master" (1965, p. 103). I had never thought that Peters' talk about "education as initiation" would be misunderstood so badly, or rather, so blatantly misconstrued and misused by persons anxious to justify religious indoctrination. W. D. Hudson elevated initiation to a "defining characteristic of education" or "a necessary condition of education" (1973, pp. 177, 178) and ignored the knowledge and value criteria of education Peters tried to establish and defend. Hudson's strategy was familiar: relax the criteria of "education" so that it becomes indistinguishable from the hazy term "socialization"; "socialization" is an all-embracing, descriptive, sociological term that does not exclude indoctrination.

Thiessen's approach is similar to Hudson's. He believes "the notion of initiation is very significant for education, and that by focusing specifically on this notion we will come to better understand both education and indoctrination" (1985, p. 229). He believes that "initiation is of course not all there is to education, but it is one essential component of education" (p. 233). But since, according to Thiessen, "initiation entails indoctrination" because it involves the use of non-rational and even coercive methods, indoctrination "is unavoidable in the process of initiating individuals into the forms of knowledge" (p. 243).

There are serious confusions here. One of the reasons Peters chose "initiating" over "teaching," "training," or other words, is that it is also an activity verb, but with much *broader scope*. Peters, respecting the rules of ordinary language, repeatedly emphasized the fact that education is not an activity:

We say quite naturally that we spent the morning gardening or cooking, but it seems odd to say we spent it educating, or to say "Go and get on with your educating." "Educate" like "reform," "improve," "ameliorate" and other such words, seems to draw

attention *only to the standards* to which the class of activities must conform and which give them their principle of unity. (1970, p. 74)

In his essay Thiessen misrepresents Peters' views by claiming that "Peters himself describes education as an activity or a group of activities" (p. 231), or that "he admits that it [education] does refer to a range of processes or activities" (p. 246, n. 3). Any person who understands Peters' work on the concept of education knows he does not and could not legitimately maintain such views. Peters uses several examples to illustrate the difference between "education" and other activity words:

We do not ask "Are you instructing him in algebra or are you educating him in algebra?" as if these were two alternative processes. But we might ask "Are you educating him by instructing him in algebra?" "Education," in other words refers to no particular process; rather it encapsulates criteria to which any one of a family of processes must conform. (1967, p. 1)

In the final analysis, the issue is not what Peters or anybody else says about "education" and "initiation," but what is the truth about these concepts; and the truth is that "education" is not an activity word whereas "initiation" is. We can say that the initiation lasted three hours because it is an activity, but we cannot say that the education lasted three hours. Thiessen's only counter-example: "Go and start your education," where "education" is supposed to suggest an activity, is unfortunate. That sentence suggests one should engage in activities that have educational value. Thiessen's other objections to my discussion of "initiation" are beside the point. When I say "*usually* one initiates a person" or that "initiation . . . is *more* of an undergoing than a doing," it is obvious I am not claiming these are necessary or sufficient conditions for the application of the term, as he mistakenly takes me to be claiming.

The ironic part about all this talk about "initiation" is its irrelevance in understanding education or indoctrination. Hudson and Thiessen have brought it into the discussion of education purely for the programmatic purpose of justifying religious indoctrination under the rubric of education.

CAN METHOD BE THE CRITERION OF INDOCTRINATION?

Of all the criteria various philosophers have proposed as necessary for indoctrination, perhaps the weakest is the method criterion. Thiessen chooses it by simply begging the question. There is no discussion of the other criteria and no arguments are offered for his preference, except the claim that "the majority agree that it is a necessary condition of the pejorative sense of indoctrination" (p. 233).

The adoption of the method criterion is mistaken and misleading because it makes indoctrination synonymous with the wider term miseducation, which is exactly what Thiessen's definition manages to do:

Teaching methods are called indoctrinatory because they involve manipulating the subject matter, either in terms of failing to provide reasons, evidence, or justification of beliefs taught, or in terms of misusing the evidence in some way. A second major emphasis running through the examples of methods of indoctrination involves manipulation of the subject, the student. (p. 237)

A correct analysis of indoctrination should distinguish it not only from education but also from other miseducational activities such as propaganda, deception, coercion, and so on. Thiessen's definition fails to make these distinctions. In fact, in the above quotation he talks of the pernicious propagandist who conceals or misrepresents facts, appeals to emotions or resorts to threats, hides his real motives, in order to influence the beliefs and attitudes of people for the advancement of his own self-interest. The indoctrinator *qua* indoctrinator is not a deliberate manipulator either of information and evidence or of students. He is not the insidious deceiver of young persons who misrepresents the world to them. The typical indoctrinator believes the doctrines he is inculcating are true, that they give meaning to life, and so on. In his teaching he provides some evidence, reasons and justifications—it is another matter that they are based on sectarian doctrinal grounds (Kazepides, 1973, p. 275). Indoctrinators, then, are not necessarily propagandists, and neither are propagandists necessarily indoctrinators—although they usually are.

