The Public Discourse of the Unlimited Communication Community: Joining in on a "Rescuing Critique" of R.S. Peters's *Ethics and Education*

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Bryan Warnick begins his important project of reassessing R.S. Peters's classic work, *Ethics and Education* (*EE*),[1] with an account of how he first comes across the text — a happenstance encounter at a library book sale. Purchasing it for one dollar, he describes how an unassuming book on ethics and education becomes an introduction to a vibrant community of scholarship. Warnick's story could be a fitting allegory of the treatment of *EE* in the present day — an interesting glimpse into an approach to philosophy of education whose moment has long passed.

However, Warnick rightly points out that any offhand dismissal of *EE* is premature. In his interesting and well-argued essay, "*Ethics and Education* Forty Years Later," Warnick develops a rescuing critique of *EE* by strengthening the connections between Peters's work and more recent development in philosophical ethics. Specifically, he hopes to revitalize the text by reconstructing some of its main insights from the point of view of philosophical communitarianism. Warnick states his project as follows:

> For me, *Ethics and Education* is best read as something of a communitarian text. By "communitarian," I mean the view of the world that rejects atomistic individualism and places the individual within preexisting traditions, practices, and cultures. The self is largely constructed from the resources of the social world…and this has important implications for views of personal identity, ethics and politics…as part of trying to uncover what is still valuable about *Ethics and Education,* I wish to undertake the more manageable task of revealing possible connections between the book and philosophical communitarianism.[2]

Clearly, the project of a rescuing critique of *EE* is a valuable one. The work continues to have an influence on both philosophy of education in particular and moral philosophy in general. However, I argue that once we rescue *EE* by placing it under the aegis of communitarian premises, the emancipatory potential of Peters's transcendental analysis, however flawed that analysis may be, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Alternatively, I aim to show how *EE* can address some of the pertinent criticisms arising out of philosophical communitarianism without sacrificing the emancipatory potential of a conception of educational ethics guided by moral universalism.

ADOPTING COMMUNITARIAN ETHICS: PETERS'S LIBERAL CONCEPTION OF PERSONHOOD

The first major area of revision for an *EE* reconstructed under communitarian premises is Peters's claim to have derived an objective normative implication in the use of the word education. An analysis of language use purports to reveal that the term education "implies that something worth while is being or has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner. It would be a logical contradiction to say that a man had been educated but that he in no way changed for the better" (*EE*,

25). Peters argues that initiation into a shared public world is a necessary condition for the development of mind (*EE*, 50). Education takes on a normative character, when, as opposed to allowing young minds to be contingently initiated into this public world, it facilitates "initiation into activities or modes of thought and conduct that are worth while" (*EE*, 55).

On this view, the "process of education" entails initiation into forms of thought characterized by public procedures through which knowledge can be criticized and revised (*EE*, 50). The public nature of these procedures means that they are impersonal, that is, valid for and accessible to anyone. Consequently, we do not educate someone in respect of the social role they are expected to play later in life or in terms of some skill they may or may not possess (*EE*, 35). We educate persons as persons. Consequently, any justification of what is worthwhile must rest upon considerations of what is necessarily entailed in being persons in a shared public world — namely, the ability to recognize, give, and act upon reasons. It serves as no surprise that Peters's justification of what is worthwhile is therefore grounded in those forms of thought that allegedly facilitate participation in practical reason — for example, science, history, literature and philosophy (*EE*, 162–3; *FYL*, 68).

On the communitarian view, however, education for personhood in itself is untenable. There can be no education of persons separate from the values and meanings held by a particular community. This view is exemplified in Michael Sandel's claim that liberalism encourages a false identification of our identity with an *a priori* autonomous will independent of those aspects of the good life which we affirm.[3] On this view, Peters's conception of education presupposes this traditionally liberal conception of the person. Consequently, "the initiation into public realms of worthwhile knowledge has for minority groups often been an initiation into a state of alienation" (*FYL*, 59). Public procedures of practical reason cause culturally situated meanings and understandings to crumble under critical reflection and scrutiny (*FYL*, 60).

