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Moral education and indoctrination: replies to John White and John Tillson

ABSTRACT: John White and John Tillson have both raised objections to the theory of moral education I have recently advanced. Here I reply to their objections and offer some critical remarks on the alternative accounts of moral education they propose.

In recent work (Hand, 2014a, 2014b, 2018), I have attempted to solve the problem for moral education posed by reasonable disagreement about morality. The problem is that, insofar as the content and justification of morality are matters of reasonable disagreement, the aim of bringing it about that children subscribe to moral standards and believe them to be justified cannot be realised except by means of indoctrination. The theory of moral education I defend purports to solve this problem by showing that, although much in the moral realm is rationally contentious, some basic moral standards enjoy the support of a sound justificatory argument. Subscription to a familiar set of moral prohibitions and requirements is needed to ameliorate what David Copp calls the ‘problem of sociality’ (Copp, 2009, p.22) – the standing propensity of human social groups to outbreaks of conflict and breakdowns in cooperation. Parents and teachers can cultivate children’s subscription to these standards on the basis of this argument without incurring the charge of indoctrination. John White (2016, 2017) and John Tillson (2017) have both taken issue with my view. In this article I reply to their objections and offer some critical remarks on their own educational recommendations.

My discussion is divided into four sections. In the first, I defend my framing of the problem for moral education against White’s objection that there is something awry with my account of indoctrination. In the second, I respond to the accusation, made by both White and Tillson, that the problem-of-sociality justification for basic moral standards is ‘foundationalist’ and yet fails to meet the desiderata of a foundationalist justification. In the third, I address the worry, also raised by both critics, that the justification founders on a free-rider problem. And in the fourth, I advance some objections of my own to the alternative accounts of moral education White and Tillson sketch.

Indoctrination

The concept of indoctrination is notoriously contested and White has long defended the idea that indoctrinatory teaching is distinguished by an illegitimate intention on the part of the indoctrinator. Back in 1967, he proposed that the indoctrinator must be trying to induce belief ‘in such a way that nothing will shake that belief’ (White, 1967, p.181). His latest proposal is that the indoctrinator must be ‘trying to prevent reflection on a belief’ (White, 2016, p.452). As the mere fact of reasonable disagreement about morality gives us no reason to think that moral educators must have belief-insulating or reflection-preventing intentions, my ‘problem’ for moral education may be illusory.

I disagree with White that his favoured definition of indoctrination captures ‘how the term is standardly used’ (ibid.). In my estimation, we standardly apply the term to teaching processes that result in non-rationally-held beliefs, regardless of what the

teacher intends. That is to say, I take the distinguishing feature of indoctrination to be a certain kind of consequence, not a certain kind of intention. But nothing much turns on which of us is right about ordinary usage. What matters is whether teaching rationally contentious beliefs as if they were known to be true results in those beliefs being non-rationally held, and whether educators therefore have a duty to avoid such teaching.

I think it does and they do. Beliefs are matters of reasonable disagreement when the evidence and argument bearing on them is subject to more than one plausible interpretation. If a teacher wishes to persuade a learner that such beliefs are true, she cannot do so by rational demonstration, by producing compelling evidence or decisive arguments. She must instead resort to non-rational means of persuasion, to some form of manipulation or psychological pressure, to impart the desired beliefs. But beliefs into which a learner has been cajoled, bullied or seduced are beliefs she has come to hold on a basis other than the force of evidence and argument. They are, that is to say, beliefs she has come to hold non-rationally.

Teaching of this kind ought to be avoided because of the difficulty of shifting or amending non-rationally-held beliefs. Insofar as beliefs are held on the basis of evidence and argument, they are open to revision and correction. One is prepared to modify or relinquish them in the light of fresh evidence, or fresh appraisals of old evidence. Insofar as beliefs are held non-rationally, on the other hand, they are highly resistant to reassessment. Because they are not founded on evidence and argument, the discovery of counter-evidence and counter-argument has little or no effect on them. Here, observes John Wilson, 'we have taken over, or put to sleep, a central part of the child's personality - his ability to think rationally in a certain area' (Wilson *et al*, 1967, p.174).

White demands 'some account' of why indoctrination is 'a bad thing', and considers it an advantage of his definition that we can readily see what is wrong with teaching that 'aims at preventing people from thinking for themselves' (White, 2016, p.452). My reply is that we can see just as readily what is wrong with teaching that *results* in people being prevented from thinking for themselves, whether that is intended or not.

'Foundationalism'

The problem-of-sociality justification purports to show that there are good non-moral reasons for subscribing to basic moral standards. It purports, that is to say, to give a satisfactory answer to the question 'Why be moral?'. If the justification is sound, it should suffice to persuade a rational agent who does not yet subscribe to moral standards that she ought to do so, and to dispel the doubts of a rational agent who subscribes to moral standards but wonders if she might do better without them.