Every indoctrinator somewhere in his teaching will have to resort to non-rational methods. That does not mean, however, that there are methods peculiar to indoctrination. Miseducational methods are always parasitic on the doctrinal content of teaching. In the absence of doctrines one does not resort to rationally questionable methods, unless one has other miseducational intentions, or is incompetent.

Furthermore, indoctrination, like education, has a task and an achievement aspect. While talk about methods is relevant to the task aspect of indoctrination, it is irrelevant when we are considering the achievement aspect. The only criterion that is necessary and sufficient here is the doctrinal content to which the subjects are expected to commit themselves.

Finally, the proponents of the method criterion of indoctrination assume that being rational is simply thinking in a certain manner. As Wittgenstein taught us, however, being rational or reasonable is not merely a matter of thinking in a certain manner but also a matter of thinking certain things.

DOCTRINES AND THE RIVER-BED OF OUR THOUGHT

All indicators about the nature of indoctrination, from its etymology to its common use in ordinary contexts, support Peters' view that "whatever else 'indoctrination' may mean it obviously has something to do with doctrines, which are a species of beliefs" (1966, p. 41). We indoctrinate people *with*, *in*,

or *into* the beliefs of a particular church, we do not indoctrinate them *into* non-rational methods. In this respect “indoctrination” behaves more like “training” than “education”; just as “trained *in*” implies competence developed in a specific area, “indoctrinated *in*” implies commitment to a specific set of doctrinal beliefs.

The original and proper home of doctrines is religion; we do not say that a person has been indoctrinated into the French language or into chemistry. Only in theological seminaries do people study and defend doctrines; in every other area of rational inquiry they are an anathema and always a source of embarrassment to the originator. The fact that “doctrine” is sometimes used to mean “theory” or “policy” does not present any problems—a lot of words in our language have variable meaning.

The most common excuses for abandoning doctrinal content as the criterion of indoctrination are, first, that it is a vague term and second, that the foundations of science are doctrines (Snook, 1972, p. 35). As I have argued recently (1987), the first claim is false and the argument (namely, that this is a reason for abandoning the content criterion of indoctrination) is a non-sequitur. The second claim, which is the main argument against the content criterion of indoctrination, is also false.

The Nature of Doctrines

People’s various ways of interpreting doctrines fall into two broad categories: the orthodox *hard* view and the figurative *soft* view. The orthodox or literal view of doctrines has the following features:

- (a) Doctrines are in principle unfalsifiable beliefs about the existence of beings, states of affairs or relationships. The doctrines of the infallibility of the Pope and of the triune nature of the Christian deity are examples of such doctrines.
- (b) Doctrines are criteria neither of rationality nor of irrationality. We do not consider believers or non-believers in the above doctrines as non-rational or irrational.
- (c) Doctrines form a system of interrelated beliefs which constitutes an all-embracing, totalizing view encompassing every aspect of human life as subsidiary.
- (d) Although doctrines are descriptive statements, they have an overriding prescriptive function.
- (e) Finally, as the last point suggests, doctrines presuppose the existence of authorities or institutions which have the power to prescribe and uphold them. Without an institution that articulates, orders and defends its doctrines they are in danger of deteriorating into common prejudices, or being abandoned.

Although all doctrines within a doctrinal system meet conditions (a), (b) and (e), not all such doctrines may meet conditions (c) and (d). The reason is that not all doctrines are of equal importance to the system at all times—some

of them may be idle and dead remnants of earlier ways of life and are preserved merely as parts of a tradition.

All paradigm cases of indoctrination involve doctrines that meet these criteria and all legitimate charges of indoctrination presuppose them. The onus is always on those who talk loosely about "Marx's doctrines" or "Darwin's doctrine" to demonstrate that indeed some ideas of Marx or Darwin are propositions that meet the above criteria. The charge of indoctrination, then, is legitimate only if one interprets doctrines literally. If, on the other hand, one uses doctrinal language metaphorically, it is no longer appropriate to talk of indoctrination but only of an expression of personal, subjective preferences. Since I have discussed the metaphorical talk about doctrines extensively elsewhere (1987) and it is not central to this debate, I will not pursue it further here. It is important to mention, however, that since such views are about subjective preferences there can be no legitimate place for them in educational institutions, unless they are taught as part of a course on comparative religion.

