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## INDOCTRINATION, MORAL INSTRUCTION, AND NONRATIONAL BELIEFS: A PLACE FOR AUTONOMY?

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Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends constitutes reflective thought.

— John Dewey, *How We Think*<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

It would seem that all that could be said about indoctrination *has* been said.<sup>2</sup> A recent rash of articles is only the latest spate of contributions to a topic that has been thoroughly debated over the past eighty years.<sup>3</sup> This latest wave of anti-indoctrination invectives and its earnest detractors suggest that there is much to the notion of indoctrination that continues to inspire point-counterpoint. The charge of indoctrination ostensibly is meant to undermine the credibility of imparting dogmatic beliefs, whereby children's autonomy is sidestepped and their capacity for critical thinking is foiled. However, indoctrination often is conflated with justifiable forms of moral instruction, though to the extent that moral instruction is perceived as pedagogically objectionable, liberals can be heard denouncing it as an immoral activity.

I will begin by situating this discussion against the backdrop of a minimalist notion of autonomy. I will then consider the case for nonrational beliefs,

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1. John Dewey, *How We Think* (1933; repr. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1971), 9.

2. I will not review this fascinating history here. It will suffice to say that before the 1920s, many saw education as synonymous with indoctrination. See Richard H. Gatchel, "The Evolution of the Concept," in *Concepts of Indoctrination: Philosophical Essays*, ed. I.A. Snook (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 9–16; Mary Anne Raywid, "The Discovery and Rejection of Indoctrination," *Educational Theory* 30, no. 1 (1980): 1–10; James Garrison, "The Paradox of Indoctrination: A Solution," *Synthese* 68, no. 2 (1986): 261–273. For many decades, "liberal" pedagogical models emphasized a set of facts and adhered to a body of knowledge that was to be imparted and received, and it was this static and passive approach to education that reformers — harbingers of "progressive education" — endeavored to undermine. In our own times, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, this trend has been thoroughly revived.

3. See Michael Hand, "Religious Upbringing Reconsidered," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 4 (2002): 545–557; Michael Hand, "A Philosophical Objection to Faith Schools," *Theory and Research in Education* 1, no. 1 (2003): 89–99; Jim MacKenzie, "Religious Upbringing Is Not as Michael Hand Describes," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 1 (2004): 129–142; Harvey Siegel, "Faith, Knowledge and Indoctrination: A Friendly Response to Hand," *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 1 (2004): 75–83; Charlene Tan, "Michael Hand, Indoctrination and the Inculcation of Belief," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 2 (2004): 257–267; Geoffrey Short, "Faith-Based Schools: A Threat to Social Cohesion?" *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 4 (2002): 559–572; and Geoffrey Short, "Faith Schools and Indoctrination: A Response to Michael Hand," *Theory and Research in Education* 3, no. 3 (2003): 331–341.

examining the difference between those whose content is objectionable on evidentiary grounds and those that are immune to verification.<sup>4</sup> Next, I will consider the indoctrination-moral instruction distinction, paying special attention to the various ways in which indoctrination is defined. Finally, I will consider the role that value coherence plays in shaping our identities, paying particular attention to fundamental commitments as defined by our respective families, cultures, and communities.

The manner in which individuals hold various nonevidentiary beliefs is critical to making any evaluative claim on an individual's autonomy. I will argue that one may be both justified in holding nonrational beliefs of a nonevidentiary sort while being capable of leading an autonomous life. I will defend the idea that moral instruction, including explicitly religious content, may justifiably constitute a set of commitments upon which rationality and autonomy are dependent. Moral instruction, I will argue, does not have to conflict with the autonomy of persons provided that the process of instruction and learning conduces to some degree of reflection and critical thinking. I will not deny that some individuals never truly possess the capacity to flourish; that is, some will not manage to escape the psychological effects of fear and a crippled identity instilled in early childhood. (It will be important for the reader to remember this as he or she continues.) Nevertheless, I will argue that individual psychology is central to our ability to assess the outcome of an upbringing purported to be indoctrinatory, particularly the role that experience and agency play in enabling us to evaluate our beliefs.

#### AUTONOMY

Autonomy, whatever else it might denote, implies the capacity to appreciate the reasons upon which one chooses to act. It also suggests an ability to weigh evidence that might run counter to one's current set of opinions or beliefs with a view to revising one's position. It is not necessary to defend a position of autonomy that requires one to reflect upon his or her commitments to a highly specified degree. The manner and degree to which various individuals actually reflect upon presumptive beliefs will depend in some measure on the nature of one's commitments and the intuitions one has about them. It is probably true to say that most people have intuitions that are extremely difficult to relinquish because of the sort of upbringing they have had or because of highly specific historical circumstances. So I will not suppose that beliefs subjected to the "harsh light of reason" are the only ones worth having. The upshot of this view is that no matter how comforting

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4. I am not using nonrational in a derogatory sense. I recognize that many nonrational beliefs, though not testable, are nevertheless meaningful.

a belief or set of commitments may be, it is surely more desirable for one to be shown that one's beliefs are false than for one to live in delusion.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the indoctrinated, the autonomous person would seem to have the capacity to accept or reject beliefs or knowledge claims whose premises are false. The autonomous individual, moreover, is not only able to supply reasons for acting but also draws upon a set of *motivations* that correspond to those reasons. I would also contend that autonomy can result even when heavy moral instruction is at work, when pedagogies do not foster critical thinking and reflection, and when nonrational content is involved. I will explain why this is so from a psychological standpoint subsequently, but there is another reason behind this that is important to recognize: allowing even for certain nonnegotiable beliefs (for example, God exists), the possibilities for moral novelty may still be prevalent given the variety of voices informing a number of religious traditions.<sup>6</sup> Within many — but by no means all — traditions, one can entertain considerable doubt; one may also foster the capacity to forge new ways of thinking about something by drawing upon the so-called voices from the margin that may be used to challenge dominant readings.

Autonomy includes, but is not exhausted by, an open-minded disposition; it certainly does not require that one be open-minded about everything. Furthermore, it is not clear *which* beliefs it would be good to be open-minded about. I would certainly want my children to be open-minded about things that I strongly disagree with, if for no reason other than their being able to articulate why holding particular views is justifiable given the reality of counterclaims. To take one example: even if I believe (as I do) that killing is a horrible thing to be avoided at almost any cost, I would still hope that my children will eventually show themselves to be open-minded to the extent that they are capable of at least *considering* cases in which killing may be justified (for example, euthanasia).

According to Peter Gardner, the truly committed person (whether his or her loyalty is to Marxism, animal rights, or Pentecostal ecstasy) cannot possibly be “open-minded” because open-mindedness requires that one be committed to a kind of fallibilism and openness to revision that may *undermine* the very position about which one is being open-minded. Gardner sees this lucidly expressed in the

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5. I can appreciate the force of this position, but it seems to me that, given a choice, many would still prefer *not* to discover some things to be true if this discovery has the effect of undoing one's very foundational commitments and the relationships upon which they are built. For all sorts of psychological reasons that I cannot examine here, I am not inclined to view knowing the truth as the best option in every instance.

