Dramatic Openings: A Role for Make-Believe in Open-Mindedness

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explore the role that the dramatic imagination can serve in developing the disposition of open-mindedness in schools. The essay argues that Method acting techniques can provide students with practice perceiving and embodying the perceptions of others in ways that are important for opening minds in conditions of belief conflict.

In the late 1970s, William Hare initiated a vibrant conversation on the value of open-mindedness for education.[1] He currently describes open-mindedness as "an intellectual virtue that reveals itself in a willingness to form and revise our ideas in the light of a critical review of evidence and argument that strives to meet the elusive ideals of objectivity and impartiality."[2] One notable strand of the discussion surrounding open-mindedness challenges the coherence of the idea that one can be open-minded *and* have committed (or "strong") beliefs at the same time.[3] Peter Gardner worries about this in an article subtitled "Is the Pope Open-Minded About the Existence of God?"[4] One of his difficulties with open-mindedness as an educational aim stems from an ordinary account of the concept, in which we are open-minded about some *thing*, some particular belief. He claims that this ordinary account makes holding the belief firmly *and* being open-minded about it at the same time incoherent. Moreover, he proposes that there are some beliefs that we ought not teach children to be open-minded about — beliefs like *it is wrong to hurt others to get what you want*. Gardner proposes two choices to deal with these problems. First, we can abandon open-mindedness as an educational aim; or second, we can reconcile the contradiction by making a distinction between being open-minded about some *thing* and open-mindedness as a *disposition*.

Hare's and T. H. McLaughlin's admirable defense of the status of open-mindedness as a disposition (Gardner's second option) and an educational aim,[5] allows me to assume this question as fundamentally settled. Even so, an important practical point remains open. *Cultivating* a disposition for open-mindedness in students requires practice. And practice requires specific beliefs to practice on. Furthermore, public education and civic progress in a pluralistic democracy require cultivating open-mindedness with the sorts of beliefs we hold most firmly and dearly — beliefs about which reasonable people disagree. Ann Chinnery distinguishes between beliefs that aim for empirical truth and the sorts of beliefs I am interested in here. In discussing Jennifer Logue's work on social justice education,[6] Chinnery writes,

> I suspect that the knowledge claims Logue is most concerned about in her paper and her teaching do not fall within the domain of rational thought…. [T]he ideas we hold about people whose race, gender, sexuality, religion, or ability is different from our own are probably not as susceptible to evidence or rational counterargument as the concept of open-mindedness would suggest.[7]

Strong beliefs about which reasonable people disagree provide the hardest, and perhaps most socially meaningful, cases for cultivating open-mindedness in American schools. These sorts of beliefs connect with our conceptions of the good life, our identities and values. As a result, they often conflict with others with whom we share public space.

As noted above, I propose that the dramatic imagination can provide students with practice *perceiving* and *embodying* the perceptions of others in ways that are important for opening minds in conditions of belief conflict. Through Method acting, students practice making beliefs that they do not hold understandable, coherent, and meaningful. To be clear: I am not proposing that Method training cultivates open-mindedness; acting is not an exercise in open-mindedness. I am proposing that Method acting develops skills and abilities helpful for opening *perception*. These abilities include: the ability to explore the beliefs of others in a non-judgmental way; the ability to search effectively for the internal logic of these beliefs; the ability to empathically adopt distinct and complex cognitive standpoints; and the ability to see one's own beliefs from an observer's position. In helping to open one's mind by expanding one's perception, these abilities support an important first step in open-mindedness in conditions of strong belief.

The argument begins with a sketch of the dramatic imagination. It then looks closely at what contemporary conceptions of open-mindedness entail. It goes on to outline how certain techniques in Method acting are connected with these views, and linked to curricular recommendations for fostering open-mindedness. The essay concludes by returning to the condition of strong belief, and reasserting that cultivating students' dramatic imaginations can be helpful for opening perception in useful ways for developing open-mindedness as a disposition.