The River-Bed of Our Thought

Snook's claim, which Thiessen accepts as true, that "the basic assumptions and postulates of science qualify as doctrines" (1972, p. 35) is false and lacks the conceptual refinement about which I wrote at the beginning of this paper. Thiessen claims that since we use the same non-rational methods in initiating the young into science that we do with religion, we should not accuse parents and teachers of indoctrinating just because children cannot choose the religious tradition into which they are initiated (p. 246). This is equally false and confused.

It is by no means clear what these authors mean by "assumptions," "presuppositions," "postulates," or "fundamentals" of science. We can identify, however, a large number of propositions belonging to the bedrock of all our thinking, and therefore to science as well, which are not doctrines. Wittgenstein tells us that this foundation of all our thought and action does not consist only of propositions of logic: "Propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language)" (1969, par. 401). Among these propositions we can distinguish some that are pseudoempirical because they are, in fact, methodological propositions, that is, rules presupposed by any language games in which we may engage. They are not propositions that can be ever doubted, tested, confirmed, or about which one can be mistaken. Examples of such propositions are: "Physical objects exist" and "Objects continue in existence when not perceived." Any attempt to deny such propositions leads to absurdity. Since they are presupposed by all language games they are also presupposed by any talk about doctrines.

There are, next, empirical propositions about which, Wittgenstein says, we "can hardly be mistaken" (par. 673). Such propositions are: "I have two hands," "Automobiles do not grow on trees," and the like. Reasonable people have many doubts, says Wittgenstein, but not about these and a great many similar propositions. Only "insane," "mad," "demented," or "idiotic" people would express doubt about such propositions and their doubt would be "hollow," "senseless" and "without consequence" (paragraphs 468, 281, 155, 662, 257 & 312, 56 & 310, 338). These and similar river-bed propositions, then, together with propositions of logic and methodological propositions constitute criteria of rationality about which one cannot be mistaken. A person who insists that his head is stuffed with straw is not making a mistake, he is mentally disturbed. As Thomas Morawetz says: "Being reasonable is not just a matter of acting and thinking in a certain manner or form but also a matter of thinking certain *things*" (1978, p. 75).

If we compare doctrines with the river-bed propositions that lie at the foundations of all our thought, judgements, language and actions, we shall see the radical differences between them. First, the questioning of river-bed propositions is a sign of mental disturbance, whereas the questioning of doctrines is not a criterion of irrationality. Second, there are no alternatives to the river-bed of our thinking, whereas there are alternatives to particular doctrines. Third, river-bed propositions are *acquired* or inherited without any thinking, investigation, or justification, whereas the learning of doctrines presupposes the river-bed propositions as well as the ability to perform a great number of fairly sophisticated language games. Fourth, there is nothing in human experience that requires the doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope or the *filioque*, whereas everything presupposes the law of induction or the existence of physical objects. Fifth, although all explanations and justifications come to an end, that end is not doctrines that can be doubted but the river-bed propositions that cannot. Since river-bed propositions are the foundations of all our thought, they must also be the foundations of all our talk about doctrines. It is obvious, therefore, that doctrines are not at the same epistemic level as the river-bed propositions.

Finally, it is useful to look at the functions of river-bed propositions and doctrines. While the former *enable* us to think, the latter act as *stoppers* that control, limit, and channel thought, disallow alternative beliefs and frustrate critical thinking. That is the reason indoctrination is inherently authoritarian: it claims there are no alternatives where, in fact, there are many legitimate choices; it aims at legitimating political authority and power in order to silence opponents and control people's lives.

In his concluding paragraph Thiessen admonishes: "all charges of indoctrination should be withheld . . . until such time as we can clearly and consistently distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable ways of initiating individuals into the public traditions considered essential to educa-

tion" (p. 246). I hope he can now see the radical difference between indoctrinating the young as opposed to providing them with the prerequisites of educational development. When we are successful in establishing the prerequisites of educational development in the young we give them the necessary foundations that will *enable* them to develop further in their individual ways. When we are successful in indoctrinating them, however, we *stamp them for life*.

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