6. I take the phrase “moral novelty” from Walter Feinberg, who wishes to give a generous, but not permissive, account of religious education in order to square with legitimate pluralism. I am sympathetic to his view, though I think he would agree that there are cases where moral novelty is not allowed in certain traditions, either because the interpretive structures are controlled in a hierarchical way, or because the group members are too tightly bound to the reading of texts whose content may not even address particular contemporary issues.

idea that the Pope cannot possibly be open-minded about the existence of God if he is to remain the Pope.<sup>7</sup> But autonomy also bespeaks a capacity for self-determination, which, Jim Garrison opines, “can only be obtained through doubt and self-reflection.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, an autonomous individual will eventually move beyond certain naked propositions or beliefs and be capable of situating those beliefs against a broader array of knowledge claims and human experience. This individual will be open-minded to the degree necessary to own those beliefs truly and authentically, that is, not *solely* on the authority of another, be that a teacher, a parent, or a judge. Political philosophers have captured the essence of an autonomous self by saying that such people identify with a set of ideas or beliefs from the inside.

Still, one cannot be too sure what is required for autonomy to flourish. Nor does one display autonomy all of the time. Autonomy is, in fact, often dependent upon the context in which one finds oneself. An adult child of an elderly parent, for example, may manage to be autonomous in every environment except her parent’s home. Given the contingent nature of autonomy and the fact that there is no consensus on the necessary and sufficient conditions for autonomy, it is wise to opt for a weaker reading. On my account, then, autonomy is not *required* for every person in every situation; moreover, even when some persons think and act autonomously, it is doubtful whether it is always demonstrable.<sup>9</sup>

#### RATIONALITY AND NONRATIONAL BELIEF

When I speak of “belief,” I am aware that this may mean any number of different things. Beliefs about the world and beliefs (if that is the correct term) about oneself occupy, it seems, two different nomenclatures, though each seems informed by the other. I think one’s self-concept is critical to this discussion and in many ways is a predictor of how well one will be capable of examining beliefs about the world. Here I will focus primarily on beliefs as ideas about the world that individuals pass on to each other.

It is not always clear just what is meant by rationally held beliefs, though they are usually based on some kind of evidence. Nonrational beliefs are generally of two types. The first type consists of content that contradicts or ignores known evidence (for example, the ability to walk through solid objects); beliefs of this kind are nonrational to the extent that believers are not capable of or willing to ascertain their truth or untruth by methods accessible to the general public (such as empirical or deductive evaluations). The other type comprises beliefs that are not

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7. Peter Gardner, “Should We Teach Children to Be Open-Minded? Or, Is the Pope Open-Minded about the Existence of God?” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 27, no. 1 (1993): 39–43. As counterintuitive as it might seem, I strongly disagree with Gardner’s position but cannot develop my argument here except to say that open-mindedness need not require anything more than a minimalist conception allowing for the possibility that one might be wrong.

8. Garrison, “The Paradox of Indoctrination,” 269.

9. Conversations with D.C. Phillips were helpful in shaping some of these ideas.

subject to verification — beliefs immune to evidentiary or rational challenge.<sup>10</sup> One may believe in reincarnation, for example, yet have no means of proving it. Or consider the act of praying, which hinges on a belief — modify it how you like — that entails a supplication for supernatural intervention in one sense or another. One may have been taught to pray as a child or may have learned it later in life. Either way, the beliefs that lie behind prayer (unless one accepts the idea that prayer is really only a form of meditation) are clearly not susceptible to publicly testable means of inquiry.<sup>11</sup> What we have, then, is another example of nonrational belief of a nonevidentiary sort.

In the first type of nonrational belief, the *content* is highly problematic. However, one may hold the second type of nonrational belief in such a way as to continue to be *reasonable*. In order to hold such beliefs reasonably, one must be capable of reflecting upon one's reasons for holding them: having the capacity to reason, to form judgments, and to draw conclusions in a manner that is amenable to the counterreasoning of others. Thus, while one may be justified in holding a nonrational belief (that prayer has supernatural effects, for instance), we must never succumb to an acceptance of methods whose tactics discourage individuals from reflecting upon a set of commitments that may interfere with their ability to become autonomous selves.

Jim MacKenzie has argued that a great deal of our social and political interaction rests on nonrational persuasion.<sup>12</sup> Various educational strategies rely not so much on rational argument as they do on sentiment — often indistinguishable from guilt or social pressure (as exemplified by the question, how would you like it if someone treated *you* that way?). Exposure to difference also counts, for in most cases there is the *possibility*, if not the likelihood, that one will confront arguments or data dissimilar to one's current ideas or beliefs. That is not to say that even learned individuals always do this. To be sure, the reason for much academic debate is precisely that facts are rarely conclusive and humans respond more favorably to certain ideas and beliefs than to others. Still, there is no general habit in any field of inquiry worth its name that discourages others from or forbids them the right to scrutinize its respective claims. Indeed, one hopes to find *justificatory content* in any particular field of inquiry. More important, though, claims of the content-based sort are *falsifiable*. This, indoctrination's critics allege, is what separates the claims of superstition from those of legitimate inquiry.

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10. Of course many people believe that their personal experience is verification enough. Religious and nonreligious epistemologies are also different; so, for example, a person with religious assumptions will find certain things to be true (such as that all living things are sacred) that to a nonreligious person are simply not supported by rationality and empirical evidence. Those who allege that religious people have been indoctrinated sometimes fail to account for the variety of ways in which a knowledge claim may be expressed, to say little about the *degree* of attachment one has to those claims.

11. This is true despite various studies that have attempted to discover whether sick people who are prayed over fare better than those who are not.

12. MacKenzie, "Religious Upbringing Is Not as Michael Hand Describes." I would add here that imperiousness to counterevidence may apply to nonreligious as well as to religious perspectives.

It cannot, therefore, be true to assert that Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle or Milton Friedman's voucher theory are just other forms of indoctrination because they seek to advance inconclusive knowledge claims. It is the *nature* of the inquiry that matters. Harvey Siegel correctly points out that for something to count as faith in a patently nonrational fashion and with a blatant disregard for evidence, such beliefs must "be held *independently* of available evidence and *protected* from contrary evidence in a way that is *impervious* to the challenges raised by evidence pointing against it."<sup>13</sup> In other words, in order for certain types of knowledge or belief to count as forms of indoctrination, they must be held in such a way as to *ignore* or *disregard* all testimony that runs counter to one's own rendering. For the indoctrinated, faith and reason stand in opposition to one another.

There are many instances in which parents and teachers in particular are called upon to give nonrational explanations to young children. Consider the case of a young child who asks her parent, "What happens when you die?" The possibilities for responding to this question are infinite, but I think it safe to say that most parents do not expound on flat brain waves and bodily decomposition. The following examples are more common: "a person stands in judgment," or "everyone must be reborn according to his karma," or even "we cease to exist." The first two answers, of course, defy logic and evidence. Both ask young children to bypass reason and accept irrational answers. Furthermore, both are just as likely to contribute to the psychological turmoil of some of these children should they choose — years later — to abandon certain beliefs and embrace others. Some parents do, it must be said, defer judgment to others or proffer humble agnosticism. A few endeavor to explain painstakingly the various interpretations and positions that one might take, but this seems rare. Because *what* we believe varies so widely, and is so often shaped by one's cultural experience, it seems to me that parents have an obligation to tell children what others believe, which is to say that parents owe their children some kind of comparative basis for belief. In the example given previously, then, the parent can only be accused of indoctrination if he or she maintains the hope of establishing unshakable beliefs: the *content* of one's answer is not the most important factor here. Let me be clear: I am not advocating telling children things that one *knows* not to be true; I am merely resisting any urge to appraise autonomy on content grounds alone.

