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Indoctrination

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Abstract and Keywords

This article examines the concept of indoctrination in the context of education. It explains that a pejorative meaning is now firmly attached to the word indoctrination and argues that the basis of the moral condemnation that accusations of indoctrination have come to convey is unclear in the absence of philosophical argument. It discusses the historical concept and conception of indoctrination, its outcome, its moral status, and its role in moral responsibility.

Keywords: indoctrination, education, moral condemnation, philosophical argument, moral status, moral responsibility

1. Indoctrination as Wrongdoing

A pejorative meaning is now firmly attached to the word *indoctrination*.¹ A much older use of the word as a synonym for *instruction* was gradually overtaken by another that now clearly connotes moral wrongdoing.² That linguistic shift provokes a question: What is the distinctive wrong allegedly done when accusations of indoctrination are made?

Suppose we have observed you teaching a class of children, and we tell you that what we witnessed was indoctrination. You would not be flattered. Without further elaboration, the content of our accusation would be vague, but its rough outlines might still be clear enough for immediate purposes. Our common recognition of those outlines is revealed by the fact that competent language users could very easily agree in identifying many unjustified accusations of indoctrination. Thus, if we went on to point out that your performance in the classroom had been hopelessly disorganized and listless, that you had mangled all your half-hearted attempts at explanation, and you had left your students at

the end as disaffected and ignorant as they had been at the beginning of the class, you would reasonably infer that, although we did intend to accuse you of morally irresponsible teaching, we did not understand *indoctrination* in its pejorative sense as it is ordinarily understood. No one could deny that to teach so carelessly that students learn nothing is wrong. Yet indoctrinated students learn something, perhaps a great deal, and their indoctrinator may be immensely skillful and determined in bringing that learning about. Still, some serious moral failing afflicts the teaching that results in their learning, or so we are apt to assume.

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When charges of indoctrination are made, the imputation of moral wrongdoing has to do with a systematic distortion of some kind in the teacher's presentation of subject matter—a distortion that elicits, or could reasonably be expected to elicit, a corresponding distortion in the way students understand the subject matter. Furthermore, the distortion is not, at least in paradigm cases, to be explained by the intellectual laziness or indifference that often explains merely ineffective teaching, but by an ill-considered or overzealous concern to inculcate particular beliefs or values.³ The connection to beliefs seems ubiquitous. Charges of indoctrination do not ordinarily apply to the teaching of skills or know-how: driver education is no doubt a practice in which wrong can be done, but teaching people how to steer a car or brake safely is not a context in which indoctrination can intelligibly occur.

These rough criteria constitute our established pejorative concept of indoctrination. In a word, indoctrination entails some kind of distortion in teaching that produces belief, a distortion liable to induce some corresponding failure in students' understanding of the relevant subject matter, and the practice is prompted, at least characteristically, by a misplaced or excessive concern on the part of the teacher to inculcate particular beliefs. Therefore, if you were accused of indoctrination you could demand, given the criteria we have specified, that the accusation be substantiated with some evidence about the intimidating or overly partisan manner in which you addressed objections to your views from students, a lack of impartiality or objectivity in the way you contrasted rival theories, intolerance toward dissent in the classroom, or the like.

The cautious phrase “or the like” in our last sentence is intended to register the fact that, so far as ordinary language goes, *indoctrination* as the name for a species of morally objectionable teaching has no more than rough conceptual boundaries. Therefore, the attempt to find a philosophically useful interpretation of the concept will inevitably gravitate toward more precision than established usage reveals.⁴ But precision just for its own sake is not what we should want; the point is rather to elucidate the morally important considerations that properly interest us when teaching seems to be contaminated with intellectual distortion of the kind sketched above. For example, does the relevant distortion apply only when objectionable teaching methods of some kind are used? When propositions whose epistemic status is especially contestable (“doctrines”)

are taught as true? When teaching is characterized by some intention that warrants the condemnation that *indoctrination* imputes?

How we should interpret our ordinary concept in light of these questions—how we develop an adequate conception of the concept,⁵ in other words—is far from obvious. For the notion of intellectual distortion in the presentation of subject matter is elusive as it stands. A sound philosophical conception should certainly keep faith with the criteria that constitute the ordinary concept; otherwise it cannot capture whatever moral concerns have driven the concept's emergence as something to be contrasted with acceptable pedagogy, assuming for the moment that these concerns have merit. But if it is to provide guidance in hard cases, it must (p. 106) yield principled answers to questions that cannot be answered merely by attending to ordinary language.

The basis of the moral condemnation that accusations of indoctrination have come to convey is also unclear in the absence of philosophical argument. If one indoctrinates, is the alleged wrongdoing so grave that it could not be justified, regardless of circumstances, or is it only *prima facie* wrong—the sort of thing that generally warrants condemnation but can be justified, all things considered, in some circumstances? In fact, we should be open to the possibility that the descriptive content in what *indoctrination* designates and the negative emotive force that has become attached to the word will come apart, so to speak, under philosophical scrutiny. We might discover that no clearly identifiable pedagogy in the roughly demarcated conceptual territory the word now picks out warrants even presumptive condemnation. This is not to deny that we should be seeking criteria that can reasonably be said to warrant moral condemnation when we assess candidate conceptions of indoctrination. But whether we can find any that really fill the bill is an open question. Maybe too much depends on the variable contexts in which indoctrination allegedly occurs for any condemnation to be appropriate in abstraction from particular cases. After all, the moral evaluations our vocabulary embodies at any point in time are not necessarily justified.

