

THE ETHICS OF MIND-ALTERING TEACHING

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Don't people have the right to think as they please? Aren't those who want to remain fact bound and dogmatic to their own detriment entitled to do so? Critical thinking is not really value neutral. Even though it does not advocate a set of ideological beliefs, it is aimed at inculcating certain mental dispositions. And if people refuse or fail to comply, how can we justify punishing them by withholding credit or issuing low grades? Maybe I am intrigued by this issue because of my own resentment of intervention in my life, for my own good, without my consent, by the enacting of seat belt and motorcycle helmet laws and sin taxes on alcohol and tobacco. I have never been intrigued to the point, however, that I would walk into a class room and announce, "You have the right to remain thought-less."

For those who may not perceive this as a problem as I do, let me ask, would a biology teacher, who happens to be a Buddhist, be justified in requiring fifteen minutes of meditation at the beginning of every class meeting? Meditation, like critical thinking, is a beneficial way of using the mind rather than being a set of beliefs or a body of facts, and it is relevant to biology because it provides access to the source of life.

Before taking up the question of compelling people to think critically, let us look at the prior question of justifying any kind of compulsory universal education. It has two components, first the obligation of the state to provide education for everyone and second the requirement that everyone accept what has been provided. In this country the first component began to be addressed in some of the earliest settlements, but the second came much later, Massachusetts being the first state to adopt compulsory attendance laws, in 1852, and Mississippi the last of forty-eight, in 1919.

The founding fathers, some of them, advocated the necessity of education for the general public on the ground that democracy could not work without an educated electorate. As John Adams said, "The English Constitution is founded, tis bottomed And grounded on the Knowledge and good sense of the People. The very Ground of our Liberties, is the freedom of Elections. . . I must judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any Man judge, unless his Mind has been opened and enlarged by Reading."¹ Thomas Jefferson, as Governor of Virginia in 1779, proposed to the House of Burgesses a bill establishing school districts and free public schools throughout the state. It would be free for all children for the first three years, and after that there was to be a series of cutoff points, only those with the highest SAT's, so to speak, going on to the next level with public support. The plan was never adopted.

None of the earliest attempts were truly universal or compulsory. What motivated the adoption of the system we now have? According to Michael B. Katz in his presidential address to the History of Education Society in 1976, "Early

and mid-nineteenth century school promoters argued that public educational systems could attack five major problems . . . urban crime and poverty, increased cultural heterogeneity, the necessity to train and discipline an urban industrial workforce, the crisis of youth in the nineteenth-century city, the anxiety among the middle classes about their adolescent children."² Simply change "urban and industrial workforce" to "suburban and service sector workforce," and Katz's list of nineteenth-century problems matches the problems people are perceiving as we approach the twenty-first century.

But of particular interest to advocates of critical thinking, Professor Katz adds, "You will observe that my discussion of the purposes of public schooling has omitted one area of concern: the transmission of cognitive skills. . . . Public school systems existed to shape behavior and attitudes, alleviate social problems, and reinforce a social structure under stress. In this context, the character of pupils remained of far greater concern than their minds."³ Once again, not much seems to have changed in the last century and a half.

Has there been any significant objection to compulsory education? There must have always been children who hated school, but unfortunately, history books are seldom able to tell us much about children's attitudes. We can get some hints, however, from other sources, like this one:

I had been to school most all the time, and could spell, and read, and write just a little, and could say the multiplication table up to six times seven is thirty-five, and I don't reckon I could ever get any further than that if I was to live for ever. I don't take no stock in mathematics, anyway. At first I hated the school, but by and by I got so I could stand it. Whenever I got uncommon tired I played hookey, and the hiding I got next day done me good and cheered me up. So the longer I went to school the easier it got.⁴

That is a quotation from a young man named Huckleberry Finn, describing an experience no later than about 1845.

Attendance laws are not aimed directly at children, of course, but at parents or other adult legal guardians, and according to Katz, "Education became compulsory only after attendance had become nearly universal. . . . Most people, by and large, did not need to be coerced to send their children to school."⁵ I have often wondered who the few were that did need to be coerced, but my research has failed to reveal this. Perhaps they were people like Huck's father, who once said to Huck, "And looky here—you drop that school, you hear? I'll

learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better'n what *he* is."⁶ The father's threats and thrashings led Huck to change his attitude. "I didn't want to go to school much, before," he tells us, "but I reckoned I'd go now to spite Pap."