Addressing Communitarian Concerns

Framing these criticisms is the communitarian suspicion that lurking behind any purportedly impartial and transcendental analysis of the ethical core of education is an arbitrary prescription of liberal values, traditions, and procedures. This is because, on the communitarian view, one cannot make a valid separation between one's own form of life and claims about what is true, good, or right. Consequently, both Peters's semantic deduction of the normative content of education as well as his identification of what is universally presupposed in the use of practical reason is misleading.

This concern expresses itself in Warnick's critique of *EE* in two main ways. First, Peters's transcendental claim to have derived the universally necessary presuppositions of practical reason is *relativized*, that is, the presuppositions are only a necessary aspect of moral deliberation if we agree, as a particular community, that asking public practical questions is an important and valuable fact.[4] The value placed on this fact is relative to the community. This perspective is intimated in Warnick's account of Peters's transcendental argument:

Peters starts with the fact of public practical reason, and tries to uncover the virtues that make practical reason possible. The aim is to show that, if we grant the importance of one fact — namely, the fact that we are people who ask together the practical question — then we must also acknowledge the importance of the virtues that supposedly make the fact possible…Valuing freedom [for example] is presupposed if we take seriously the asking of practical questions. (*FYL*, 60)

The act of valuing freedom is a virtuous one, but only insofar as the fact of public practical reason is taken to be important, and the prominence of *that* fact rests upon the strong evaluations of different communities that can vary among contexts. Another community could make valid moral judgments without such a principle. They embrace a different set of "discursive" virtues. Perhaps a community that values the role of the orator, for example, might take rhetoric to be a better approach to moral deliberation. Here, the most passionate or clever argument would "win."

Warnick reinterprets principles of practical reason as values that can only be exemplified within the forms of life that endorse them. Why would a communitarian critique require such a relativization of practical reason? For Peters, necessary and unavoidable presuppositions of practical reason such as freedom and equality form the basis of any form of life. Rather than endorse a particular concrete form of life, however, these presuppositions are taken to be formally necessary and unavoidable for anyone who engages in the employment of practical reason: argument about what one ought or ought not to do unavoidably presupposes the public character of justification in general, irrespective of how any particular community might seek (or not seek) to institutionalize public justification. These presuppositions, were they to be shown to be necessary and unavoidable, could stand as principles which anyone participating in the discourse must adopt (*EE*, 115). Regardless of the substantive standards of justification that arise at any particular time and place, principles of public practical reason are claimed to be procedurally necessary for anyone who appeals to the epistemic force of reasons.

Under communitarian premises, however, justification can at most be a social practice that members of a community more or less endorse as part of a shared from of life: "human practices…are assigned functions and gain normativity through the collective assignment of function" (*FYL*, 63). The transcendental analysis must be contextualized and historicized, so the communitarian argument goes, lest it inflate values of discussion and virtues of discourse into abstract principles of obligation whose imposition undermines the shared motivation and solidarity of a concrete ethical life. For Bernard Williams, inflating virtues of practical deliberation into a duty to impartially weigh the arguments of other participants promotes a distorted understanding of the meaning of practical reason:

the drive toward a *rationalistic conception of rationality*…imposes on personal deliberation and on the idea of practical reason itself a model drawn from a particular understanding of public rationality. This understanding requires in principle every decision to be based on grounds that can be discursively explained.[5]

Individuals trying to follow through on this model find that they can only do so by conceiving themselves as having no prereflective interests or desires, for this is the only way that they can arrive at an objective agreement on what should or should not be done.[6] By properly reinterpreting principles of practical reason as values of

reflection, we can give our ethical lives a more natural character, and we are free to take responsibility for our moral deliberations without alienating ourselves from our own desires and interests or waiting to see what others agree to.

Once we get rid of its transcendental conceits, *EE* is recovered as representative of an analytic aesthetic — a text that is exemplary of the values it seeks to promote. In this way "Peters's [argumentative] strategy draws the reader into a community of inquiry…[arguments] are clear enough that they can be easily discussed and criticized…the aesthetic character of the book make it openly invitational" (*FYL*, 57). *EE* is now a more authentic project of promoting virtues of equality, respect, and freedom situated within a real community existing in a real time and place. *EE* is an exemplar of a desirable form of life.

