

*A Theory of Moral Education*, by Michael Hand (2018), Routledge, London.

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In *A Theory of Moral Education*, Michael Hand homes in on a central problem of moral education and offers us a solution. Briefly put, the problem is this: There is often widespread disagreement about moral matters, even among those who have thought long and hard about them. So how is moral education possible without resorting to indoctrination? We are all aware of familiar strategies to avoid this problem, such as introducing various moral systems and conflicting beliefs without taking a stand on them, encouraging students to reach their own conclusions about moral matters, or even keeping well clear of the whole subject in the first place. Unfortunately, these options are not available to anyone who sees the need for moral education and takes it that bringing about rational assent to moral standards is among its aims. Given this starting point, the fact of reasonable disagreement makes it difficult to see how to avoid the problem of indoctrination.

Hand's solution is to argue that, while disagreement about moral matters is a salient feature of social life, there is a significant core of moral values about which there is actually little contention, and for which an adequate justification is within reach. Among them are "prohibitions on killing and causing harm, stealing and extorting, lying and cheating, and requirements to treat others fairly, keep one's promises and help those in need" (p. 78). With well-known caveats, there is at least general assent to these prescriptions, but their rational justification is more problematic. The history of ethical theory is littered with arguments as to why such things are wrong, but the arguments are contentious—and that looks to compound the problem. Nevertheless, Hand believes that there is at least one sound argument that can be used to justify our core moral standards.

The argument itself is based on a sociological premise. It asserts that there is a "standing propensity in human social groups to breakdowns in cooperation and outbreaks of conflict, arising from the contingent but permanent circumstances of rough equality, limited sympathy, and moderate scarcity of resources" (p. 66). The concept of rough equality picks up on the fact that we are all subject to the actions of others and none of us is immune to their consequences. To say that we have limited sympathy is to point out that fellow-feeling is directed more strongly to loved ones and that we are far more inclined to meet our own needs and of those who are close to us than the needs of anyone else. Moderate scarcity of resources implies that, while the resources needed to satisfy our needs are generally in reasonable supply in

societies like our own, they are not sufficiently available to prevent competition for them.

These facts present a perennial problem that stands in need of a solution; and the best solution we have found is for society to subscribe to the kinds of basic moral standards mentioned above. That is the crux of Hand's argument. Once we face the facts and acknowledge the problem they present, the role of our core moral values becomes clear. We have, as it were, entered into a contract to abide by them as the best means we have to ameliorate the problem.

While the facts that inform Hand's premise are no doubt subject to detailed sociological analysis, they are sufficiently obvious as they stand to service his needs. A sociological explanation of the role of moral values along the lines he proposes is also plausible, in my view. While it is a rather audacious claim, let us say for the sake of argument that Hand has solved the theoretical problem of the rational endorsement of our core moral values. This brings us back to the underlying practical problem for moral education that he is attempting to solve: how to avoid indoctrination and bring about rational endorsement of moral standards. The solution is to do it by means of some form of this rationally unassailable argument, of course, but we need to look at this matter in more detail.

Hand acknowledges that a good deal of moral training occurs in schools by means of prescriptions, rewards, and punishments. Students are subject to rules of conduct, good behaviour is rewarded, and there are penalties for misdemeanors. This is not to overlook things like exhortation and modelling. While all that is part of students' moral formation, we are here concerned with the rational endorsement of moral standards, a part of moral education more closely aligned with the kind of teaching methods that support cognitive development and knowledge acquisition in academic subjects. Hand argues that this calls for moral inquiry, but he wishes to distinguish what he calls directive moral inquiry from its non-directive cousin, and to insist on the use of the former.

The philosophical Community of Inquiry with which most of the readers of this journal are familiar may be taken as a paradigm case of what Hand understands by non-directive inquiry. Much could be said about the many ways in which such inquiry is actually directive, but not in the sense that he has in mind. By directive inquiry, Hand means an inquiry in which someone aims to persuade others of something by leading them through a process of rational consideration. In the case

in question, it involves the educator ensuring that the persuasive force of an argument is appreciated by the learner.