Consider a further challenge, namely, that *what* people believe and *how* they believe it (that is, what actions flow from holding those beliefs) cannot be separated and that some content (belief in karma, or in the predictive efficacy of the zodiac, for example) *requires* that one hold those beliefs in an *unreasonable* way, which is another way of saying that someone has been indoctrinated. I will not deny that this is often — though not always — the case. Being in possession of nonrational beliefs, or beliefs not known to be true, *is* in some sense problematic and even possibly the result of indoctrination.

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13. Siegel, "Faith, Knowledge and Indoctrination," 76–77.

Of course, beliefs need not be confined to the world “out there.” Indeed, beliefs may extend to the manner in which we view ourselves, particularly to how we identify as Native American, transgendered, anarchist, or what have you. These may not even count as *beliefs* at all but, rather, seem more akin to one’s deepest sense of self and, as such, are difficult to recognize, let alone to evaluate from a critical distance. How I see myself — that is, how I maintain a certain understanding about who I am and what I am capable of — is a type of belief very different from those I have been describing. What I believe about myself may circumscribe other types of beliefs I hold and vice versa; it is often crushingly difficult to uncover the extent to which these mutually inform each other. Even so, being in possession of nonrational beliefs does necessarily mean that one is unable to imagine a different set of beliefs or to recognize the possibility that counterclaims may show one’s beliefs to be false.

#### WHAT IS INDOCTRINATION?<sup>14</sup>

Today, indoctrination carries an exclusively pejorative meaning. The word conjures up mind control or brainwashing and runs counter to open-mindedness and tolerance. Ralph Page posits that indoctrination “involves not the inability to think, but instead the inability to think for oneself.”<sup>15</sup> While there appears to be some consensus that indoctrination must involve some form of *belief* (as opposed to having certain *feelings* about various matters), this use of “belief” does not necessarily pit religious against nonreligious perspectives.<sup>16</sup> Nor would it be useful to frame this debate simply in terms of “liberal” versus “conservative” thinking. My point here is that *certain processes of learning, irrespective of ideological orientation, are at the same time capable of arresting thinking and moral development.*

Many argue that indoctrination is especially dangerous and coercive because of the authority and trust with which teachers and parents are invested. Being committed to a particular point of view, the argument runs, distorts any objectivity that otherwise might obtain in the instructional moment. For example, take individuals raised in small villages, where aberrant beliefs are at once both conspicuous and frowned upon: members of these communities must carefully consider the potential consequences of beliefs (and their attendant choices or behaviors) that fall outside of the approved range of options. To do otherwise is to

14. I will not canvass the literature that discusses the significance of doctrines in order for indoctrination to occur. Suffice it to say that doctrinal content, regardless of its rationality or irrationality, is “erected on foundations which are not open to rational proof.” See James Gribble, *Introduction to Philosophy of Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969), 35.

15. Ralph Page, “Some Requirements for a Theory of Indoctrination” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1980), 78.

16. Most authors have been selective in choosing *propositional* criteria, leaving behind other emotional or personal qualities that help to define a state of belief. There has been some debate concerning whether certain forms of social conditioning count as indoctrination. The role that psychological and sociological factors play is an open and unsettled question, and not one I will pursue here, though perhaps it will be useful to say that some imperceptible interplay exists between having feelings and making judgments. For further discussion of this point, see Page, “Some Requirements for a Theory of Indoctrination,” 28–41.

risk what Lawrence Kohlberg called *disequilibrium*, which imperils everything held dear by someone caught in a moral quandary.<sup>17</sup> Faced with pressures like these, many choose simply to assimilate their beliefs to those sanctioned by the community in order to avoid being ostracized. Holding or acting upon beliefs viewed as pernicious by one's family or community is to expose oneself to alienating forces that may wreak havoc on an individual's physical and mental health.<sup>18</sup> Any decision to go against the folkways comes at an exorbitant price, a price that only the strong (or the foolish) are willing to pay.

One thing we will need to consider is whether indoctrination so profoundly dampens an individual's capacity to become autonomous. Either way, the content of one's beliefs is too broad a focus. I will argue that *indoctrination involves a process of knowledge or belief transmission whereby persons are left with crippled reflective capacities with respect to particular content*. That is to say, to the extent that *any* knowledge claims or set of beliefs inhibit the development of one's deliberative capacities, even when the content is unquestionably moral, indoctrination is at work.<sup>19</sup> (That is not to say, of course, that this indoctrination is irrevocable or permanent; this point will be discussed more fully later in the essay.) Before we untangle indoctrination from other legitimate forms of moral instruction, it is necessary to consider the various criteria used to adjudicate its scope and effects. Others have covered this ground before. The purpose of this section is not to advance new theoretical assertions but to clarify broadly what is meant by "indoctrination" in the literature.

#### CONTENT

Inasmuch as indoctrination concerns the *content* of one's beliefs, it has to do with beliefs that dodge publicly testable grounds (regardless of whether they happen to be true or false). Hence Antony Flew famously maintained that the content of religious — and particularly Catholic — education does exactly this.<sup>20</sup> On this definition, indoctrination occurs whenever knowledge is confidently instilled that surpasses the available evidence or when it is based on a reading of the evidence with which others may reasonably disagree. Yet it can easily be shown that this

17. Lawrence Kohlberg, "Development of Moral Character and Moral Ideology," in *Review of Child Development Research*, vol. 1, eds. Martin Hoffman and Lois Wladis Hoffman (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964). See also Michael Schleifer, "Moral Education and Indoctrination," *Ethics* 86, no. 2 (1976): 154–163.

18. But suppose that the authoritative source is removed — say, that a father figure or a village elder has died. Of those that remain, only some continue their steadfast commitment to the traditions and beliefs by which they were brought up. Are they the indoctrinated ones? What about the others who have moved on? Have they ceased to be indoctrinated if they no longer believe? Might their thoughts and actions continue to be animated by lingering beliefs and doubts over which their wills have little control? Are we able to separate those who have merely been conditioned to behave in certain ways from those who have been indoctrinated? These and other questions challenge the idea that methods consistently result in indoctrination.

19. Admittedly, in young children this will be a *potential* and thus latent ability to assume deliberative capacities. There may also be an emotional, and not only cognitive, aspect to deliberative capacities, such that one is able to *know* something to be false while *acting* as though it were true.

20. Antony Flew, "Indoctrination and Religion," in *Concepts of Indoctrination*, ed. Snook, 67–92.



definition is too expansive to be of much use. Many of the beliefs one may have, for instance, concerning turmoil in Chechnya, the harms that may come from drilling in the Arctic, or the likelihood that domestic violence will decrease if strict gun laws are enacted are based on reasonable but controvertible assumptions for which there is always counterevidence and warrant for reasonable disagreement. One could even go so far as to say that much of our knowledge consists of little more than propositions of empirical adequacy or plausible assertability. All of us believe certain things about diet, technology, the economy, or the environment (for example, that certain foods are cancer-related, or that inflation and interest rates at current levels will avert an economic recession) until we are faced either with facts or experiences that challenge our assumptions. A mountain of evidence and expert witnesses may be contradicted by another, opposite, mountain of evidence and string of expert witnesses. Those things we count as truths are in many ways contingent on "traditions of precedent, thought and practice."<sup>21</sup> Yet we would not necessarily want to say that we were indoctrinated into them.