Consider in this regard some remarks on indoctrination in George S. Counts's famous pamphlet, “Dare the School Build a New Social Order?” Counts was writing at a time when *indoctrination* as a term of reproach was beginning to acquire the salience that it has now. But he was at least a little doubtful about the assumptions that the emerging concept seemed to harbor:

And when the word indoctrination is coupled with education there is scarcely one among us possessing the hardihood to refuse to be horrified. This feeling is so widespread that even Mr. Lunacharsky, Commissar of Education in the Russian Republic until 1929, assured me on one occasion that the Soviet educational leaders do not believe in the indoctrination of children in the ideas and principles of communism. When I asked him whether their children become good communists while attending the schools, he replied that the great majority do. On seeking of him an explanation of this remarkable phenomenon he said that Soviet teachers merely tell their children the truth about human history. As a

consequence, so he asserted, practically all the more intelligent boys and girls adopt the philosophy of communism. I recall also that the Methodist sect in which I was reared always confined its teachings to the truth! (Counts 1932, pp. 10–11)

Counts's considered view on the moral status of indoctrination is not clear. But on one reasonable interpretation at least, he wanted to dispel what he saw as overblown liberal anxieties about the means by which teaching tries to reach worthy educational ends. If the ends are indeed worthy, then scruples about indoctrination in the means to achieve the ends are perhaps misplaced. At least that is a possibility to which we should return when a more exact interpretation of the concept is available.

(p. 107) 2. Method, Content, and Intention

Some attempts to specify a philosophical conception of indoctrination have claimed as constitutive criteria the methods used to impart beliefs, the propositional content of the beliefs being imparted, or the intention of the party doing the imparting. None of these three ways of characterizing indoctrination adequately interprets the concept.

The attempt to define *indoctrination* by reference to methods appeals to our intuitive qualms about teaching methods that fail adequately to engage learners' capacity to reason. But succeeding in this attempt requires more than a list of methods that indoctrinators use. Instead, as John Kleinig says, we must ask “[w]hat is it about particular methods which makes them indoctrinatory?” (Kleinig 1982, p. 58). P. J. Sheehan describes them as “those ... which induce beliefs in a way which bypasses the reasoning process of the person to which they are applied, or coerce his will and are systematically applied over a prolonged period” (quoted in Kleinig 1982, p. 58). But the most flagrant indoctrinators will frequently appeal to chains of reasoning when teaching their beliefs. Religious or political indoctrination, for example, will commonly involve instruction in standard arguments that purport to disclose the erroneous reasoning on which heresies are based. And some (though certainly not all) instances of indoctrination occur in venues entered into voluntarily by those who become victims of indoctrination.

An additional objection to any definition that hinges on the use of nonrational methods is the fact that these are often used in unambiguously innocent contexts to teach multiplication tables, elements of spelling and grammar, or the like. Responding to this objection, David Cooper has argued that nonrational methods are indoctrinatory “if these methods are employed *despite the availability of other, rational methods*” (Cooper 1973, p. 54, emphasis in original). However, Cooper's amendment misses the fact that nonrational methods are often used without any justified reproach, merely for convenience: it would be possible, though tedious, to teach the multiplication tables solely by appeal to multiplicative reasoning instead of memorization. Since uncontroversial instances of indoctrination can occur without nonrational methods, and

nonrational methods can uncontroversially be used without indoctrinating, their use cannot be central to a satisfactory conception of *indoctrination*.

A notable variation on Sheehan's definition is offered by Cooper (1973): "[I]ndoctrination will be identified...by the tendency of the activities involved to produce certain effects, e.g., to result in non-evidentially held beliefs" (p. 53). Although Cooper's definition refers to outcomes, he is primarily concerned with methods rather than outcomes, for two reasons: first, Cooper wants to be able to describe a teacher as indoctrinating even if, after instruction, no one is indoctrinated; and second, Cooper wants to protect from charges of indoctrination teachers whose conscientious use of exemplary teaching methods happens to instill in a student what we would want to call indoctrinated beliefs.

(p. 108)

The first of Cooper's aims rests on the idea that we can observe a scene in which no particular learning outcome has yet been achieved and still say, "Person A is indoctrinating Person B." What Cooper fails to explain is why it should be important for us to be able to say that rather than, "Person A is attempting to indoctrinate Person B and may soon succeed in doing so." If the latter conjecture were to turn out to be wrong—if Person B were to leave Person A's presence unconvinced of the truth of what Person A had been saying—then we could surely amend our observation: "Person A tried to indoctrinate Person B but failed to do so." Cooper's focus on the tendency of certain methods to produce a certain outcome misses this successful-outcome requirement of indoctrination.

Cooper's second aim is to show that the charge of indoctrination is unjustified if a teacher's lesson, although a model of morally responsible pedagogy, instills in a student the same learning that indoctrination would produce. In other words, such teachers' innocent methods should suffice to save them from accusations of indoctrination, despite an outcome identical to that of indoctrination. Cooper believes that indoctrination is inherently blameworthy, and that it would be unfair to blame the teacher in the absence of malicious intent or negligence.