Finally, Warnick traces the major conceptual inconsistencies of *EE* to Peters's refusal to acknowledge the fact/value dichotomy. On Warnick's view:

> This dichotomy forbids Peters from drawing normative statements from his description of language. This is what seduces him into thinking (wrongly) that an impartial analysis of language is possible apart from the normative views about education that he holds…this is one reason he turns to transcendental arguments — he cannot find any way to criticize the ends of action, so he can only discuss what must be assumed if we want to achieve certain ends. (*FYL*, 62)

A communitarian reading purportedly relieves this tension by downplaying the impartiality of transcendental analysis and emphasizing the traditions and associated concepts that pervade his text. This is supposed to initiate a more modest ethic that begins with the acknowledgement that normativity arises from inside human life:

> [proper human functions are] granted by the collective acceptance of function within social contexts. Traditions and practices give human lives functionality and, in doing so, bring in the possibility of values and norms. Traditions make ethics possible because they bring in required teleology. For traditions to play this role, it is necessary to drop the fact/value dichotomy. (*FYL*, 64)

On a communitarian view, norms and values can be more authentically applied by embracing traditions for which they are functional. Read in this way, *EE* is exemplary of a working out of the "proper teleology" implicit in the normative tradition of our shared liberal democratic community. In Rortian fashion, the normative tradition of education in a liberal democracy is received as a contingently acquired framework that has authority and weight: "Peters, it could be said, is a communitarian who takes political liberalism as his normative tradition" (*FYL*, 64–6).

With this final move, *EE* is liberated from the constraints of a purportedly distancing and abstracting transcendental analysis and meets its true potential:

> If we grant the normativity of traditions, and if we accept Peters's analysis as a way of exposing the relevant features of the traditions, then we can openly apply value judgments. Suppose we take as an example Peters's point about the intrinsic value of education being part of the ordinary understanding of education within a tradition…An education that treats students as a means to economic productivity…would then be a bad education. (*FYL*, 66)

In welcoming this tradition, philosophers of education and educators alike are supposed to use it as a "critical weapon" for addressing the narrowing of education

that many within the liberal democratic community want to overturn. However, once the principles of practical reason and the normative tradition refined by Peters have been contextualized and historicized in the way that Warnick suggests, can we validly maintain an intelligible critique of established practices and collective functions that might involve oppression and injustice?

PRACTICAL REASON AND THE UNLIMITED COMMUNICATION COMMUNITY

Once we shift to a communitarian reading of *EE*, addressing questions of justice becomes increasingly problematic. These problems turn on the debate over the scope of practical reason. For communitarians, a sharp distinction between evaluative practical questions of what is good for my community and moral practical questions concerning universally valid rights and duties cannot be maintained. Defining our obligations from an impartial moral point of view inevitably involves presuppositions about our own particular form of life. Consider, for example, Peters's derivation of the principle of equality. Looking at the common usage of the term "ought" in the question "What ought I do?" Peters claims to derive a universal and impersonal (that is, impartial) moral principle of equality — "the notion of 'ought' being more or less equivalent to the notion of there being reasons for something" (*EE*, 121). However, there are other interpretations of what it is to accept a prescription, and of what counts as universalizability, that would lead to different theories.[7] This valid observation tempts us to overstep into a relativized position that would have us accept as true the premise that justification is entirely rooted in our tradition or form of life.

I claim that this position is an overstep because the argument that our practices of moral justification are shaped by our form of life necessarily means that our moral judgments are only valid within that form of life is only tenable insofar as the meaning of practical discourse is explained solely through reference to the semantic content of the practical question, What ought I do? This leaves the meaning of impartiality to the linguistic framework of the particular community asking the question, where different interpretations of validity, universalizability, and prescription abide. However, Peters does not always restrict himself to this form of analysis.[8] His transcendental account shows how presuppositions of practical reason such as respect and freedom are pragmatically and performatively inescapable and necessary presuppositions of every form of argumentation, presuppositions that give practical discourse its meaning and logic in any community:

> For the principle of liberty, at least in the sphere of opinion, is also surely a (general presupposition of this form of) discourse into which any rational being is initiated…In matters where reason is paramount it is argument rather than force of inner illumination that is decisive. (*EE*, 85)

Therefore, it is not the particular meaning of "what ought I do" that matters, so much as the public appeal to open and unrestricted rational discourse — an unavoidable appeal made by those who argue about a norm of action.