#### METHOD

Viewed from another angle, indoctrination has more to do with the *method*, specifically the manner in which beliefs are transmitted. To the extent that various claims are purveyed without any propensity to give fair hearing to alternate readings or to critically examine those claims, one may speak of indoctrination. Ben Spiecker avers that this is the essence of *inculcation*, for by inculcating certain doctrines (that is, beliefs about reality that we hold to be true in an ultimate sense), we ineluctably aim to suppress the critical disposition necessary to evaluate these truth claims through nonrational methods.<sup>22</sup> Indoctrinatory methods are usually those involving tactics that circumvent reason and exert psychological pressure; in other words, through coercion. In many cases such coercive action is efficacious because it is reinforced by the presumption of intellectual authority.

Now consider yet another dimension of the manner of imparting beliefs that derives from a perceived intellectual authority. One can easily imagine that there is something insidious about placing children under the tutelage of those strongly committed to a particular point of view. And what about texts around which faith communities are built, especially when those texts are invested with a kind of infallibility? Such questions have particular relevance for certain religious schools, as the presence of committed teachers continues to be perhaps the single most important means of imparting a strong religious identity and corresponding set of beliefs.

#### INTENTION

Some claim that those who impart knowledge with the *intent* to suppress creativity and critical thinking are guilty of indoctrination. Here one may say that

21. Alven Neiman, "Religious Belief and Education for Spirituality after the Enlightenment: The Vision of Elmer Thiessen," *Religious Education* 94, no. 4 (1999): 432.

22. Ben Spiecker, "Indoctrination, Intellectual Virtues and Rational Emotions," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 21, no. 2 (1987): 262–265.

indoctrination obtains when an authority figure intends to implant a set of non-verifiable beliefs so that they will irrevocably hold. This suggests a level of psychological control that discourages or overrides another's critical thinking. John Wilson goes so far as to say that indoctrination requires taking over another's consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Charlene Tan, therefore, is right to see indoctrination as a "paralysis of one's mind, both in form and substance."<sup>24</sup> David Cooper attempts to distinguish "sincere" indoctrination (a teacher who believes what he or she teaches) from "insincere" indoctrination (when one is forced to teach something he or she does not personally endorse).<sup>25</sup> But rarely is it an either/or situation. Many commitments and beliefs (such as patriotism, capitalism, competition, and the like), John Kleinig reminds us, are simply taken for granted, and the imparting of these is far less a matter of intention than simply an aspect of the hidden curriculum.<sup>26</sup> While such acculturation is not tantamount to indoctrination, they share a process in which certain ideas have permeated one's consciousness without defense or explanation and in which critical reflection is seriously limited.<sup>27</sup>

This method alone is not sufficient to demarcate "indoctrination," even where nonrational beliefs are imparted by the use of means that block one's deliberative capacities. Yet to allege indoctrination based solely on intent is to assume that the indoctrination invariably succeeds; because attempts to indoctrinate may fail, intention must not be confused with outcomes.

#### OUTCOMES

Some have argued that people can only be said to have been indoctrinated if they uncritically hold a set of beliefs and presumably continue to do so for an indefinite period of time. On this account, indoctrination occurs when individuals are under the impression of having accepted beliefs freely and rationally when in fact they have not. Rather, John Wilson argues, these individuals have had their reason lulled to sleep either under duress or through psychological intimidation (unduly enabled by means of unquestioned authority).<sup>28</sup> An indoctrinated person, Kleinig explains, is one who

23. John Wilson, "Indoctrination and Rationality," in *Concepts of Indoctrination*, ed. Snook, 22.

24. Charlene Tan, "Michael Hand, Indoctrination and the Inculcation of Belief," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 2 (2004): 264.

25. David Cooper, "Intentions and Indoctrination," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 5, no. 1 (1973): 44–45. An interesting question relates to the manner in which teaching in schools might generally fit this description. See Henry Rosemont, "On the Concept of Indoctrination," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 7, no. 3 (1972): 226–237. A parent or teacher might *unintentionally* be guilty of playing an indoctrinatory role if, for example, sexist attitudes are expressed in one form or another. Or consider the slogan, "Support the Troops." This is an instance of *potentially* indoctrinatory content if the teacher or parent uses this mantra in a manner that clouds any or all judgment about the (im)moral grounds on which one government may be at war with another.

26. John Kleinig, *Philosophical Issues in Education* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

27. It should also be noted that there are instances where acculturation *includes* indoctrination (I am thinking of certain totalitarian states), but, as it concerns the hidden curriculum, I do not think this distinction is necessary.

28. John Wilson, "Indoctrination and Freedom," in *Concepts of Indoctrination*, ed. Snook, 102.

falls back on implausible claims to self-evidence, continually engages in distortion, resorts to question-begging devices, professes to find reasonably clear objections unintelligible, or becomes chronically unable to feel their weight against his/her position.<sup>29</sup>

Indoctrination, on this understanding, does not depend on another's intent. The difficulty with this account is that it is hard to claim with any certainty whether an individual is no longer capable of changing his or her mind. Even profoundly brainwashed individuals are capable of eventually realizing the error of their former thinking or beliefs. The freedom and volition of individuals, then, is not in this case — nor is it ever — totally eclipsed.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, any connection between indoctrination and the criteria used to ascertain its existence must be tentative and incomplete. An individual's beliefs may be isolated from other knowledge claims, or they may be integrated with all that a person holds to be true. Thus, we must conclude that the manner in which individuals hold their beliefs is the definitive characteristic of indoctrination.

#### MORAL INSTRUCTION

Enter now the claim that we need certain codes to live by and that we are justified in inculcating values in children, including firm, unshakeable beliefs. Here one must carefully differentiate between indoctrination and proper moral instruction. I disagree with the claim that moral training is necessarily indoctrinatory because its contents are neither true nor false;<sup>31</sup> rather, the *process* of imparting moral content is the overriding concern, particularly as it relates to the facilitation of a capacity for critical thinking. The argument for moral instruction for young children goes something like this: children *need* to be taught to tell the truth, to respect others, and to be considerate and forgiving. Such things are necessary, and desirable habits ought to be encouraged before the capacity to reason or reflect upon one's motives exists. There is an obvious worry that a child's autonomy will be violated by preempting the capacity to choose habits for oneself. However, a compelling argument can be made for age-appropriate moral training that does not short-circuit a child's capacity for subsequent reflection upon those habits. (I will return to this point.)

With regard to moral training, many liberals express concern over the safeguarding of one's autonomy. Instilling moral values, including religious beliefs, does not violate a very young child's autonomy because autonomy is not yet something remotely within their grasp. Influencing a child's behavior, either through modeling or simple instruction, is morally acceptable because rationality is as yet underdeveloped in young children. The transmitter of values may have good reasons for imparting a particular belief and justifiably choose not to communicate

29. Kleinig, *Philosophical Issues in Education*, 62–63.

30. I have not the space here to consider the case of *willful* indoctrination: those who seek to be indoctrinated and are quite eager to embrace — uncritically and unreservedly — the teachings of others, even when those who would inculcate these teachings, aware of the novice's pliant state of mind, are reluctant to do so.