However, if we accept the premise that a teacher's lesson (and not some other confluence of factors that fortuitously coincide with the lesson) has produced some belief in the student that we would want to call indoctrinated, then what we have is better viewed as a case in which indoctrination sheds its usual normative overtones. By analogy, instances of killing other human beings may prompt us to look for malicious intent or negligence on the part of the killer, but we often fail to discover these. Similarly, in a situation such as the one imagined by Cooper, the correct response to the teacher would seem to be, "Alas! It appears that, through no fault of your own, you have indoctrinated this student." In the section below on indoctrination and moral responsibility, we deal with just such a nonstandard case.

Several alternative attempts to form a philosophically cogent interpretation of indoctrination have focused on its supposedly distinctive propositional content. Perhaps the most influential version of the content criterion has been that a sufficient, or at least a necessary, criterion of indoctrination is the teaching of doctrines (e.g., Flew 1972). But this cannot be right. First, however broadly or narrowly *doctrine* might be defined, we can surely impart doctrines without resorting to indoctrination. The Marxist teacher in Stalinist Russia and the teacher of Marxism in a contemporary American university teach certain doctrines, and yet it would be rash to assume that the latter is fated to indoctrinate just because the former was almost certain to do so. Indeed, even if the latter were a self-described Marxist, it would be unjust to infer that she must be an indoctrinator without evidence other than her own doctrinal commitments. So the teaching of doctrines cannot be a sufficient condition of indoctrination. And neither can it be a necessary condition, for indoctrination might occur without imparting anything ordinarily recognized as a doctrine. For example, we might imagine a teacher indoctrinating his pupils to believe that the *Apollo* moon landing was actually filmed on a sound stage or that the U.S. government has secret knowledge of extraterrestrial intelligence. (p. 109)

Another variation on the content criterion is that the teaching of false beliefs as true is the heart of the matter. We return to this idea later on when we use it to throw our own conception of indoctrination into sharper relief. It suffices for now to note that it could not be the whole story, for the simple reason that the indoctrination of true beliefs is obviously possible. Suppose we happen upon a student who insisted that 2 is the only even prime number, but the character of her belief and what we know of how it came about incline us to impute indoctrination. The student is intensely dogmatic about her mathematical beliefs, seems wholly indifferent to their rational basis, and persistently appeals to the intellectual authority of her teacher whenever challenged to justify what she believes. Now, suppose another student is like the first in all respects except that the second one believes that 2 is not the only even prime number. The only difference between the first and the second student is that the first has a true belief whereas the other has a false one. But it is counterintuitive to on that ground alone say that the second is a victim of indoctrination whereas the first is not.

Many attempts to define indoctrination have claimed that the intention of the indoctrinator is essential. According to J. P. White, indoctrinating someone is trying to get him to believe that a Proposition P is true in such a way that nothing will shake that belief (White 1967). This formulation runs aground because it does not yield a sufficient condition of teaching we have reason to deplore. Consider the teacher who tries to get her students to believe that 2 is the only even prime number using analysis of the definitions of the concepts *even* and *prime number* along with careful reasoning about divisibility. Suppose the consequence of her efforts is that nothing will shake their belief. White's formulation would entail that this teacher is indoctrinating, which is clearly wrong.

A slightly different formulation by I. A. Snook does hit on something crucial. Someone indoctrinates P (a proposition or set of propositions) if she teaches with the intention that the learner believes P regardless of the evidence (Snook 1972, p. 47). The crucial consequence of indoctrination noted by Snook is that the student will disregard evidence that may bear on the truth or falsity of P. Insufficient regard for evidence is essential to an adequate conception of indoctrination, or so we shall argue. However, Snook's formulation and all other variations of the intention position implausibly deny that a teacher might indoctrinate without intending to do so. As we shall see, indoctrination without any deplorable intention is a familiar phenomenon.

3. The Outcome of Indoctrination

The philosophical literature on indoctrination discussed thus far concentrates on features internal to the activity of teaching rather than its effects on students' (p. 110) learning. Even when those effects have figured in analysis, they have often received scant scrutiny. White argues that indoctrination entails the intention to instill unshakable belief, but says almost nothing about what such belief entails. Snook claims that the intention to teach belief that is held regardless of the evidence is the heart of the matter, while leaving the object of that intention unanalyzed. Cooper equates indoctrination with methods that instill belief nonevidentially whenever evidential methods are available, suggesting at least that evidential belief (once the belief can be evidential) is the normal outcome of educationally responsible teaching. But he leaves the distinction between evidential and nonevidential belief unexamined. Still, White, Snook, and Cooper gesture toward something important in their references to the outcome of indoctrination that is worth exploring further, even though what they suggest cannot be quite true as it stands.

If indoctrination must result in unshakable belief, then its effects could never be undone. But we cannot rationally infer that someone who, as an adult, abandons beliefs that were inculcated during childhood must therefore have acquired those beliefs without indoctrination. The bare fact that one changes one's mind cannot suffice to show that no indoctrination occurred in the first place. Children who were instilled with Nazi ideology in the Hitler Youth Movement were in most cases able to abandon that ideology after the war ended, though it hardly follows that they were never indoctrinated. Still, White is on the track of something important insofar as excessive resistance to revision does seem to be symptomatic of the indoctrinated mind, as we intuitively understand that condition.