The Dramatic Imagination

Alan White writes "To imagine something is to think of it as possibly being so."[8] Elisabeth Camp describes how contemporary philosophers tend to think of the imagination as a type of mental pretense.

> Mental pretense can take two main forms: a cognitive attitude of supposing a set of propositions to be true (make-believe) or else an experiential state of imaging a scenario as if it were before one (imaging). Much of our pretense intertwines the cognitive and experiential modalities, of course. But both share a common feature: all of one's imaginative effort is invested in pretending that certain contents obtain. In this sense, we can understand imagination as the "offline" simulation of actual beliefs and perceptions (and perhaps other attitudes as well), where we analyze these in the normal way, as states individuated by their attitude and representational content.[9]

In other words, if the Pope fully imagines that God does not exist, his "simulation" can be experienced and examined *as if* it were true. The Pope, like all normal human beings, has the potential to engage in a "make-believe" experience of "God does not exist" while continuing to believe that "God does exist."

Kieran Egan points out that White's definition of the imagination highlights two commonly understood aspects of an otherwise ambiguous concept.[10] First, imagination allows us to conceive of the world as other than it is, or other than we perceive or

believe it to be. Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes this as "the willing suspension of disbelief."[11] Second, it consists of "thinking that is unsubdued by habit, unshackled by custom, and as that which enables us to transcend those obstacles to seeing the world as it is that are placed before us by conventional, inadequate interpretations and representations."[12] Maxine Greene's work moves the imagination beyond seeing what is to include conceiving of what might be. She writes that to imagine is "to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or 'common-sensible' and to carve out new orders in experience."[13] For both Greene and Egan, the imagination releases us from some of the constraints on our thinking and understanding created by our perceptual limitations, habits, biases and customs. Greene proposes yet another important aspect of the imagination; "[O]f all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give *credence* to alternative realities."[14] The imagination makes fictions plausible to us, both cognitively and emotionally. It allows us to live vicariously and embodied in unfamiliar ideas and worlds. Through the imagination we can experience the "paradox of fiction" — being moved by what we know does not exist.

Actors engage their imaginations in service of a drama. One goal of a Method actor is to "live truthfully in imaginary circumstances."[15] Pioneers of the Method developed practices that make conscious this process of *make-believe*, of making one's self and others believe. Unlike literary narratives, which draw audiences slowly into the world and characters of a story, an actor sets out consciously and actively to discover, explore, and make real the emotional and psychological life of a character. Moreover, she works to embody this character within herself. In other words, she uses Method practices to fully enter the "paradox of fiction." She engages her dramatic imagination.

Let's return to the question driving this essay: What value might the dramatic imagination have for opening minds in conditions of strong belief? Answering this question requires taking a closer look at the way philosophers conceive of open-mindedness.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS

As noted above, Hare characterizes open-mindedness as a cognitive disposition; open-minded people are disposed to seek truth in particular ways and with particular rational values. A love for truth motivates this disposition, and the recognition of general human and person-specific fallibility underlies it.

Hare argues that three "interlocking" and "complementary" components comprise an open mind and ought to be cultivated in classrooms. They are (1) genuine openness to new ideas, (2) critical assessment of these new ideas, and (3) a willingness and eagerness to revise one's beliefs in the face of evidence.[16] In his work, Hare typically focuses on the latter two components, driving home the point that the open-minded person is disposed to revise her beliefs in the light of rational analysis of evidence and argument. In this essay, my focus on the imagination centers on the first component — genuine openness to new ideas.