31. See Hugo Meynell, "Moral Education and Indoctrination," *Journal of Moral Education* 4, no. 1 (1974): 17–26.

those reasons to the recipient of those beliefs. George Sher and William Bennett argue, "most children cannot respond to unadorned appeals to moral reasons. If we accept this as true, we do not violate their autonomy when we supplement such appeals with more efficacious influences."<sup>32</sup> They make a case for direct moral instruction that does not violate one's autonomy so much as pave the way for future autonomy to develop. How does this work?

It is true that directive techniques use nonrational means to produce desires and character traits that will eventually influence one's adult actions. However, even if an adult *is* motivated by a desire that was originally produced by nonrational means, it still seems possible for his action to be done for good moral reasons. In particular, this still seems possible if his nonrationally produced desire is precisely to act *in accordance with* such reasons. But it is surely just this desire which the sensitive practitioner of directive moral education seeks to instill.<sup>33</sup>

Directive moral instruction, on this view, does not violate an individual's autonomy even if it fails to *contribute* to it. Inculcating moral habits and behaviors may very well clear the path for the later inculcation of *reasons* that will serve to reinforce those selfsame habits. According to Sher and Bennett, direct moral instruction removes unnecessary competing motives, such as self-interest, by enabling the acquisition of honesty, a sense of fair play, and concern for others. Long before reasons can be fully grasped, virtuous habits will have been internalized so that when people are finally receptive to reasons grounding those habits, they contribute to the autonomous decision making of a moral self.

Such an approach is certainly consistent with cognitive and emotional development, and its persuasiveness lies, perhaps, in the empirical realities of parenting. But what if the "obstacles" that Sher and Bennett talk about include competing *reasons* that are just what is needed in order to forge a truer, more authentic exercise of the will? If we are simply talking about reducing the number of options available in order to provide some level of coherence, then we may indeed have an ideal arrangement. Being exposed to dissenting views does not in itself make one a more autonomous agent, and the espousal of some basic values and commitments seems requisite to a healthy pluralism. If, however, we are eliminating counterevidence and unduly influencing children in such a way as to stymie freedom and autonomy, we have another matter on our hands. And of course moral instruction that serves to enhance subsequent autonomy must operate under the proviso that it will not hinder future growth.<sup>34</sup> Hence, there remain unanswered questions regarding the extent to which those inculcated with heavy moral instruction are allowed to flourish. Even so, it cannot be assumed that deliberative discussion about controversial issues will necessarily conduce to flourishing or, for that matter, produce morally better people. Simply thinking more clearly about whether or not it is acceptable, say, to steal when hunger has reduced one's ability to thrive, or whether lying is acceptable when telling the truth

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32. George Sher and William Bennett, "Moral Education and Indoctrination," *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 11 (1982): 668.

33. *Ibid.*, 669.

34. See D.C. Phillips, "Directive Teaching, Indoctrination, and the Values Education of Children," *Social Theory and Practice* 15, no. 3 (1989): 339–353.

may threaten someone's safety or even cause harm, may do little to actually foster better behavior.

I am also not arguing that one needs to entertain every possible outcome before arriving at appropriate moral habits. Few of us really believe that children need to weigh all possible sides of an issue. Take Martin Luther King's exhortation that Americans come to judge a person not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. To avoid the charge of indoctrination, should parents and teachers entertain both antiracist *and* racist perspectives? In other words, should children be given the opportunity to explore from the inside the mind of a racist? Of course not: it could encourage beliefs with dastardly social and political consequences. Teaching children that racism in any form is wrong is, without a doubt, a form of moral instruction, but the claims of this form of instruction are amenable to testing by accessible and prudent methods. It can be *shown*, using both historical and contemporary examples, that racism is morally objectionable, that it militates against civic responsibility, and that it unequivocally causes psychological (and other physical) harm to others.

What protects antiracist education from the charge of indoctrination, then, is both its substance — morality itself disallows racism — and the manner in which it is taught. Certainly, antiracist education *can* be indoctrinatory, and thus morally objectionable, if its methods are unsound. Antiracist education would be bad for individuals, for instance, if it proceeds by way of inflicting guilt and shame on young people over injustices for which they are not directly responsible. Antiracist education that accuses white people of racism simply for being the unwitting heirs to social privilege *is* morally objectionable.<sup>35</sup> However, it would not be morally objectionable if antiracist educators decry racial injustices in order to raise awareness of students' social privilege and thereby to encourage more responsible behavior in combating racism, even unwitting racism, in their thoughts and actions. For instance, antiracist educators would be right to question the hasty conclusions students draw about the "quality" of neighborhoods or schools based on the concentration of minority families in a particular area.

It is very tempting for some to counter the arguments liberals make against moral — particularly religious — instruction by insisting that *all* forms of inculcating values and norms in others are tantamount to indoctrination.<sup>36</sup> From this point of view, all forms of teaching values (whether through television, parenting, or schooling) are indoctrinatory, and this is both necessary and desirable. Thus, according to Henry Rosemont, the better approach entails (a) considering how to *minimize* indoctrination, and (b) identifying those indoctrinatory materials and

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35. One could, of course, argue that using shame or guilt to combat racist impulses would not be morally objectionable. This may be a defensible notion of antiracist education, though perhaps not the best way to approach it.

36. See Elmer Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Charles Harvey, "Liberal Indoctrination and the Problem of Community," *Synthese* 111 (1987): 115–130; and C.J.B. Macmillan, "On Certainty and Indoctrination," *Synthese* 56 (1983): 263–272.

methods with “minimal mischievous consequences.”<sup>37</sup> It is my conviction, however, that this response grossly overstates the case. Moral instruction may be both necessary and desirable, but to characterize all moral instruction as indoctrination is to trivialize the meaning of *indoctrination*. Moreover, it is to assume that all moral instruction occurs with similar methods, intentions, and outcomes. Admittedly, though, there are unexamined habits and commitments which are seldom explicitly taught; rather, they are “embedded structurally in society [and] in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and [the] collective consequences of following those rules.”<sup>38</sup> These assumptions are as invisible as the air we breathe and, as such, pass for true without actually rising to the level of awareness necessary for examination.

#### VALUE COHERENCE AND UNDERSTANDING

I have argued that ethical principles must be instilled in children, for without a particular notion of the good, derived from a *limited* range of options, there will be no foundation on which autonomy and rationality can build. One’s moral instruction (and conditioning) does not determine who one will become or what one will believe so much as it provides one with imitable behaviors and convictions that ground one’s self; being grounded, one typically finds one’s present beliefs wholly natural and irreplaceable. Yet, there will most likely always be some who either cannot or will not reflect upon their fundamental commitments. Various forms of cognitive or emotional disturbance — either innate or induced — can impede a person’s capacity to achieve autonomy.<sup>39</sup> Even so, a strong argument can be made for instilling a particular set of values and beliefs in young children in order to provide them with a coherent and organized framework from which to view the world around them and make sense of it. Moral instruction on this understanding is not only desirable but also necessary to a child’s cognitive development and psychosocial health.