Snook's conception leans in a similar direction. To hold a belief regardless of the evidence does not mean that one gives no regard to evidence. Those whom we suspect of being indoctrinated may devote themselves to winning converts and exposing the errors of all who disagree with them, and that cannot be done without heeding relevant evidence. But when belief is held regardless of the evidence, its maintenance has been divorced from consideration of the evidence, however extensive that consideration may be for other

purposes, such as proselytizing. This condition of nonevidential maintenance, like unshakable belief, is also redolent of the intellectual rigidity we intuitively associate with being indoctrinated.

Snook's conception takes us a little further than White's because it suggests that the effect of indoctrination has to do not with the sheer strength of conviction, as unshakable belief would imply, but with some illicit breach between conviction, on the one hand, and the assessment of evidence, on the other. Because strong conviction is so often desirable in our lives, a conception of indoctrination that entailed its wholesale derogation could not be right. But the idea that some wrong or harm is done when conviction and the evaluation of evidence are sundered from each other is a familiar ethical idea. Cooper's reference in his analysis of indoctrination to the inculcation of nonevidential belief when evidence is available takes us very close to that idea.

That our convictions are properly based on the evidence that can be adduced in their support is evidentialism, a principle famously expounded by W. K. Clifford in the nineteenth century and defended by many contemporary (p. 111) philosophers as well (Clifford 1977/1999; Wood 2002; Conee and Feldman 2004). But the claim that we do wrong when conviction is cut adrift from the assessment of evidence is not unique to philosophers. The very fact that to describe someone as close-minded is also to ascribe what is taken to be an intellectual vice attests to a concern with the ethics of belief embedded in our ordinary language that is at least akin to evidentialism.⁶ To believe Proposition P close-mindedly is to be unable or unwilling to give due regard to reasons that are available for some belief or beliefs contrary to P because of excessive emotional attachment to the truth of P. People who are characteristically close-minded are thus liable to cling to beliefs that cannot be justified by the best evidence and argument to which they have access. Still, close-minded belief need not be so utterly disengaged from the assessment of evidence that it can be characterized as holding regardless of the evidence; the point is that regard for evidence in close-minded belief is deficient, not that it must be nonexistent.

The idea of close-minded belief is a more promising candidate for the relevant outcome of indoctrination than either unshakable belief (White's candidate) or belief held regardless of the evidence (Snook's candidate). Unlike White's candidate, it allows for the possibility that indoctrination may occur even when its victims are disabused of their indoctrinated beliefs at a later date. A closed mind need not be irrevocably shut. Snook's candidate limits the scope of indoctrination to the most extreme cases, where the disregard of evidence is total. Yet if a total disregard of evidence on the part of the learner might warrant moral reproach to the teacher who induced that attitude, the teacher surely cannot escape reproach just because the induced disregard of evidence is a bit less than total. So if we are trying to make sense of indoctrination as a practice that warrants moral disapproval, then the concept of close-mindedness, which admits varying degrees, seems better suited to capture the full range of relevant outcomes than Snook's candidate.

We said that close-minded people are unable or unwilling to give due regard to reasons that are available for revising their current beliefs. But although this is necessary, it cannot be sufficient for close-mindedness because sheer intellectual laziness or credulity might make people unwilling to show such regard, and it would be odd to describe anyone as close-minded just because she cared too little to use her mind.⁷ (That is not to say that intellectual sloth and credulity are not vices; it is only to say that they are different vices from close-mindedness, and that nothing is to be gained by confusing them.) What also seems necessary is a special emotional investment in the truth of some belief that an open mind regarding that belief would threaten: the belief has become integral to the individual's understanding of who she is and why her life matters so that seriously considering evidence contrary to the belief is threatening to her very identity.

Protection from the threat might be achieved by attaching to the belief a moralistic second-order belief. The content of the second-order belief would be: it is always wrong/shameful to entertain doubt about this belief.⁸ But moralistic second-order beliefs are not strictly necessary because close-mindedness may also be the effect of two closely related intellectual vices that create resistance to doubt. (p. 112) One is intellectual cowardice, the other intellectual arrogance. The pursuit of knowledge and understanding will sometimes require intellectual courage, and those who fearfully close their minds when evidence to abandon some cherished conviction is available are guilty of intellectual cowardice. Similarly, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding will sometimes require intellectual humility. That happens when fresh evidence against some belief we have proudly defended shows that others have been right where we were wrong. Those whose vanity closes the mind to such evidence are intellectually arrogant.

We said that close-mindedness can be evident to varying degrees. This is what we might call its psychological depth, a standard that registers the intensity with which the individual is prone to resist countervailing evidence to beliefs already held. But another important dimension is breadth, which reflects how widely close-mindedness affects particular components within the overall system of the individual's beliefs. There is no necessary connection between the depth and breadth of close-mindedness. A deep close-mindedness of narrow scope, localized around a few cherished convictions, might coincide with a laudable open-mindedness beyond the sphere of those convictions. By the same token, a broader close-mindedness that ramifies widely across the entire structure of someone's belief system might be relatively mild. If a subset of beliefs is almost freestanding, with few implications for other items within the system, then a localized close-mindedness might be easy to keep localized. This could be true, say, of your beliefs about the glorious history of your favorite baseball team and the exalted skills of its players. But a close-mindedness of narrow scope is not feasible with comprehensive religious, moral, or political doctrines that are specifically intended to have an architectonic role within the believer's life. These will inevitably have far-reaching implications across belief systems, and precisely because the falsification of what they

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imply will cast doubt on the underlying doctrine, close-minded adherence to the doctrine will naturally motivate close-minded resistance to whatever would falsify its implications.