Jason Baehr, a significant voice in contemporary work on the intellectual virtues, defines open-mindedness differently. He writes that an open-minded person is "characteristically willing and (within limits) able to transcend a default cognitive standpoint in order to take up or take seriously the merits of a distinct cognitive standpoint."[17] Unlike Hare, his definition does not necessitate impartial and objective rational assessment. Nor does it assume what Baehr calls the conflict or adjudication models of open-mindedness that Hare's does. In the conflict model, the model I am interested in, open-mindedness is relevant for situations of "intellectual conflict, opposition, challenge or argument, and in particular, to situations involving conflict between a person's beliefs on the one hand, and an opposing position, argument, or body of evidence on the other."[18] Here, open-mindedness requires moving "beyond or temporarily setting aside one's commitments to give a fair and impartial hearing to the intellectual opposition."[19] The adjudication model identifies situations in which one is "*neutral* with respect to the items being assessed."[20] Baehr illustrates this latter model with the example of a judge preparing to hear opening arguments in a trial. Both models involve the assessment of at least two competing positions.

Baehr points out additional types of situations in which open-mindedness is relevant, but impartial and objective rational analysis of conflicting positions is not. The first captures situations in which we try to follow or understand some paradigm or perspective-shifting possibility that requires that we let go of our assumptions about the world. The second type of situation is that of the detective, a Sherlock Holmes, who has to "*imagine* or *conceive*" of a coherent explanation for data.[21] The imagination is clearly salient in these two latter types of situations. The role of the imagination in the conflict model, however, remains underexplored.

Baehr's conception of open-mindedness differs from Hare's in another significant respect. Baehr introduces the notion of *standpoint*. In feminist epistemology, a standpoint is a place or position from which one sees and judges the world. Experience, status, and role and group membership all contribute to what one perceives (and misses) in the world, what one believes (and does not believe), what one considers worth knowing, what one thinks counts as evidence, and so on. Standpoint theory points out how knowledge is situated, and thus partial and incomplete. It also highlights the ways beliefs are formed and connected to perspectives on the world. Adding standpoint to the conversation underscores the complexities of our beliefs. It also draws attention to some of the challenges of open-mindedness, challenges that firm commitment to a belief can exacerbate.

Steven Bramall's examination of the ways in which *perspective* shapes perception and beliefs reveals another challenge to open-mindedness. Perspectives are molded by traditions and history and "enable and constrain" our ability to pursue and know the truth. They "enable" us to pursue what is true by providing the categories and concepts through which we perceive and understand the world. At the same time they constitute "a prejudice in the sense that the categories and concepts that we inherit condition or predetermine the ways in which we can understand the world."[22] Following Hans-Georg Gadamer, Bramall makes distinctions between those with different perspectives and those with the same perspective, but different beliefs. He

argues that "we need to be open-minded not only in the sense of being willing and able to challenge and change beliefs, but also in the sense of being willing and able to modify significantly the concepts and categories that enable our point of view. In other words we need to be open-minded about our perspective."[23]

The challenge of standpoint and perspective can be further complicated by the connections a single belief has to other beliefs. Wayne Riggs introduces the concept of *construal* in his work on open-mindedness. He proposes that beliefs may not live in us in ways that make them surgically removable or changeable. Adapting the concept from social psychology, he writes that a construal is "an interrelated network of beliefs and other doxastic attitudes that together provide a 'picture' of some part of reality. Presumably, these networks are often comprised in part of propositions, along with representations of evidential and explanatory relations among those propositions."[24] In the human psyche, beliefs are networked with other beliefs, attitudes, explanations, and justifications about how the world works. Like perspectives, these networks affect how we perceive and interpret our selves and the world. They also allow us to construe or adduce reality in the absence of knowledge; in other words, they "fill in" when we lack direct knowledge. In this way, construing can further (and perhaps even irrationally) strengthen a belief. Riggs points out that the epistemic significance of a belief may not reside in the individual belief, but in the network itself. If beliefs are so intricately and protectively networked, attempts at open-minded consideration of a single and particular belief may be ineffective, as its connections to other beliefs and attitudes serve to affix it, making the possibility of open-minded consideration difficult.