To illustrate the difference between his two forms of inquiry, Hand asks us to consider two teachers, Dawn and Tim, who are conducting a class discussion as to whether voting in general elections should be compulsory. As it happens, both teachers are in favour of compulsory voting. Dawn facilitates the discussion in ways with which those conversant with the Community of Inquiry will be familiar, while Tim guides the discussion so as to ensure that the best case for compulsory voting is put, even by putting it himself if need be, and given due emphasis. This does not exclude a proper consideration of objections, but it does exclude the teacher divulging that it is *his* view, or putting other non-rational pressure on students to accept the argument.

According to Hand, the pedagogy of directive inquiry is called for where there is a rationally compelling argument for a conclusion. This includes arguments in favour of propositions, as well as refutation of them. Where things are properly a matter of controversy, teachers should revert to non-directive inquiry. It is therefore unfortunate, though instructive, that Hand uses the example of Tim's lesson on compulsory voting to illustrate the concept of directed inquiry. The issue is properly a matter of controversy, in that people, having carefully considered it, may still reasonably disagree with one another. Thus, it is not a fit subject for directive inquiry. There is a more important point to be made, however, in that Tim engages in directive inquiry because he believes that he has a completely compelling argument in its favour. This raises the worry that teachers who follow Hand's prescription may take it as a license to promote arguments that to their mind are compelling, when in fact they are not. It is always possible that students will see the holes in such arguments, or find contrary arguments equally persuasive, but we shouldn't underestimate the unspoken power of the emphasis the teacher places on the argument to persuade students who are logical novices.

Were Dawn's students to fail to consider the best cases for and against compulsory voting that would certainly be a loss. Tim's approach has the advantage of ensuring that students consider what appear to be the strongest arguments. Still, Tim is doing more than that. He is trying to persuade students to come to a conclusion, albeit by rational means. Dawn, by contrast, is helping students to apply their intellectual acumen, but then letting the arguments speak for themselves. This raises the question of what teachers should—and should not—do to ensure that reason

prevails. In so far as possible, they should see that relevant arguments and objections are considered. They should call for good reasons in support of premises and should not let poor reasoning off the hook. These things are required for the rational consideration of an issue through argument. It may be that Tim's attempt to persuade students of a conclusion amounts to no more than this, but there is an obvious danger of crossing the line. Having given prominence to his favoured argument and exhibited what he takes to be its cogency, students are likely to form the impression that Tim is a proponent, even though he doesn't openly declare it. With this comes the subtle, or even not so subtle, extra-logical message that they are expected to endorse it.

Those who follow Hand's prescription for moral education need to know which moral standards to cultivate, which ones to deter, and which are matters of debate. While he nominates a number of standards requiring cultivation, toward the end of the book, he explores the other categories by means of three examples, two of which are cases where there is plenty of room for reasoned disagreement, with the third being rationally insupportable. The first two, then, are matters for non-directive inquiry, while the third is one for directive inquiry. It is a pity that he doesn't consider a case for directive inquiry aimed at the endorsement of one of the standards he listed earlier. We do have the general argument from the sociological premise, of course, but it would have been good to see it worked out for a particular case. It is only when you work through the nitty-gritty that you can really say the argument is unassailable—or *not*. The danger of attempting to present a detailed reasoned case, of course, is that it may leave the reader unpersuaded.

As elsewhere in philosophy, few arguments in ethics are completely irrefutable, and it would be a brave undertaking to place what an educational authority took to be such before the philosophical community. In my view, that is the test they would need to withstand before they were promoted. This is not to deny that there ought to be a place in moral education for the careful consideration of what their proponents take to be sound arguments for their conclusions, but this is something that can be done through non-directive inquiry.

In a book centred on the measures that educators should take to help secure rational endorsement of moral standards, it is understandable that Hand has less to say about the social dimensions of classroom inquiry. On this front, it is worth pointing out that, when the right settings are in place, engagement in collaborative moral inquiry is a form of moral social praxis. Students are learning to listen to and

respond to one another in a respectful fashion. They are learning to carefully consider arguments and viewpoints with which they may not agree and to engage with one another in the give and take of reason. They are learning, in a word, to be reasonable. This is not just a matter of following an argument, no more than being reasonable is to be reduced to being rational. I don't know that this is anything with which Hand would disagree, but it is, once again, a benefit that can be derived from non-directive inquiry.

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