There *has* been significant and well documented resistance to *public* education. An Oregon statute making private elementary schooling illegal was struck down by the U. S. Supreme Court in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925). Our "education president," George Bush, would like to make the private school option available partly at government expense through vouchers. The home schooling movement claims perhaps 100,000 households and has been supported by a number of court decisions. The Minnesota Supreme Court held the state compulsory attendance law unconstitutional in *Minnesota v. Budke* (1985). The issue here was certification of home teachers, and today only Michigan and Iowa have statewide requirements that home teachers be certified. Benno Schmidt recently resigned as President of Yale to head Chris Whittle's Edison Project, a corporation that will compete with the public schools by offering education as a product on a for-profit basis. Yale Vice-President for Finance and Administration, Michael Finnerty, is going with him.

Many of those who resist the system do so in protest against what they see as indoctrination in secular humanism or on other religious grounds—but not all of them by any means, certainly not Benno Schmidt. Few, if any, claim the right to refuse education altogether. What they all seek is the freedom to choose a kind of education. In *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), which permitted Amish parents to take their children out of school two years before the law allowed, Chief Justice Burger wrote, "no one can question the state's duty to protect children from ignorance." *Commonwealth v. Roberts* (1893) held that "The great object of the provision of the statutes has been that children be educated, not that they be educated in any particular way." Advocates of alternatives to the public system accept both rulings.

College attendance is not legally required but is sustained by economic and social compulsion. Once enrolled, students face graduation requirements set by the institution. Those in vocational programs (and that means most college students) often just do not want to deal with anything outside their major, and if you ask them, will tell you flat out that they feel their rights are being violated by any outside requirements that may exist. Sometimes their faculty agree. The Liberal Arts would have long ago disappeared from most campuses if education were a product on the free market, as most students believe it should be and as George Bush and Chris Whittle may succeed in making it. Furthermore, not only is there opposition to *what* is required outside the major, but *inside* the vocational majors there is strong resistance to critical thinking approaches that change *how* technical material is taught.

How is the problem of justifying intervention in people's lives to get them to think critically, whether they want to or not, different from the issues of required education

in general that I have been discussing? Unfortunately, I think, we have a more severe challenge than do the advocates of compulsory general education. We cannot say as they can that we are protecting children from ignorance by compelling their parents to send them to school. More important, we cannot say as they can that we are only requiring that children, or older students, be educated, not that they be educated in any particular way. We *are* requiring a particular way. Furthermore, whereas there has been relatively little direct opposition to general education, critical thinking is far from being universally accepted by the educational establishment itself, let alone by students or society.

Critical thinking instruction does confront some of the same issues that traditional universal education has faced. In his analysis of the history of education, Katz regarded as misguided the use of education for social reform and for the molding of pupils' character rather than their minds. And yet, strong sense critical thinking, which seeks to change intellectual attitudes, can be seen as continuing the tradition of building character, if not instead of mind, then at least in addition to mind. I do not believe we have the right to grade students on their attitudes. On the other hand, if we go the way of weak sense critical thinking and follow Katz's call to shift the emphasis from character to cognitive skills, we still have a problem. Critical thinking values and rewards some cognitive skills and thinking styles more than others. So does traditional education for that matter, but a different set of them. The problem is that *all* cognitive skills and thinking styles are necessary and have their usefulness and their value. But these skills and styles are distributed differently across people. Everyone's abilities and accomplishments deserve to be recognized and rewarded, whatever they are, but if the teacher values only skills different from those the student has acquired, the student may see his or her accomplishments punished instead of rewarded.

So how can we justify using grades and other pressures in an effort to alter people's minds?

Obviously, it will not do to say, "I don't like the way you think and I'm going to change it. You might not appreciate that so much right now, but twenty years from now you'll be grateful to me for it." We do not have the right to intervene in people's lives for their own good without their consent. We cannot just enforce a way of thinking simply because of its presumed intrinsic merit.

We can, however, identify a value that critical thinking is contributory to and necessary for and that we claim transcends the right of people to think as they please. One such value may be the survival of the academic disciplines themselves, which, it is true, cannot be understood and continue to flourish without a widespread base of people capable of critical thought. We can say this if we want to, but we will be left with a few million students to account for who don't give a hoot for the fate of the academic disciplines, especially those who leave school before even beginning a college major.