Significant challenges arise in educating for "genuine openness"[25] and an ability to "take up or take seriously a cognitive standpoint distinct from one's own."[26] Strong beliefs, like all beliefs, are embedded (and perhaps affixed) in networks; these networks are shaped by and situated in standpoints; and these standpoints are derived from (and constrained by) the concepts and categories of our traditions and history. Even at the level of *perceiving* conflicting beliefs, we are challenged. How might educators work to meet these challenges?

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A number of theorists make recommendations for opening minds in schools. Riggs recommends exposing students to "a wide variety of ideas and world views."[28] Jonathon Adler concurs, suggesting that educators provide "access to a plurality of values."[29] He also suggests that open-mindedness depends upon "our capacity to view our own beliefs as if an observer, without withdrawing authority over our own beliefs."[30] Bramall stresses the importance of engaging in dialogue with people holding different perspectives on the world. "The open-minded person then can be understood as one who is open to, and perhaps adept at, interpreting the world from different perspectives."[31] Finally, Baehr suggests that we provide students with opportunities to practice open-mindedness through *adopting* other standpoints.[32] These curricular suggestions all indicate a role for the dramatic imagination.

Beliefs, construals, standpoints, and perspectives do not exist apart from people. "Taking up or taking seriously" the beliefs of others relevant for public education

requires understanding the content of the belief in relation to the people (real or imagined) who possess it. Riggs writes that if we are "to take seriously a construal that is at odds with our own," we must come to understand another person's construal "from the inside."[33] We must come to understand the relationships between its elements and how they work to make the world intelligible to that person. He suggests that to do so involves sympathetic consideration. "One sympathetically considers a construal when one reflects upon it in a way that brings to mind the possible evidential and explanatory connections among the propositions of the construal." Elsewhere, I have argued that empathy better describes this sort imaginative and embodied movement inside another person's point of view. [34]

Empathic consideration of the beliefs of others is foundational to Method acting. The Method, in all its various offshoots, developed from the ideas of Constantin Stanislavski — an actor, director, and administrator at the Moscow Art Theater around the turn of the twentieth century. Stanislavski was the first to develop a systematic approach aimed to help actors study a part and build a performance from the *inside out*.[35] He called his techniques the System; American acting teachers modified this approach and made it into the Method. In the Method, actors systematically move "inside" a character so that they might "live truthfully in imaginary circumstances."[36] Living truthfully onstage requires an embodied understanding of the perceptions, experiences, beliefs and circumstances that drive the actions of the character. A number of practices that train actors to live truthfully can be usefully applied in opening one's mind to "take up" and "take seriously" beliefs that conflict with one's own. These skills include a nonjudgmental search for the internal logic of the beliefs and behaviors of others and an embodied adoption of others' standpoints and (at times) their perspectives. Method training can also provide an actor with the opportunity to see her own beliefs from the outside, if she chooses to do so.

A Method actor aims to genuinely open herself and take up the life of a character within the circumstances of the play. The playwright provides dialogue and (usually) minimal stage directions for her to use. Within these constraints, an actor explores, crafts and enacts the character. Lee Strasberg, founder of the famed Actors Studio, said this about acting: the actor "must somehow believe. He must somehow be able to convince himself of the rightness of what he is doing in order to do things fully on the stage."[37]

Stanislavski's System has at least three components relevant for opening minds: objectives, motivations, and the "magic if." Actors explore these components through questions. The first question, what does my character want?, helps the actor identify the character's objectives. Objectives are broken down to beats (what does she want in this moment?), units (what does she want in this scene?), and a super objective (what does she want in the context of the play?). When working on objectives, the actor looks forward to what the character desires. The second question, what motivates my character?, focuses on the character's past. The actor identifies experiences that contribute to defining objectives and explaining or justifying a character's beliefs and behavior. An analysis of these two questions helps the actor create an internal logic for the beliefs and actions. Creating this logic requires understanding the context of

the play, the standpoint of the character, and her perspective. Exploring objectives and motivations brings cognitive clarity to character's beliefs and actions. In other words, it helps the actor make sense of the character.