Shelley Burttt avers that children encumbered by unchosen obligations and commitments are in possession of the resources necessary for independent thought about those identities. The good life, she says, can take many forms and this includes different parenting styles. While civic competence and exposure to other ways of life count for a great deal, Burttt believes that children principally need a moral and sentimental education, one that “provides the material and psychological resources that allow for a full and flourishing human life.”<sup>40</sup> Cultural coherence is a strength on Burttt’s view because children, particularly young children, need

37. Rosemont, “On the Concept of Indoctrination,” 233.

38. Barbara Applebaum, “Raising Awareness of Dominance: Does Recognizing Dominance Mean One Has to Dismiss the Values of the Dominant Group?” *Journal of Moral Education* 30, no. 1 (2001): 60.

39. Of course, autonomy and rationality are not the “be all and end all” of a good life. My point is this: we are intuitively bothered by certain forms of indoctrination and not by others. Either way, where one finds examples of harmful indoctrinatory content — for example, racial intolerance — there are excellent reasons to challenge these beliefs on two fronts: (1) on the basis of sound moral instruction rooted in claims of human dignity and kindness, and (2) on the basis that these beliefs portend harmful social or political consequences. The latter claim is empirical, while the former is conceptual.

40. Shelley Burttt, “In Defense of *Yoder*: Parental Authority and the Public Schools,” in *Nomos 38: Political Order*, eds. Ian Shapiro and Russell Hardin (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 428.

consistent moral messages in order to make correct choices and in order to live a good life later as adults. She invites us to consider an education for autonomy as instilling the capacity to live well according to the norms and customs of one's group:

Remaking our world into one in which all children are encouraged to cast all of their commitments as selected on the basis of personal preference does not seem to me either necessary for their autonomy or possible given certain fundamental facts about what it means to be human....Like [Michael] Sandel, I believe it is independently a good thing to see ourselves as encumbered by unchosen attachments and loyalties.<sup>41</sup>

These norms and customs need not be synonymous with a comprehensive belief system, and Burttt asserts that the capacity for critical reflection is necessary even for those whose ideological boundaries are determined by accepted canons. But she believes that this requirement can be met by, say, comprehensive religious schools, provided that "certain minimum standards of educational achievement are met," a basic civic capacity is cultivated, and parents' motivations are in the right place. Burttt maintains that cultural coherence is justifiable principally because parents want what is best for their children and because children's psychological interests are best served in this way, since they are "irrevocably constituted" as culturally embedded persons. The very fact that an individual's way of life falls well outside the mainstream will, she purports, suffice to encourage critical reflection on one's basic beliefs. This happens because most parents will be unable to shield their children from Western culture's "largely secular, highly commercialized mass culture." One does not need to demonstrate empathy toward alternate understandings of the good life in order to cultivate autonomy.

Burttt clearly has children's best interests in mind, but she knows that her argument can be misinterpreted. Precisely because of widespread abuse and neglect, she readily admits that, even when their intentions are good, parents are capable of "profoundly misdirecting a child's ambitions and understanding."<sup>42</sup> Despite this, Burttt believes that where comprehensive schooling is concerned, most parents are not "disenabling a child's ultimate choices" because evidence can be adduced to show that some do in fact defect from their communities. She decries any attempts to exploit her proposals as an excuse for parents to fashion an education that "severely compromises children's emotional, material, or cognitive needs or that fails to provide them with the skills and dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship."<sup>43</sup> Predictably, there is a lot of wiggle room in this caveat.

Burttt argues convincingly, however, that an education or upbringing for cultural coherence is likely to provide (1) moral courage, (2) character pluralism, and (3) the capacity to identify with a particular version of the good "from the inside." The first trait concerns the capacity to resist pressures for conformity, especially of the consumerist sort. The second involves recognizing that some individuals — owing

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41. Shelley Burttt, "Comprehensive Educations and the Liberal Understanding of Autonomy," in *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies*, eds. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 193.

42. *Ibid.*, 181.

43. Burttt, "In Defense of Yoder," 433.

to “different needs, characters, gifts and abilities” — may not find the good life of another to be particularly compelling. The third item concerns the necessity of identifying with a specific way of life in such a fashion that it feels right to the individual espousing it. When this identification does not exist, some other opportunity to live the good life must be made available. Here, Burttt assumes that the ability to exit a community is available to those who are so inclined, but does not concern herself with the manner in which many people are forced to leave. Furthermore, the harm principle, on Burttt’s view, does not extend to psychological harm.

Nevertheless, Burttt does not miss the crucial question. She asks whether those who have received an education for cultural coherence are endowed with the “emotional and cognitive tools necessary to distance themselves sufficiently from their familial or societal educations to ask, ‘Are the principles by which I have been raised just? Is this a way of life worthy of human commitment in the first place?’”<sup>44</sup> She responds that we have reason to believe that children

taught to question the justice of the existing social order from the point of view of their parents’ religious commitments possess the capacity, in theory at least, to direct that critical sensibility against the principles by which they were taught to live. Any way of life will in practice fall short of at least some of its expressed ideals. It is perhaps in the space opened up by this disjunction that those raised to embrace comprehensive visions of the good life will find the room to reflect on the justice of their own ideals.<sup>45</sup>

One can only hope that she is right here, though it is perhaps in ascertaining the nuances of *servility* to a set of comprehensive goods that the danger of an education for cultural coherence lies.<sup>46</sup> Burttt insightfully notes that reflective questions can be asked concerning what counts as a good life for oneself “without requiring extensive familiarity with how very different sorts of people from very different circumstances choose to live their lives.”<sup>47</sup> Even so, this can hardly be considered *critical* reflection if the answers to life’s important questions (such as, what goods ought to compel my allegiance?) are narrowly circumscribed by *supra-rational* means inaccessible to others. Finally, while there is considerable merit to Burttt’s argument that “parents [be] allowed, indeed encouraged, to structure their children’s educational experience in conformity with their religious beliefs,” the deference she accords to parents in choosing the kind of education their children will receive leaves us with unsettling challenges beyond the scope of the present discussion.<sup>48</sup> Yet, insofar as a set of *indoctrinated* religious beliefs is believed to be a requirement of balanced child development, I must demur.<sup>49</sup> A moral education

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44. Burttt, “Comprehensive Educations,” 196.

45. *Ibid.*

46. I hold that servility includes but is not exhausted by having to justify one’s thoughts and beliefs on the basis of sacred texts or face being condemned as an infidel or an apostate. Burttt would, conversely, appear to hold the belief that children who are given the “intellectual tools” to distinguish true from false doctrines are being equipped for “independent critical thought.” I believe Burttt is simply wrong here.

47. Burttt, “Comprehensive Educations,” 202.

48. Shelley Burttt, “Religious Parents, Secular Schools: A Liberal Defense of an Illiberal Education,” *The Review of Politics* 56, no. 1 (1994): 55.

49. See Charlene Tan, “Michael Hand, Indoctrination and the Inculcation of Belief,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 2 (2004): 257–267.



for value coherence must not preclude the capacity for rational choice. Furthermore, moral education must not be confused with a sense of belonging or identity security that contravenes the bounds of respect for individual autonomy.