Jürgen Habermas interprets these presuppositions of argumentation as a pragmatically necessary anticipation of communicative conditions of symmetry and reciprocity, the fulfillment of which every speaker who is engaged in argumentation

must presuppose.[9] When we argue, we must make the mutual expectation that we are equal participants in debate. While people may argue about moral norms in different times and places, they each make an implicit appeal to a kind of unlimited communication community where all that counts are reasons — a community free of any kind of internal or external coercion. When I ask the question, What ought I do?, I make the argumentative presupposition that all that counts is the epistemic force of reasons. This does not require a leveling of differences between communities, but it does mean that moral norms and claims to justice reach beyond the confines of community, because all are equally engaged in the game of truth: "although they may be interpreted in various ways and applied according to different criteria, concepts like truth, rationality or justification play the *same* grammatical form in *every* linguistic community."[10] When diverse communities encounter each other in the moral world they will probably disagree on the norms upon which they base their moral judgments. But insofar as they choose to argue to settle their practical conflicts they presuppose that they encounter one another on equal terms — together they cooperate in a search for the better argument.

Flesh-and-blood people who are members of actual communities ask practical questions; practical arguments are communicated between participants who have concrete interpretations of their own needs and interests. I think that a communicative reading of practical reason should satisfy our concern that the moral point of view might promote a false abstraction from existing forms of life. But public practical reason need not imply ethnocentrism. Communicative conditions of reciprocity and symmetry are necessary and normative for anyone who genuinely deliberates about the rightness of a moral norm or judgment — conditions that are extended to members of any particular community. Peters himself suggests such an unlimited communication community through his own account of practical reason. This account is exemplified in his conception of the moral community:

> Moral agents do not form special societies for discussion of moral problems…Neither is morality a code confined to a club, class or state…A "moral community" is not therefore supported by those massive feelings of loyalty built over years of constant association in common tasks that are so characteristic of face-to-face groups…a "moral community", by definition, has no authority structure, no built in appeal to consensus. By this is meant that the validity of moral rules is not determined by appeals to authority or to majority agreement. (*EE*, 226)

The unlimited communication community fulfills Williams's requirement that if there were ever to be an impartial agreement on moral rules, it would have to be uncoerced and "grow from inside human life."[11] Williams sets out this condition as a limit of philosophy — the philosopher cannot impose substantive moral rules on humanity at a distance. However, this limit is the very intuition expressed by the unlimited communication community — we must be convinced of the worthiness of proposed moral norms on the strength of the better argument and not the authority of the reason giver. Public practical discourse, though occurring within real social contexts, nonetheless presupposes the inclusion of all within the moral community as a matter of principle. We cannot validly decide the outcome of moral arguments occurring within this community beforehand, nor can we interpret the needs and

interests of particular individuals on their behalf — to do so would be a clear violation of our own argumentative presuppositions. This means that what counts as the better argument is left to those engaged in actual discourse. The universal core of practical discourse is left intact, however, because the validity of any moral agreement rests upon argumentative conditions of reciprocity and symmetry where each individual has equal opportunity to voice his/her interests.[12]

An unlimited communication community is antithetical to a conception of norms of justice based on collective social practices. That a community collectively endorses that a certain social practice ought to be done is not a *de facto* good reason for its validity, because this excludes future arguments for or against the validity of the norm, clearly contradicting the communicative conditions of symmetry and reciprocity. It is true that in contrast to real discourses and actual communities the communicative presuppositions of an unlimited communication community are counterfactual — idealizations that can leave speakers disappointed. However, these presuppositions are in no way a mere normative ideal — communicative conditions must be fulfilled to a certain degree if we wish to argue at all. On this view, communicative presuppositions are operative idealizations that we all appeal to whenever we make a claim to truth or rightness.[13]

The Limits of Communitarianism

From this point of view, an appeal to normative traditions cannot validly settle questions of justice. On what grounds, for example, could we validly respond to questions of justice and fairness in education by restricting ourselves to the conventions and convictions of the community within which those questions arise? I am not even sure how this would make sense in a multicultural context with different normative traditions.