The final question, what would I do if I were in the character's circumstances?, helps *connect* the actor to the character psychologically and emotionally; it helps the actor believe as the character would believe. Stanislavski called this the "magic if." Although disagreement exists between the branches of the Method about how best to employ the "magic if" to make these connections, the goal remains stable. Actors use it to move *themselves* into the emotional lives and the circumstances of the character. The System's cognitive preparation helps the actor believe what the character believes.

Unlike those engaged in debate or argumentation, actors do not ask these questions so that they might gather information for some other purpose. They do not want to persuade others to adopt their beliefs. They do not want to strengthen their argument, or attack the position of others. Actors do not ask the questions from a position of judgment. *They do so to further their search for understanding, coherence, meaning, and connection to a character's beliefs and actions.*

Answering these questions requires that actors learn to "read" text sensitively, including: what their character says and does, what other characters say and do, subtext, contexts (including historical and cultural), and the behavior of the actors they work with. Again, they read to believe, not to judge. They question and read these "texts" in order to become actively and genuinely open to their characters' beliefs and actions. Actors *practice* reading other people and circumstances.

These practices of make-believe can cultivate a double consciousness useful for opening minds. Stanislavski told his trainees, "An actor is split into two parts when he is acting." He cites famous Italian actor, Tommaso Salvini, "'An actor lives, weeps, laughs on the stage, but as he weeps and laughs he observes his own tears and mirth. It is this double existence, this balance between life and acting that makes for art.'" [38] Method training can help position the actor so that if she chooses, she can "view [her] own beliefs as if an observer."[39] Adler writes that open-mindedness "depends upon, and leads to, an appreciation of the value of a dual view of one's own beliefs — internal and objective."[40] If motivated (or directed to do so), students can practice seeing themselves and their beliefs from the standpoint and/or perspective of their characters. When an actor enters the "paradox of fiction," she does so without losing her own beliefs, and she gains the potential to view those same beliefs from a different standpoint.

Training in Method acting can help develop and exercise abilities useful in opening one's perception of alternative cognitive standpoints, taking up and taking seriously these standpoints, and recognizing they are born of (and tied to) the experiences, history, and traditions of the people who hold them. The exercise of the dramatic imagination allows students to create and explore the inner logic of a belief or position they do not hold, and the experiential nature of acting can provide practice embodying this understanding. Given opportunity and direction, a student

can also be shown how to take an observer's view on her own beliefs and positions. These practices can allow a student to do so without necessarily jeopardizing her commitment to her beliefs. Through exercising the dramatic imagination, the actor can both hold her committed beliefs and open her mind to perceive the perceptions and beliefs of others. She does so in the relative safety of make-believe.

CONCLUSION

In proposing that the dramatic imagination can help develop abilities to open minds by embodying the perceptions of others, I am not proposing that it cultivates open-mindedness. Open-mindedness in cases of conflicting beliefs *requires* rational analysis of evidence and argument and a willingness to revise one's views if they are found wanting.[41] Lack of critical appraisal leads to mindlessness, not open-mindedness. I am also not claiming that answering the three Method questions constitutes good acting. Although they are part of the *cognitive preparation* of actors, they constitute a slight fraction of the task of living truthfully onstage. Instead, I make the narrow claim that this cognitive preparation can develop abilities relevant for genuine openness to perceiving the content, coherence, and meaning of the beliefs of others. It can cultivate the abilities to "transcend" one's own beliefs, and "take up or take seriously the merits" of the beliefs of others.[42]

Martha Nussbaum writes that "intelligent citizenship" requires the narrative imagination,

> This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.... [T]he *first* step of understanding the world from the point of view of the other is essential to any responsible judgment, since we do not know what we are judging until we see the meaning of an action as the person intends it, the meaning of a speech as it expresses something of importance in the context of that person's history and social world … the ability to decipher such meanings is through the use of the imagination.[43]

The role that the dramatic imagination might serve for open-mindedness in schools is that it can allow students to practice taking that first and important step — opening themselves to perceive and engage with beliefs that conflict with their own in a serious and meaningful way.