Nevertheless, one can state unequivocally, first, that people — especially young children — need to identify with a particular notion of the good and to possess the attendant capacity to pursue it.<sup>50</sup> Second, unless choices are kept to a manageable level, there will not be sufficient coherence for shaping identity and fueling agency. Third, without an adequate level of coherence, no clear standard emerges by which one's decisions may be evaluated. To elevate choice over a person's need for circumscribed boundaries is to ignore the need for what I will call *limited guidance*, a resource essential to providing psychological coherence. While it may be true that older children possess the capacity to glean insights from alternative cultural views and to appreciate the propositional complexity of moral choice seen from multiple perspectives, it is commonly assumed that younger children lack the cognitive capacity and emotional maturity to make wise and sensible choices without reasonable limitations on those choices that are available to them.

#### DISCUSSION

One sometimes hears a criticism that goes something like this: An education for autonomy places demands on children by forcing them to make choices and weigh options before they are sufficiently grounded in a set of beliefs from which to adequately evaluate their options. It is not with levity that G.K. Chesterton quipped, "the greatest fear today is not that children will believe too much, but that they won't believe anything at all." In order for us to become autonomous, it is necessary first of all that we have commitments. Without commitments, there exists no foundation upon which rationality and autonomy can be enacted, including the ability to doubt the beliefs underlying one's commitments.

This raises a very interesting question: Would children benefit from learning to live a set of, say, religious beliefs from the inside before they are exposed to any testing or challenging of those beliefs as nonrational and therefore unworthy of espousal? The rule would apply equally to those with rational and nonrational beliefs, theists and nontheists, and so forth. One argument in favor of this position would be that each individual would be brought up with a set of beliefs (a *Weltbild* or world picture, Wittgenstein called it) basic to any linguistic having and sharing of the world.<sup>51</sup> But another reason is simply that it would be meaningless to expect children or adults to make informed decisions concerning the life they wish to live

50. Provided, of course, that they are later given the opportunity to reject it. Again, this applies to those who would leave nonreligious homes to join religious communities and vice versa.

51. Wittgenstein appeared to support the idea of indoctrination on this understanding. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), par. 162. In "The Paradox of Indoctrination," Garrison summarizes the view thus: "Initiation of the learner into the linguistic community requires a degree of indoctrination," 268. John Dewey, no fan of indoctrination, nevertheless admitted to the need for a self-correcting indoctrination, which C.J.B. Macmillan distinguished from the type that demands the subordination of critical discrimination and comparison. See Macmillan, "On Certainty and Indoctrination," 263–272.

without first understanding their options from the inside. Nevertheless, this understanding lends itself to the erroneous idea that nontheistic children, for instance, cannot possibly understand or disagree with their religious neighbors unless they have lived their faith from the inside. According to Gardner,

Theories which see belief as necessary for understanding threaten [the liberal society] at a logical level and, in terms of their social influence, they would encourage people to dismiss the views of "disagreeers" and outsiders and, so, discourage the debates and the interchange and dissemination of ideas which are part of the fabric of liberal society. [Moreover], theories which regard belief as necessary for understanding, render disagreement impossible and so encourage the ossification of ideas.<sup>52</sup>

Common sense tells us that it is not realistic to expect the parent or teacher to teach children strong commitments while simultaneously equipping them to question or doubt those very commitments. It is a different matter where a parent educates for one set of commitments, while a separate influence (such as a teacher or a scout leader) educates for something else. But fostering such split or schizophrenic outlooks can be detrimental to children; moreover, as I argued previously, they derive from a faulty assumption that an individual with highly specific commitments is necessarily incapable of reflection and self-directed behavior — that is, of autonomy.

The content of one's commitments is not at issue. Having religious commitments no more undermines autonomy than commitments toward civic responsibility, environmental conservation, or nuclear disarmament. The idea is that commitment to any particular point of view enables one (at least in theory) to demonstrate — though there is no guarantee that this will successfully occur — how certain beliefs could alter one's outlook for the better and profoundly influence one's behavior. From the standpoint of a Sikh family, for instance, an upbringing or education that centers on learning *about* Sikhism, with little regard for how to integrate it into one's entire life, would be less than compelling. Similarly, an education *about* civic responsibility bereft of beliefs and actions that demonstrate one's commitment to said responsibilities will appear hollow and useless.

Of course, one can point to difficulties with the position that one first has commitments *in order to* achieve autonomy, or only in order to have those commitments challenged by countercommitments. First, this would seem to make of commitments an instrumental good, particularly with a view to overthrowing or even repudiating those very commitments, thus rendering them trivial. Second, it is doubtful whether one would be capable of holding more than one set of *fundamental* commitments at any given time. Other questions emerge as well: Should children be encouraged to consider and weigh all possible explanations or interpretations of controversial matter? Should children be expected to offer reasons for why they believe or do what they do? If so, by what age? Will parents really want their children exposed to conflicting, possibly confusing, ideas in the classroom? If so, to what extent?

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52. Peter Gardner, "Religious Upbringing and the Liberal Ideal of Religious Autonomy," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 22, no. 1 (1988): 102.

I have already argued that most parents are not likely to teach for one set of commitments while also equipping their children to question those very commitments. Many parents send their children to school to learn conventional knowledge and do not want the school to change their children's minds about views held sacrosanct by the family or community. Especially when topics have a strong moral undertone (such as contraception), it is legitimate for parents to voice their concerns about who should introduce certain discussions. Moreover, the manner in which the discussion is introduced and sustained is also significant. The preceding discussion brings into sharp relief the tension between what parents desire and what an education is for, namely, to foster critical reflection on various matters, including those that contradict the beliefs of one's parents. Yet, what is to prevent intellectual freedom from occurring *within* a particular tradition? Even tightly knit communities are highly permeable to exterior influences and this exposure to alternatives cannot be eclipsed.<sup>53</sup> The point, finally, is that one must have a place from which to make evaluative judgments, but this ought never to preclude the knowledge that others view matters very differently.

Even so, we are left with warrantable challenges: What role exactly should *doubt* play in education? Is all education that fails to entertain doubt indoctrinatory? Before we can answer with certainty that it is, perhaps it is necessary to consider whether it may be beneficial to doubt the inherent goodness of the process of doubt itself. Should we, in some Cartesian sense, doubt all that we know, or think we know? What purpose, if any, will this serve? Perhaps the purpose doubt serves is to initiate reflection, to imagine the possibilities beyond one's current set of commitments or beliefs. Provided the level of cognitive dissonance does not induce a state of mental incapacity, doubt allows for the possibility of autonomy in the sense that it enables one to will for oneself a commitment to ideas and beliefs, even those rightly inculcated as moral instruction. For even clinging to the very ideas and beliefs handed down from one's parents or teachers, if mingled with doubt, can facilitate the *ownership* of those ideas and beliefs.