This point may help to explain more fully why it is a mistake to stipulate that indoctrination requires the inculcation of doctrines. Comprehensive doctrines are commonly at the core of our individual identities, and so they are readily allied with the intellectual cowardice or arrogance that evidential threats to identity are liable to provoke and commonly fortified with moralistic second-order beliefs to keep the threats at bay. Yet because the implications of these doctrines extend so widely, a pedagogy that ensures fidelity to any one of them may have to secure close-minded adherence to implications remote from the normative core of the doctrine. Some (by no means all) Christians believe that the implications of their faith cannot be reconciled with evolutionary biology, and that belief motivates efforts to defend creationism, “intelligent design,” or the like, as better alternatives to evolutionary biology. Whether such people are right about the implications of Christianity or not, there is plainly a risk that attempts to instill the faith as they conceive it will modulate, for example, into efforts to teach children that the bacterial flagellum (an appendage that lets bacteria swim) is too complex to have (p. 113) developed through natural selection. But if instilling close-minded religious conviction is indoctrination, then surely eliciting closed-minded belief about how the bacterial flagellum came to be is also indoctrination, given that both might be integral to the same (anti-)educational process.

4. Indoctrination and Moral Responsibility

To be close-minded is not necessarily to have been indoctrinated. Human beings would appear to be entirely capable of learning to be intellectually arrogant and cowardly, or to develop misplaced scruples about doubting particular beliefs, without being taught to be or do these things by anyone else. But close-mindedness can also be the product of teaching, and where it is, responsibility for its occurrence will shift at least somewhat from learner to teacher.

That fact also shows what is appealing and yet misleading in the idea that indoctrination entails the intention to indoctrinate. If indoctrination presupposes a teacher who is responsible (to some degree) for the close-mindedness of the learner, then the intention to produce that outcome is plainly sufficient for responsibility. But we are commonly and rightly held to account for some outcomes that may be flatly at odds with our intentions. If I drive my car at excessive speed and kill a pedestrian, the fact that I intended to kill no one does not make me blameless. The accusation of negligence has purchase here. As a driver, I have a legal and moral duty to drive at a safe speed, and injury to a pedestrian caused by my failure to discharge that duty is injury for which I will be held accountable, regardless of my intentions. The idea of moral negligence must apply to teaching if teachers have educational responsibilities to their students. For whenever unintended harm is caused by a culpable failure to discharge those responsibilities, the charge of negligence will be justified. The claim that unintended indoctrination is a species of moral negligence derives from the reasonable assumption that among the educational responsibilities of teachers is the avoidance of social influences that conduce to close-mindedness. Teachers should be reasonably vigilant about avoiding such influences, which easily seep into their practice whenever a belief is taught that has broad and fervent social consensus in its support, and merely forswearing the intention to indoctrinate is not enough for adequate vigilance.

The wider social context of belief is an important consideration in addressing moral responsibility. An ingenious example developed by Rodger Beehler will help to show what is at stake here. Beehler asks us to imagine the predicament of a young man with a high-school education who is hired as a teacher in Canada's Northwest Territories during the 1930s (Beehler 1985). Among his responsibilities is the task of teaching students in the first three grades about "the native peoples of Canada and their relation to the immigrant white population." The teacher has never met any of Canada's native people, and none live close to the town where he (p. 114) teaches. But he is intellectually scrupulous, and he reads all he can find about the topic. All he reads represents Canada's indigenous peoples in a derogatory fashion. The uniformity of the picture that emerges from the only materials to which he has access means that when he tries to stress the evidential basis of his pedagogy, a wildly inaccurate stereotype of Canada's native peoples is reinforced.

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Is this indoctrination? The case is ambiguous, and we think our conception is helpful in explaining this ambiguity. As a complacently colonial society whose legitimization depended on justifying the dispossession of its indigenous peoples, Canada in the 1930s had a vested interest in portraying that population negatively. School textbooks, and mainstream scholarship and political discourse, all spoke with one voice in supporting that invidious portrayal. Beehler's depiction of the young teacher makes it wrong to think of him as close-minded, rather than just very badly mistaken, and his efforts to make students form their beliefs on the basis of available evidence could hardly be more strenuous. All that makes it somewhat plausible to say that he is not guilty of indoctrination. For if open-mindedness requires due regard for relevant evidence and argument, those who practice the virtue, and try to teach it to others, are still constrained by bias, selectivity, and outright lies in the evidence available to them in a given sociohistorical context. And one might rationally hope that if the students came to emulate their teacher's open-mindedness in such circumstances, they would be cognitively primed to reject the stereotypes they are taught when counterevidence one day becomes available to them.

Yet a very different line of interpretation of the case is also reasonable. This begins with the hypothesis that the evidence available to white Canadians during the 1930s about the country's indigenous population was so badly corrupted because of white Canadians' collective self-image as a righteous people who had wrested control of a vast wilderness from undeserving savages. The defense of the self-image would naturally lend itself to close-minded resistance to whatever would falsify its presuppositions. Thus in what parents or pastors said to children outside school, what children heard on the radio, read in newspapers when they were old enough, and the like, the image of an impeccably virtuous white citizenry would be powerfully affirmed, and a concomitant close-minded resistance instilled to whatever would threaten their self-image. Therefore, we need to interpret the conduct of Beehler's teacher in the classroom against the background of a broader racist process of societal indoctrination to which his pedagogy is inevitably related. A reasonable surmise is that because the evidence to which the teacher has access is so utterly corrupted, his efforts effectively support the societal process of indoctrination by sealing a veneer of evidential rectitude on the very same beliefs that students are taught to believe close-mindedly outside the school. And that makes it at least somewhat plausible to say he does engage in indoctrination, despite not being morally responsible for what he does.