1. William Hare, *Open-Mindedness and Education* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 1979).

2. William Hare, "Helping Open-Mindedness to Flourish," *Journal of Thought* 46, no. 1–2 (2011): 9.

3. Like Hare, when I refer to "beliefs" in this essay, I intend this to include principles and commitments.

4. 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,* 21, no. 1 (1993): 39–43.

5. William Hare and T. H. McLaughlin, "Open-Mindedness, Commitment and Peter Gardner," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 28, no. 2 (1994): 239–44; and William Hare and T.H. McLaughlin, "Four Anxieties About Open-Mindedness: Reassuring Peter Gardner," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 32, no. 2 (1998): 283–92.

6. Jennifer Logue, "The Politics of Unknowing and the Virtues of Ignorance: Toward a Pedagogy of Epistemic Vulnerability," in *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), 53–62.

7. Ann Chinnery, "On Epistemic Vulnerability and Open-Mindedness," in *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Mayo, 3.

8. Alan R. White, *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 184.

9. Elisabeth Camp, "Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction and Thought Experiments," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2009): 107.

10. Kieran Egan, *Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36.

11. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, 2004), e-book #6081, chap. 14, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm.

12. Egan, *Imagination in Teaching and Learning*, 36.

13. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

14. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 3 (emphasis added).

15. Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner: On Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 15.

16. William Hare, "Education for an Unsettled World: Dewey's Conception of Open-Mindedness," *Journal of Thought* 39, no. 3 (2004): 118.

17. Jason Baehr, "The Structure of Open-Mindedness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 41, no. 2 (2011): 202.

18. Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1807, Kindle edition.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 1824.

21. Baehr, "The Structure of Open-Mindedness," 197.

22. Steven Bramall, "Opening Up Open-Mindedness," *Educational Theory* 50, no. 2 (2000): 207.

23. Ibid., 209.

24. Wayne Riggs, "Open-Mindedness in the Classroom" (paper presented at the Educating for Intellectual Virtues Conference, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA, June 22, 2013).

25. Hare, "Education for an Unsettled World," 118.

26. Baehr, "The Structure of Open-Mindedness," 202.

27. In what follows, I bracket important questions that lie beyond the scope of this essay, including *which characters* should be enacted?, *how* should teachers teach students to inhabit these characters?, and *how can teachers transcend* their own default cognitive standpoints?

28. Wayne Riggs, "Open-Mindedness," *Metaphilosophy* 41, no. 1–2 (2010): 183.

29. Jonathan Adler, "Reconciling Open-Mindedness and Belief," *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 2 (2004): 127.

30. Ibid., 136–37.

31. Bramall, "Opening Up Open-Mindedness," 211.

32. Jason Baehr, "Educating for Intellectual Virtues: From Theory to Practice," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 2 (2013): 258.

33. Riggs, "Open-Mindedness in the Classroom."

34. Susan Verducci, "Opening Minds Through Narratives," in *Art's Teaching, Teaching's Art: Philosophical, Critical, and Educational Musings*, ed. Megan J. Laverty and Tyson E. Lewis (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2015).

35. Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge, 1936/1964).

36. Meisner and Longwell, *On Acting*, 15.

37. Milly Barranger, *Theatre: A Way of Seeing* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2006), 209.

38. Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character* (New York: Theater Arts Books, 1949), 167.

39. Adler, "Reconciling Open-Mindedness and Belief," 136–37.

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40. Ibid., 138.

41. Hare, *Open-Mindedness and Education*.

42. Baehr, "The Structure of Open-Mindedness," 20.

43. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10–11 (emphasis added).