

Agonistic Progressivism: Best-Self Progressivism in a New Guise?

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In his essay, Chris Higgins develops a third way that he describes as intermediate between the dilemmas of progressive and traditional views of education. Progressive education “tend[s] to disavow authority, claiming that the direction of growth is supplied by the student,” and in some versions “the teacher merely follows and facilitates the student’s interest.” Traditional education, which is the other horn of the dilemma, focuses on socialization and conformity to authority.

His solution weaves together what he sees as two different notions of motivational displacement, that of Nel Noddings, who advocates a “turning on the part of the teacher from her or his own needs and projects toward the person and the situation of the student,” and that of Michael Oakeshott, who advocates “a turning on the part of the student [whereby] the teacher not only avoids displacing her or his own motivations to align with those of the student, but also works to interrupt the student’s initial motivations and reroute the student into a genuine educational encounter.”

He characterizes these two kinds of motivational displacement as “mirror image[s]” of each other that can and do come together in his agonistic progressivism. This progressivism involves both an “interruption of the student’s tendency to view learning in light of purposes extrinsic to it,” and has a goal of helping students develop a “genuine interest” in themselves, “personal insight[,] and self-cultivation.”

I agree with Higgins that a kind of progressivism in which the teacher merely follows the interests of the students is problematic, as is a traditionalism of preserving the values of the past and cultivating obedience to authority. I do wonder though whether his view is distinct from a kind of progressivism that he explicitly rejects, one that depends on a notion of the “best self.” I shall illustrate this concern by looking again at the examples he offers.

I begin with Noddings’s description of the math teacher. Higgins describes Noddings as rejecting an approach that is presumably akin to Oakeshott: “I must help this poor boy learn to love mathematics. Then he will do better at it.” She concludes that the caring teacher must let the student “find his rewards,” and see “the view from his eyes,” while teacher and student “struggle together with it.” But note that she does not conclude at this point that she should not teach him math, regardless of whether he ever comes to view it as worthwhile for him to learn.¹ It seems to me that what Noddings’s caring teacher is doing here can be aptly described as, in Oakeshott’s words, rerouting the student into “a genuine educational encounter.” Thus, in this case, I would argue that there is no substantive disagreement on this example between Noddings and Oakeshott, and that both are defending a plausible

progressivism — that the student should be supported in learning something that his best self would come to appreciate as in his interest to learn.

The second is Noddings's description of helping a stranger who needs directions on her campus. In this scenario, she describes motivational displacement as the replacement in her awareness and motivation of her prior project with the stranger's desire for help. Presumably, Oakeshott's approach would not differ from Noddings here as long as the stranger's project on campus was an appropriately educational one. But let us change this example and now have the stranger lost in the mall and seeking help finding the tanning salon. On one reading of Noddings's notion of motivational displacement, where one "soul empties itself out of all its own contents in order to receive the other," one simply forgets one's reasonable beliefs about the dangers of tanning and shares the stranger's desire for a quick tan. One might assume that Oakeshott would be motivated to talk the stranger out of this unhealthy desire. What should the genuine progressive do?

I suspect that the right answer is "it depends." I assume that we all agree that it is not in anyone's interest to patronize a tanning salon, certainly not on a regular basis. Another salient feature that is relevant here is whether one has a student-teacher relationship with the person needing help. Teachers have a different set of responsibilities to students than they have to nonstudent strangers, and this obligation sometimes requires that one try to shift the student's current motivational impulses. If the person wanting directions to the tanning salon identifies her/himself as a student in one's health course, I suspect that Noddings would be happy to agree with Oakeshott that the student ought to be encouraged to reflect upon her/his current desires.

In this kind of case, Noddings's motivational displacement is not terribly different from Oakeshott's. In both cases, discerning the proper course of action requires noting two things: the first is whether one is in a student-teacher relationship with the person needing help, and the second is what seems reasonably to be in the person's best interest. If we assume that best interest is glossed, at least in part, by appeal to freedom and autonomy, then this view simply is a plausible version of progressivism.

The third example I will discuss is the *Meno* dialogue. As Higgins points out, a strong interpretation of motivational displacement might suggest that Socrates, were he appropriately caring, should simply let Meno have what he seems to want, a chance to best Socrates in a rhetorical joust. A best-self progressive approach would include a constraint on motivational displacement: one ought to take on the desires of another only if those desires are reasonably consistent with the best interests of the person in need. I call this attention to the best interests of others maternalism. When one is motivationally displaced in this sense, one tries to be aware of what others in the situation would want one to do, what would most likely be in their best interests, and how they would like their wishes, interests, and needs addressed. This is done in the context of a special sensitivity to the wishes of the other and with an understanding of the other's interest that is shaped by a deep sympathy and understanding.²

There is a further reason that justifies a caring Socrates in thwarting Meno's immediate felt desire, and that is that Meno's coming to Socrates for help in his quest to understand virtue creates a student-teacher relationship and the consequent obligation to be sensitive to the needs of Meno's best self.

Here again, I think that both Noddings and Oakeshott could agree that the best response is a kind of best-self progressivism: assume that Meno is in a real sense a student and that learning about virtue is more beneficial to him than getting further reinforcement for being a boor.

The final example is the student in the Zen koan. The student here is clearly in a teacher-student relationship with Joshu, so there is a progressive presumption in favor of the kind of molding that is conducive to creating his best self. Further, the student came to the monastery to learn precisely what the teacher wants to teach. Although refusing to satisfy the student's immediate desire might look antiprogressive, it is entirely consistent with doing both what is in the student's best interest and satisfying the student's explicit desire to learn what the monastery has to teach. It seems to me that both Noddings and Oakeshott would be perfectly content to agree that distracting the student from his immediate desire for information is in the interest of furthering the education he very much wants.

These examples illustrate a number of things. First, even if we agree that motivational displacement is the appropriate attitude for teachers, it does not require teachers to satisfy a student's transient interests. Second, teachers have a special responsibility to their students to look after their best interests. In the progressive tradition that includes attention to the furtherance of their ability to reason and function autonomously. Third, when a student explicitly comes to a teacher in order to learn a particular wisdom tradition, there is no real conflict between satisfying the student's best interest and satisfying the student's real desire. Finally, in all three cases I would argue that best-self progressivism is sufficient to explain good teaching.

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1. Michael Katz commented on this essay in the conference discussion and said that Noddings does think that one shouldn't force reluctant students to learn algebra, but I suspect that she would at least see the need to teach the basics of arithmetic, regardless of the student's interest, because it is hard to imagine how anyone can function in our number-crunching world without at least a knowledge of arithmetic.
 2. For a further discussion of maternalism, see Rita Manning, *Speaking From the Heart: A Feminist Perspective on Care* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982).