The ambiguity of Beehler's and similar cases does not matter much so long as we stay alert to why we are inclined to respond to them in contradictory ways. One way to maintain the necessary alertness is to distinguish between standard and nonstandard cases of indoctrination. In the standard case, the teacher bears some (p. 115) moral responsibility for the inculcation of close-minded belief, typically by being negligent in the duty to do all that might reasonably be done to avoid social influences on her teaching that conduce to close-mindedness. Still, in some unfortunate (and nonstandard) cases,

teachers might do all that could be reasonably done and yet the outcome of their best efforts causally reinforces some wider process of indoctrination that pervades the society as a whole.

5. The Concept and Conception of Indoctrination

We suggested earlier that our ordinary concept of indoctrination connotes some intellectual distortion in the presentation of subject matter that elicits a corresponding distortion in the minds of students. We also said that at least in paradigm cases, the distortion is not to be explained by intellectual laziness or indifference, but by an ill-considered or overzealous concern to inculcate particular beliefs. The question we face now is whether the conception of indoctrination we have outlined is consistent with the criteria that constitute the ordinary concept and whether our conception opens the way, as we argued it should, to a clearer grasp of the moral considerations at stake in accusations of indoctrination than we would otherwise have.

Academic subject matter can be distorted in many different ways in teaching. False beliefs might be presented as true. The risk of that happening is obviously great when teachers fail to keep abreast of intellectual progress in the subjects they teach, but it cannot be avoided just by staying attuned to recent research. For if the history of science reveals anything, it surely tells us that scientific progress will expose much that we now take as true to be false, and that being so, teaching what is false as if it were true would seem to be an almost inevitable misfortune in the educational process rather than a culpable distortion for which anyone could be held to account. How do we best cope with the inevitability of that misfortune?

Perhaps the most obvious strategy is to remind students regularly of the corrigibility of even our best theories. These are the best approximations to the truth that we can currently construct, and will in many cases be superseded through the progress of inquiry. No doubt that caveat is wholesome good sense, but the incantation of the caveat at regular intervals seems unlikely to do much good if what occurs between the incantations is not teaching conducive to open-mindedness. Only open-mindedness enables us to make the best use of fresh argument and evidence to improve our understanding of the world. If what we take to be our corpus of established knowledge is almost certainly riddled with errors that we cannot yet identify, the only reliable means of identifying these as (p. 116) promptly as we can is by keeping an open mind to whatever might expose them as errors. That being so, close-mindedness would seem to be a particularly formidable obstacle to the timely correction of error. The inculcation of close-mindedness counts as a particularly grievous form of intellectual distortion in the

presentation of subject matter, and its condemnation in an intellectual culture sensitive to our susceptibility to error is just what we should expect.

A conceivable instance of inculcating close-minded belief is a teacher consciously formulating the intention to do precisely that and then acting on that intention. But a more common phenomenon is surely the teacher who indoctrinates but lacks the level of self-awareness that such examples entail. Perpetrators of indoctrination will often be past victims of indoctrination, and the more successful their victimization, the more apt they may be to regard themselves as paragons of open-mindedness, whose intensity of conviction is merely a consequence of how thoroughly they appreciate the compelling evidence for what they believe. Given that self-ignorance, they will be primed to indoctrinate others without any intention, conscious or not, to encourage close-mindedness. Thus on the conception we have championed, it is easy to understand why in paradigm cases the relevant distortion in the presentation of subject matter is not to be explained by intellectual laziness or indifference but by an ill-considered or over-zealous concern to inculcate particular beliefs. On our conception, what makes the teacher's motivation ill-considered or overzealous is precisely the close-mindedness that students are explicitly or implicitly taught to emulate.

6. The Moral Status of Indoctrination

If the inculcation of close-minded belief is indoctrination, then one can obviously be indoctrinated to believe what is false. But as we noted earlier, one can also be indoctrinated to believe what is true. No doubt indoctrination in support of truth is preferable to indoctrination in defense of falsehood. But does that preference mean that indoctrination is a morally neutral means to an end, to be commended when it serves laudable ends and condemned only when its ends deserve condemnation? This is the question that our earlier quotation from George Counts provokes.

Two considerations suggest that open-mindedness has an important human value that cannot be reduced to its role as a means to protecting and achieving true belief or other worthy ends, and that being so, indoctrination is bad to the extent that it thwarts the realization of that value even when it secures other values. The first consideration has to do with the epistemic value of understanding; the second with the moral value of autonomy.