But then why is it that even among those who have doubted, so many retain the beliefs and commitments of their parents? A variety of reasons exist for this, ranging from the desire to remain within a tradition, to passing on cultural or family custom, to a means of family education, to a basis for a moral code, a "balanced" upbringing, a set of values, and so on. What may appear to be conviction to the outsider may be little more than habitual adherence to the familiar. Humans, Antoine Vergote wrote, feel an "imperious need to orientate [themselves]

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53. Harry Brighouse has pointed out that the permeability is less likely to be welcomed in tightly knit religious communities, whereas secular parents would, he argues, invite more permeability, even if it meant their children would likely leave the community. See Harry Brighouse, "Civic Education and Liberal Legitimacy," *Ethics* 108, no. 4 (1998): 744 n46. I see Brighouse's point but think that permeability has more to do with the middle class and its cosmopolitan values. Secular parents from small, rural communities are often highly suspicious of outside influences, including those from the community who go off to college. In many rural communities, attraction to pursuits outside of the community is perceived as a betrayal of local values and concerns; similarly, higher learning is looked at askance by many who strongly distrust its relevance to what happens in "real life."

in an organized and restricted world."<sup>54</sup> Even the autonomous individual is by necessity historically and contextually situated. It is difficult to imagine *any* beliefs — conscious or unconscious — that are not, in some sense, given. The past "remains active upon the present, and the present modulates itself according to the past."<sup>55</sup> One's arguments, beliefs, preferences, and habits typically lie within a broader narrative structure. Even one's choices are themselves conditioned choices, including those that react *against* an ostensibly determined set of circumstances. Herein lies our historical contingency.

Yet I would still hold that simply because children have been inculcated with certain beliefs does not guarantee that they will continue to hold those beliefs *in the same way*. The understandings we have as children develop and mature in most cases. We cast off some beliefs and hold to others, even as we modify them to accord with our experience. Most will not hold so assiduously to a set of beliefs or commitments as to avoid some measure of reflection. The quality of that reflection depends on a host of factors determined by the range of culturally available critical perspectives.<sup>56</sup> One could say, then, that there are corresponding degrees of autonomy, though it is not for me to say whether one individual has attained a higher level of moral progress. Furthermore, even if one continues to hold *irrevocably* to commitments and beliefs (for example, "smoking is bad for you" or "littering is inconsiderate and irresponsible" or "war doesn't solve anything"), chances are that over time both the breadth and depth of reasons available to that individual will have expanded. It is therefore highly implausible to assert that someone who has been inculcated with specific notions of right and wrong will resist, or be denied, all efforts to change them. To hold to this view is to take a dim view of human agency, experience, and cognitive development. Indeed, I am ambivalent concerning the extent to which *any* ideas and beliefs actually hold in people to a degree that warrants the charge of indoctrination.

Most moral instruction occurs in degrees, seldom encompassing all that we believe or claim to know. Those who instill religious beliefs usually do so with the idea of *fides quaerens intellectum* — faith seeking understanding — even if the understanding is not one that meets with wide approval in the broader society. Certain individuals accord too much authoritative weight to parents, assuming, as Michael Hand does, that young children will regard their parents as intellectual authorities on "everything under the sun."<sup>57</sup> However much children may internalize their parents' opinions, I would argue that they rarely are so impressionable as to accept uncritically their ideas and beliefs, provided there is a modicum of exposure to other points of view.

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54. Antoine Vergote, *The Religious Man: A Psychological Study of Religious Attitudes* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1969), 124–125.

55. Antoine Vergote, *Belief and Unbelief: A Psychological Study* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 25.

56. See Emily Robertson, "Liberalism and Autonomy as an Ideal of Character" (paper presented at the Philosophy of Education Institute, Urbana, Illinois, July 2004).

57. Hand, "Religious Upbringing Reconsidered," 552.

But suppose for a moment that I am committed to a particular way of thinking. Should indoctrination include instances of irrationality that amount to little more than optimistic thinking? Consider the phrase, "good things come to those who wait." On the surface, it seems true to many of us. Yet, surely for tens of millions (the famine stricken of Sudan and Niger come to mind) no sum of waiting for a good thing will ever amount to much. Instilling the idea, "good things come to those who wait" might strike us as not only irrational but even cruel and unkind. What is more, such thinking may be the very undoing of a belief system. Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg asserts:

If a specific religious tradition is not able to do justice to human experience through such integration [of suffering, meaninglessness, and the like], its failure will lead to a crisis of belief in the truth of the tradition; it then becomes questionable whether the God proclaimed by this tradition can, as a matter of fact, be understood as and believed to be the creator and perfecter of the world, as actually experienced by humans.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, many people embrace a life of faith well into adulthood, or convert from one set of very different beliefs to another. No one can say unequivocally that indoctrination has occurred or that this person has not acted autonomously. Nor can our investigation determine whether someone who has relinquished his or her beliefs and adopted a new set of convictions does not in some sense remain indoctrinated in some indiscernible ways.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have argued that critics of indoctrination are not only guilty of conflating it with legitimate moral instruction, but that they also fail to take into consideration the resilience of individuals who have embraced a set of beliefs and practices that have been passed down to them.<sup>59</sup> It is likely that each of us will test our ideas and beliefs in one way or another, though probably not all at the same time and certainly not with the same conclusions. For liberals truly to value pluralism, they cannot refuse to accept the conclusions that others have come to, provided that those conclusions do not justify harming others.

Concerning the nature of one's beliefs, I have maintained that nonrational beliefs need not conflict with autonomy or, for that matter, with reasonableness. A worthy life does not depend only on views that are capable of rational analysis and systematic doubt. Nor must one be forced to choose between the goods of cultural belonging and value pluralism.

I also hope to have furthered the conversation regarding the need for nonindoctrinatory moral instruction, while at the same time valuing the place of fundamental commitments. Moreover, I want to stress the psychological resilience of people: the experiences, freedom, personalities, and volition of individuals are

58. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Press, 1990), 168.

59. This essay does not speak directly to  *motive*, which is the subject of another project. One reason people cling to nonrational beliefs is because of the benefits that accrue to group members. This is perhaps one explanation for an outsider, but I can imagine that, from the inside, the benefits for many group members need no "explanation," for their benefit lies in their beliefs being true.

rarely such as to be unyielding to any forms of critical reflection. Even those who are indoctrinated with nonrational beliefs are more resourceful than we often imagine. Provided that one's commitments are at least slightly open to revision (and this seems to be the case for most people, whether they are conscious of it or not), there are forms of moral instruction that may strengthen those commitments and also contribute to the sense of value coherence needed for moral development and psychological health. Certainly, if the methods used to instill beliefs and the intentions underlying this process serve to repress and discourage creative responses and deliberative capacities, indoctrination will have occurred and ought to be condemned. But my account has left room for a human response to indoctrination such that its effects are less immutable than commonly assumed.

Perhaps there will be those who deem my account of indoctrination too sanguine and optimistic. After all, just because a large number of individuals manage to escape the clutches of doctrinaire parents and teachers does not mean that many others will. We can all think of examples where whole communities thrive around an inflexible core set of beliefs. In many cases, these beliefs are so frightening (for example, that committing an infraction will imperil one's eternal soul) as to induce the most debilitating kind of fear and mental paralysis. In such cases, unless critical thinking is actively cultivated, there is no reason to believe that even a minimalist autonomy will have been attained.

Still, I have endeavored to keep my aims modest. I have argued that moral instruction is a defensible practice that ought not to be confused with indoctrination. Provided that the process of moral instruction facilitates critical thinking to one degree or another, there are not sufficient grounds for finding it morally objectionable or in conflict with autonomy. Correlative to the process of instruction is the important *manner* in which various nonevidentiary beliefs are held, and so the question of individual psychology is central: even the indoctrinated are capable of doubting the certainty of those beliefs and modifying the strength of their attachment to them.

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