The only plausible justification is the one that ultimately underlies universal free compulsory education, and that is the needs of society. It is true that only by critical thought is it possible to have a citizenry capable of understanding and making intelligent decisions about the complex issues of our society. This goes far beyond just voting, which seems to have been the main concern of some of the founding fathers like John Adams. In every institution from the corporation to the church, only stagnation and gridlock can result without decision making based on critical thought.

I do think it is important to inquire into the ethical justification of what we are doing. However, there is a sense in which we may be dealing with a moot issue after all. As Francis Canavan of Fordham said at a conference in 1975, "People, even young ones, are in fact free and they will make up their own minds, whether they have a right to or not."⁷ I found Father Canavan's statement of this truth extremely striking, and his attitude about it is equally striking: "In a real sense," he said, "I am professionally committed to indoctrination. Yet I do not personally regard indoctrination in the classroom as a practical problem, because I am so convinced that the effort to indoctrinate is largely futile." Not all of us may want to believe we are professionally committed to indoctrination, but we must surely all agree that the teacher can try to guide people into a certain way of thinking, but "then he must leave the matter up to the judgment of the students. And he will do this, not primarily out of respect for the students' rights, but out of recognition of the nature of their minds."

Every one of us who has ever tried to teach must surely know this whether we are ready to admit it to ourselves or not. If somebody is really determined to hold on to some cherished belief without questioning it, or to learn in no other way but memorizing lecture notes, or indeed to learn or think nothing at all, somebody will, and there is simply nothing we can do about it, whether we have a right to or not.

Finally, critical thinking cannot be imposed; it must compete in the market place of ideas. What brought this conclusion home to me most convincingly was a paper about an experience in a mathematics class that was written by a student who received a "D" in my freshman English class last year. (He got the "D" for other reasons, not because of the paper). It had to do with an algebra word problem about someone who had a certain amount of money consisting exclusively of dimes and nickels, and there were certain relations between the number of dimes and the number of nickels, and the question was how many dimes and how many nickels did the person have. Now, instead of letting "x" equal the number of dimes and "y" equal the number of nickels and setting up two equations, my student worked at the problem by trial and error until he finally arrived at the correct answer. This instructor, however, was one who made students show their work and graded the problem-solving strategy as well as the answer, so my student got only a few points of credit and

a friend of his who set up the equations but miscalculated got many more points. Of course, my student argued in his paper that getting the right answer should be worth something, in fact it should be worth a lot, and the teacher had no right to insist that the problem be done only his way.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this student was right. Anyone who gets the right answer must be given full credit. If problems can be solved without using algebra, then algebra is unnecessary. If this instructor wanted his students to learn that algebraic equations have a function in this world that nothing else can substitute for, then he should have demonstrated this truth by providing a realistic problem that could not be solved without using equations. He could easily have done so, even though he might have had to make the problem difficult beyond the ability level of the class. If, however, problems that require algebra are beyond people's ability to learn, does it not seem futile to require people to take a course in algebra?

The example is not unique to mathematics. If we are attempting to teach critical thinking and a student is able to get the right answers on our assignments without thinking critically, then that student must be given full credit. One of two things has then been proved: either critical thinking is unnecessary or we are asking the wrong questions. They must be fair questions, not ones that only professional logicians can answer, and we must recognize that some legitimate questions can be legitimately answered in other than critical ways. We must let students discover for themselves that, not always, but very often, *only* critical thinking can achieve the right answer. If we cannot make critical thinking work in free competition with other approaches and have to resort to compulsion, then we deserve to lose.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1962), I, 220. The entry is for August 1, 1761.
- 2 "The Origins of Public Education: A Reassessment." Revised and printed in *Reconstructing American Education*, Harvard UP, 1987. Reprinted in B. E. McClellan and W. J. Reese, *The Social History of American Education* (Urbana: U of IP, 1988), p. 102.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 4 Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Centennial Facsimile Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 40.
- 5 Katz, *Op. cit.*, p. 110.
- 6 Mark Twain, *Op. cit.*, p. 45.
- 7 "The Problem of Indoctrination," in *The Ethics of Teaching and Scientific Research*, ed. Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz, Miro Todorovich (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1977), p. 30.

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