Suppose for the moment that the best form of government ever invented is American constitutionalism, and that Jane has been indoctrinated to accept this true belief. One risk Jane must incur is that many other beliefs might be true for (p. 117) reasons that would seem to cast some doubt on her belief that American constitutionalism is the best form of government, and the close-minded character of her belief is liable to disincline her to evaluate those reasons impartially, and hence block the acquisition of whatever other true beliefs the reasons support. If American constitutionalism is the best form of government,

its success might still presuppose conditions that are sometimes absent in extant human societies—a tradition of largely peaceful accommodation between rival religious groups, or the like. Taking to heart Voltaire's adage that the best is the enemy of the good, we might find ourselves with some reasons to believe that human beings should often settle for political regimes that differ substantially from American constitutionalism. These reasons will apply when the presuppositions of the American model have yet to be satisfied. The cogency of these reasons is entirely consistent with the belief that American constitutionalism is indeed the best form of government. But if Jane believes the latter close-mindedly, she will also feel psychologically threatened by any arguments that seem to dilute or qualify the grounds for her belief. She is thus less well situated than people who hold the same belief open-mindedly to profit from such arguments.

It would be a mistake to infer from this that the harm close-mindedness causes Jane is an overall deprivation of knowledge. For her close-mindedness might well be combined with a passionate curiosity about American constitutionalism, and that might prompt her to become as knowledgeable about the object of her passion as anyone could be. Where close-mindedness will inhibit the acquisition of knowledge is in those particular matters she perceives (not necessarily consciously) to pose a threat to her faith in the superiority of American constitutionalism. Why should that loss concern us if she accumulates a great store of other knowledge about the same object? The short answer is that however much knowledge Jane might pick up, her close-mindedness is sure to limit her to a decidedly lopsided understanding of the object of her passion.

According to Jonathan Kvanvig “understanding requires...an internal grasping or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic and other kinds of relations” (2003, pp. 192–93). On Kvanvig's account, understanding is the product of a mind primed to sift through the multifarious relations that link items in a body of information. That task requires not only imagination, logical skills, and kindred intellectual abilities but also an emotional readiness to follow thought in directions that might cast unexpected doubt on some central organizing idea within that connect items of information to each other. The problem for Jane is that much of the information about American constitutionalism that comes her way will disclose, for example, its possible imperfections or dependence on conditions that might not be widely replicated in other countries. To adequately integrate these into her understanding of the topic would not require her to give up any true belief. But it would require her tenaciously to pursue the implications of facts and probabilities that critics of American democracy stress in their arguments, imaginatively to entertain possible beneficial departures from American (p. 118) constitutional norms, and so on. What these intellectual activities have in common is both the prospect of achieving a deep understanding of American forms of government and the risk of entertaining at least episodic doubts, which might even become settled doubts in time, about her true belief that American democracy is best. Unfortunately, the prospect cannot be achieved without incurring the risk, and Jane's close-mindedness blocks her from taking the risk.

The harm done by indoctrination to our capacity for understanding will vary with the depth and breadth of the close-mindedness it fosters. But except in the uncommon case when the inculcated belief is about some relatively trivial matter and is a more or less freestanding module within one's system of beliefs, indoctrination must count as a substantial impairment of understanding, regardless of other values with which it might coincide.

The alleged impairment of the capacity for understanding that indoctrination will bring about presupposes that without indoctrination, the victim could have achieved a better understanding of matters related to the indoctrinated belief through educationally responsible teaching. That presupposition might well be false in some particular cases, and in such cases, indoctrinated true belief could well be a better outcome than any feasible alternative, such as open-minded but catastrophically false belief. This point reveals an interesting connection between the belief that human cognitive capabilities are very unequally distributed and a willingness to resort to indoctrination on paternalistic grounds. The connection is abundantly evident in Plato's notorious argument in *The Republic* in defense of an education for the masses of citizens that instills steadfast adherence to true beliefs with no understanding of the grounds of those beliefs. The argument affronts our egalitarian sensibilities. Nevertheless, if Plato were right that the recipients of political indoctrination were capable of no greater understanding than their indoctrination gives them, we could not say that it denies them the value of greater understanding.

The argument about the ethics of indoctrination threatens to become mired at this point in empirical disputes about the distribution of human cognitive capabilities. But an alternative line of argument promises a way around that impasse. The alternative stresses indoctrination's status as a violation of the autonomy to which all persons within some wide range of normal cognitive functioning are rightfully entitled, irrespective of substantial differences in intellectual endowment among those within the range. This argument assigns a distinctively moral rather than an epistemic loss to the victim of indoctrination. The autonomy argument against indoctrination has been cogently pursued elsewhere (Kleinig 1982, p. 65; Siegel 1988, p. 88), and we wish to add only a small addendum here.

The powerful intuition at the root of the autonomy argument is the idea that people should be free to determine their own lives within wide boundaries set by the rights of others, and that intellectual self-determination (which entails open-mindedness) is intrinsic to that freedom. When someone exploits the asymmetry of power between teacher and learner by instilling close-minded belief, the intellectual self-rule that befits rational beings has been violated. But a good question that might arise here has to do with the quality of thinking that people (p. 119) exhibit when they think for themselves. If some people think badly when they think for themselves, why is intellectual autonomy preferable to having other people (the benevolent indoctrinators perhaps) think for us by instilling true close-minded beliefs? The question seems to take us back to those disputes

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about the distribution of cognitive capabilities from which the autonomy argument promised an escape.

Two points can be said about this. First, if we abandon indoctrination for an education that systematically cultivates the open mind, it would be foolish to suppose that teaching students to think for themselves should be our only goal. We should also try to teach them to think rigorously, clearly, imaginatively, and the like. Honoring learners' intellectual self-determination signifies no indifference to intellectual quality. But by itself, that claim will cut no ice with Platonic pessimists who believe that most ordinary mortals have at best modest potential to think well when they think for themselves. This takes us to our second point.