While Warnick is well aware that this is a problem (*FYL*, 66), it is not clear how his proposed answer offers much hope in this regard. His argument is that tradition can be redeemed through an "immanent critique of tradition [that] would involve bringing tradition into dialogue with itself" (*FYL*, 71). If this proposal were valid, communicative idealizations of the kind outlined by Habermas and Peters could be argued to be pragmatically redundant and epistemically unnecessary. However, one has to ask what "bringing tradition into dialogue with itself" means exactly. If a self-critique of one's own tradition is undertaken only through concepts immanent in that same tradition, it does not explain how we would know that those traditions were unjust or how their revision can be justified. It is true that the liberal traditions of freedom and equality may be a useful corrective to the underlying conservatism of tradition (*FYL*, 69), but this fails to explain why the conservation of tradition can be wrong and why the traditions of freedom and equality represent something that is right, and it fails to explain why we ought to have a corrective in the first place.

This leads us to the central tension facing any reconstruction of *EE* on communitarian grounds. Can one's claim to justice exclusively be directed to (and relevant for) one's own community? It is not at all clear why claims to what is morally right should stop at the doorsteps of one's own ethos. Or is the objection that

moral claims ought to stop at those doorsteps? If so, what does the "ought" of this claim mean? True, the relevance of reasons will depend upon the concrete interests and needs of individuals within real communities — on this point, communitarians are correct. However, if the authority of what is most exemplary within preexisting traditions caps the ceiling of our learning about what is morally right, we pre-judge and limit the kinds of moral arguments individuals can offer in their critique of social practices.

We can perhaps point to this tension in another way: communitarians might be right in suggesting that certain accounts of morality and impartiality actually undermine the fostering of moral understanding between individuals in a commu-nity. However, as Axel Honneth rightly points out, one can speak in a normative way of impediments to achieving understanding between subjects "only if one first defends the universalist idea that a subject in his or her individuality should get the chance to articulate his or her claims in a free and unconstrained manner."[14]

Warnick strikes a perfect balance to this tension when he claims that we can belong to an age, but not be a prisoner to it (*FYL*, 71). But to think that we can do this without maintaining the universalistic core of practical reason is an uncer-tain proposition:

> If we wish to remain faithful to the Aristotelian conviction that moral judgment is bound to the ethos of a particular place, we must be prepared to renounce the emancipatory potential of moral universalism and deny so much as the possibility of subjecting the structural violence inherent in social conditions characterized by latent exploitation and repression to an unstinting moral critique.[15]

The problem is not so much the educator who is not enthused enough about the normative traditions of the community to which he or she belongs. Canadian educators working in oppressive residential schools, for example, were quite clear on what the aims of education were from the standpoint of their own heritage. It is Peters's claim that education must be pursued "in a morally unobjectionable manner" that reminds us that educational questions ought never stray too far from questions of justice (which are necessarily public and open to all), so long as we want to ensure that our pedagogical polices and practices are not blind to the "latent exploitation and repression" that can condense under any normative tradition. The principle of tolerance means that communities ought to be free to initiate their fellow members into traditions they see as good. But *EE* provides us with a powerful argument why it is that only an education compatible with a universally valid and impartial moral point of view can be considered an education that is worthwhile.

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1. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966). This work will be cited as *EE* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Bryan R. Warnick, "*Ethics and Education* Forty Years Later," *Educational Theory* 57, no. 1 (2007), 54. This work will be cited as *FYL* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 152.

4. Peters outlines the presuppositions in the form of necessary principles, such as the principles of justice, freedom, and equality.

5. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 18 (emphasis in original).

6. Ibid., 69.

7. Ibid., 85.

8. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 85.

9. Ibid., 88.

10. Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 138 (emphasis in original).

11. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 172.

12. Jürgen Habermas, *Inclusion of the Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).

13. Chris Martin, "A Pragmatic Utopia? Utopianism and Anti-Utopianism in the Critique of Educational Discourse," *Paideusis: The Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society* 15, no. 2 (2006): 37–50

14. Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 114.

15. Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 125.