

## No Remedy for Cultural Conflict: The Inability of Discourse Ethics to Resolve Substantive Moral Disagreement

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As R.S. Peters remarks in *Ethics and Education*, “Philosophy is essentially a co-operative enterprise. Advances are made when two or three are gathered together who speak more or less the same language and can meet frequently for the purpose of hitting each other politely on the head.”<sup>1</sup> It is a pleasure as well as a privilege to participate in philosophical conversations about important educational issues — conversations in which disagreement is, at least ideally, productive. There is, perhaps, no more important question facing contemporary philosophers of education than the one I find at the core of Chris Martin’s essay. Accordingly, I am delighted to consider how, if at all, people representing rival moral traditions can reach rational agreement about what is just or fair in both the matter and the manner of public education. (I use the term “moral traditions” broadly to include cultural, religious, philosophical, and political traditions with implicit or explicit moral philosophies.) I will argue that, while Martin is right to raise concerns with the relativism of Bryan Warnick’s “communitarian” moral theory, transcendental analyses of public practical rationality do not provide us with a philosophical position adequate to the challenges of moral pluralism. I will then advance two claims about what accounts of the ideal speech situation require to produce a response to moral relativism adequate to making education ethical.

In his article “*Ethics and Education Forty Years Later*,” Warnick endorses a moral philosophy he attributes to Alasdair MacIntyre, in which teleologies are understood to be historical and social, not metaphysical. That is to say, it is the sets of empirical beliefs and normative commitments developed within and carried by traditions that establish what functions things should serve. Once we collapse the fact/value dichotomy, such teleologies provide a basis for the exercise of public practical rationality, including the critical assessment of educational institutions that are out of step with traditional values. As Martin points out, this leaves it unclear how, if at all, we could adopt a critical stance on our own traditions. It is not clear, in other words, under what conditions, through what processes, and with reference to what criteria or evidence, traditions of moral inquiry and practice can be self-correcting. Warnick’s position also gives no indication how, if at all, we could engage in discourse with members of other moral traditions in a way that does not simply take the soundness of our normative commitments for granted.

A further indication of relativism is Warnick’s own observation that, once reinterpreted in light of his assumptions, philosophical liberalism’s substantive moral commitments become one contingent tradition among others.<sup>2</sup> Surely this is a conclusion that would alarm Peters as much as it concerns Martin, who seeks principles of justice to ground critique both within and across different normative traditions. I think MacIntyre would reject Warnick’s communitarian position as

well, for MacIntyre argues that an account of the goods internal to practices cannot provide the basis for a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics without a vision of the overriding good of human life. For MacIntyre, belief in God as unconditioned Being, Truth, and Goodness — the ultimate *telos* of all human inquiry — is a key element of the Thomistic moral tradition and part of what gives it the intellectual resources to succeed where rival traditions such as genealogical approaches and liberalism fail.<sup>3</sup>

To avoid relativism, Martin finds the basis for a universalistic ethics in transcendental analyses of the concepts and commitments implicit in the exercise of public practical rationality. He argues, with Peters and against Warnick, that commitment to basic moral principles of equality and freedom is “procedurally necessary for anyone who appeals to the epistemic force of reasons.” My concern is not that this is wrong, but that it does not provide enough of a basis for resolving substantive disagreements within and between traditions on what commitment to equality and freedom entails for concrete educational priorities, policies, and practices.

First, I am not as convinced as Martin appears to be that commitment to the discursive redemption of norms through the kind of rational discourse Jürgen Habermas describes is a necessary element of all forms of social life, such that those who appeal to other sources of moral authority, or reject practical rationality altogether, can either be caught in a performative contradiction or dismissed as irrational.<sup>4</sup> However, I leave that question aside since my chief concern is that transcendental analyses of justification, argumentation, or communicative rationality do not establish what forms of reasoning and evidence distinguish moral from other forms of discourse. I can agree that moral reasoning, like all forms of reasoning, is impartial in the sense that (a) what is a good reason in one context is necessarily a good reason in other relevantly similar contexts;<sup>5</sup> and (b) inquiry and justification are social processes requiring that we actively seek — or, at least, remain open to — other points of view that reveal limitations of our own. That the pursuit of truth should not be distorted or compromised by strategic or other inappropriate interests is not a trivial point. Again, however, it applies equally to all forms of inquiry and argument, both theoretical and practical. Different forms of discourse have different key concepts and different ways of validating, justifying, or redeeming different kinds of claims including empirical, interpretive, historical, and normative (not an exhaustive list).<sup>6</sup> Peters himself argues that consensus is only rational when it is based on the right kind of reasoning. Without an account of the sense in which moral and other normative claims can be true or false, right or wrong, and a corresponding account of what forms of evidence provide appropriate reasons for and against ethical positions, we cannot determine even how the two moral principles of equality and freedom are properly interpreted in particular contexts or which take priority when they conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Part of the position I am arguing is that self-defeating relativist conclusions follow if we collapse the distinction between what is justified and what is true. I see no difficulty with holding that social practices of justification are internal to

communities of inquiry that are the present embodiment of historical traditions. I think MacIntyre is right that there is no place from which to engage in making and justifying claims except from a position that is internal to a tradition, and this holds true for all forms of inquiry. At the same time, this presents no difficulty to making empirical or normative claims that purport to be true, not just “true for us.”

I think Martin and I would agree that there is no substitute for dialogue among people within and across moral traditions in which uncoerced agreement is the regulative ideal. As philosophers of education concerned with justice, however, I do not think we can simply say that “what counts as the better argument is left to those engaged in actual discourse.” More needs to be said on the conditions under which, the processes through which, and the criteria with respect to which, traditions of moral inquiry and practice can be self-correcting and conversations across rival moral traditions can be productive.

Since I have discussed these topics at length elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> I will simply advance two claims for consideration. The first is that MacIntyre’s account of the rationality of traditions illustrates how noncircular and nonfoundational justification is possible without positing critical perspectives outside particular traditions. The second is that specifying the kind of evidence particular to moral or practical discourse requires an account of intrinsic moral value. I think Peters was on the right track in saying that appreciation of intrinsically worthwhile activities is only from the inside, and that

Perhaps the greatest of educators are those who can convey insensibly the sense of quality in these activities so that a glimmering of what is intrinsic is constantly intimated. The result is that others are drawn along with them to join in the shared experience of exploring a different level of life.<sup>9</sup>

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1. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 8.

2. Bryan Warnick, “*Ethics and Education* Forty Years Later,” *Educational Theory* 57, no. 1 (2007): 65–6.

3. Daniel Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 137–214.

4. “It is no use employing logical arguments with a maniac, a hysterical woman, or an enraged Nazi” (Peters, *Ethics and Education*, 125).

5. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, 122.

6. *Ibid.*, 50.

7. “The considerations which make a difference relevant cannot be determined by the principle of justice itself. Similarly, the principle of justice itself cannot determine the grounds which make it proper to make an exception to a rule already in existence” (Peters, *Ethics and Education*, 123); also, “There is no rule for determining which reasons are most relevant when the reasons fall under different fundamental principles which conflict in a particular case. Judgment is required, not a slide rule” (128). For a relevant critique of the response to pluralism in Habermas’s discourse ethics, see Chantal Mouffe, *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism* (Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000).

8. Vokey, *Moral Discourse*, 257–357.

9. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, 62.