For the sake of argument, suppose we agree with Platonic pessimists that many, perhaps most children who receive the best feasible education might still often think and choose badly when they are encouraged to be autonomous and, therefore, open-minded. Does it follow that once we take this bleak view of ordinary mortals' educable capacity for rational self-determination we must now take a favorable view of indoctrination when it is undertaken with the paternalistic intent of securing adherence to the truth? The inference that we should is very odd because it combines moral and intellectual pessimism about those who are likely to be on the receiving end of indoctrination with an astonishing optimism about those who would be its practitioners. If the outcome of the best feasible education still leaves us with an acute susceptibility to error, how can anyone be trusted with the power to indoctrinate anyone else? Even if paternalistic indoctrinators are sincere—they genuinely believe that what they teach is true and profoundly important—their assurance is no guarantee against error. And is it not likely that in many cases what they choose to indoctrinate will be whatever serves their own predatory interests, regardless of what they believe to be true? The moral argument against indoctrination requires no sunny optimism about open-mindedness as the easy route to truth and justice; it is better served by a tough-minded realism about the vulnerability to abuse that besets all unequal human relations, including that between teachers and students.

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Notes:

(1.) The approach to indoctrination canvased here was profoundly influenced by Hare's seminal work on open-mindedness (1979, 1985). Our endorsement of an "outcome

criterion” also builds on several important contributions to the philosophical literature on indoctrination that pioneered this approach (Green 1964/5; Siegel 1988; Kleinig 1982). Many thanks to Harvey Siegel and Bill Hare for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

(2.) It may well be true that attempts to distinguish a concept we would now label *indoctrination* long antedates this linguistic change. For an intriguing argument along these lines, see Sommerville 1983. It is also not clear just when the pejorative usage begins, though John Stuart Mill in a letter from 1852 is suggestive: “What the poor as well as the rich require is not to be indoctrinated, is not to be taught other people's opinions, but to be induced and enabled to think for themselves.” (Mill 1852/1972, p. 80). Thanks to Bill Hare for this reference.

(3.) Some readers will want to distinguish between values and beliefs on the grounds that beliefs imply some commitment to the truth of a proposition whereas values have no content that could be strictly true or false. We shall use “belief” as shorthand where some readers might prefer to see “beliefs and values.”

(4.) That point was acknowledged even during the heyday of ordinary language philosophy (Flew 1972, p. 87).

(5.) The distinction between concepts and conceptions was introduced in Rawls 1971. The best elucidation of the distinction is in Dworkin 1986, pp. 70–72.

(6.) To acknowledge the epistemic vice of close-mindedness, as it is specified here, does not make us take sides in the debate between evidentialists and their most notable contemporary critic, Alvin Plantinga. Any evidentialist must concede that some beliefs are “properly basic” in the sense that they are not rightly inferred from evidence: for example, your belief that you are reading this text right now. Plantinga argues that the scope of properly basic belief is much greater than Enlightenment-inspired evidentialists have traditionally supposed, and even includes the creedal core of Christianity (Plantinga 2002). But Plantinga acknowledges that very many other beliefs are properly evidential. To fail to maintain those beliefs evidentially is necessarily, on his terms, to fail to give due regard to relevant evidence, and hence to be close-minded in the sense defined here. Moreover, he concedes that the propriety of basic belief, in Christian theism, for example, will depend on our ability to refute whatever rational objections to which it is susceptible, and that brings him closer to the evidentialist camp than he might seem at first glance. Still, we do not believe that Plantinga's attempt to put Christian belief beyond evidentialist challenge is successful, and therefore, we regard his argument as no more than a very ingenious defense of a close-minded Christian piety. But whether we are right about that is far too big an issue adequately to address here, though it is certainly relevant to the topic of religious indoctrination in Christian and other faiths.

(7.) This is where we might take issue with Siegel's analysis. Siegel says that students "are indoctrinated if they are led to hold beliefs in such a way that they are prevented from critically inquiring into their legitimacy.... Indoctrination may be regarded as the collection of those modes of belief inculcation which foster a non-evidential, or non-critical, style of belief" (1988, p. 80). Credulity and intellectual sloth may prevent critical inquiry and nourish nonevidential styles of belief, but they are not the same as close-mindedness and, therefore, the teaching that produces them is not the same as indoctrination. Credulity and intellectual sloth are commonly the upshot of bad teaching that plies students with content to be memorized or brings no spark of intellectual excitement to subject matter. No doubt these species of bad teaching should be deplored, but as we argued in the opening section, not all kinds of bad teaching are indoctrination. There seems no reason to suppose that indoctrination is necessarily morally worse than teaching that instills other kinds of invidiously nonevidential belief. But maybe indoctrination is especially worrying to the extent that close-mindedness entails an active resistance to counterevidence and argument that credulity or intellectual sloth does not entail. Other things being equal, close-mindedness would seem a more formidable obstacle to the correction of error than these other intellectual vices.

(8.) The point is well made by Kleinig: "Where ... particular beliefs become closely identified with a person's feelings of security, or take on strong moral associations such that questioning them would induce guilt-feelings, we could expect them to be indoctrinated" (1982, p. 63).

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