A *standard* specifies something to be done or not done; it is 'anything that is expressible by an imperative' (Copp, 1995, p.20). A person *subscribes* to a standard when she intends to comply with it, feels good about complying with it and bad about failing to comply with it, and habitually does comply with it. And subscription to a standard is *moral* when it is *universally-enlisting* and *penalty-endorsing*; that is, when the subscriber wants and expects everyone to comply with it and supports some kind of punishment for non-compliance.

Morality is optional for human beings. We have a choice about whether or not we go in for universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to standards. If we do go in for it, we should have good reasons for doing so. Because morality involves not just holding ourselves to certain standards but holding everyone else to them too – and on pain of punishment – we should insist on a sound justification for it.

One such justification is to be found in our collective need to ameliorate the problem of sociality. The problem of sociality arises because of three contingent but permanent features of the human condition. These features, sometimes described as the 'circumstances of justice', are (i) rough equality, (ii) limited sympathy and (iii) moderate scarcity of resources. Discussions of these features or circumstances are to be found in the writings of many philosophers, including Thomas Hobbes (1929 [1651]), David Hume (1896 [1739]), H.L.A. Hart (1994 [1961]), G.J. Warnock (1971), John Rawls (1971) and J.L. Mackie (1977). It is not difficult to see why the combination of these features is a recipe for trouble. Because we are roughly equal in strength and intelligence, we each know that we have a reasonable chance of coming out on top in any physical or strategic conflict, and we are each aware that those around us know the same thing about their chances. Because our sympathy for strangers is limited, in the sense of being notably weaker than self-love and familial love, we are inclined to prioritise the safety and satisfaction of ourselves and our loved ones over the safety and satisfaction of others. And because resources are not abundant enough to satisfy everyone's needs and wants, we are forced into competition with each other for access to goods in short supply. The clear implication of these circumstances, taken together, is that there is, in human social groups, a standing propensity to outbreaks of conflict and breakdowns in cooperation.

While we are often motivated directly by sympathy and self-interest to cooperate with each other and refrain from harming each other, these motives are not sufficient to the task of sustaining cooperation and averting conflict. They do not reliably yield peace and productivity. To ameliorate this problem we need a supplementary kind of motivation for keeping to cooperative agreements and treating each other in non-harmful ways. We need the kind of motivation that subscription to moral standards provides. The basic moral standards justified by this argument include prohibitions on killing and causing harm, stealing and extorting, lying and cheating, and requirements to treat others fairly, keep one's promises and help those in need. To deal with the danger to each person of others coming 'to dispossesse, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life, or liberty' (Hobbes, 1929 [1651], p.95), there must be standards that afford basic protection to people and their property; and to overcome the distrust that threatens to make us 'lose our harvests for want of mutual confidence and security' (Mackie, 1977, pp.111), there must be standards that oblige us to be fair, honest and reliable in our dealings with each other, and to extend each other a helping hand in times of need.

This, then, is the justification for subscribing to basic moral standards I propose we should offer to children, alongside our attempts to cultivate in them the conative, affective and behavioural dispositions in which subscription to those standards consists. An objection to this proposal advanced by both White and Tillson is that the problem-of-sociality justification is 'foundationalist' and yet fails to meet the desiderata of a foundationalist justification. Here is Tillson:

Hand takes a foundationalist approach to moral epistemology. According to such accounts, 'a moral belief is justified if and only if it is either self-justifying or bears an appropriate inferential relation to a belief that is self-justifying' (McMahan, 2000, p.110). To fill this role of a self-justifying moral belief, Hand appeals to what he calls 'the problem of sociality'... I deny that Hand has identified a foundational moral truth. (Tillson, 2017, pp.169-70)

White too sees me as taking a 'foundationalist approach' (White, 2017, p.340) but shirking the obligation to supply a self-justifying foundation. He argues as follows:

As Hart sees it, if we begin from the – reasonable – assumption that human beings should continue to survive, the preconditions of their continuing survival also have to be in place, and these include the moral prohibitions in question... Hand's theory of moral education rests on this assumption. A devotee of rationalism will press further and ask why there should be continued survival... If the supporter of survival were able to produce a further justification, that, too, if sound, would have to be a normative statement. We are in the territory of the infinite regress. It was to stop this that intuitionists of old posited their self-evident starting points, and that Richard Peters followed Kant in claiming justifications embedded in the presuppositions of moral injunctions. Hand offers us no such remedy. (White, 2016, pp.451-2)

Now, just what does and does not count as foundationalism in moral theory is far from clear. I hold that there are good non-moral reasons for subscribing to moral standards; if, for some, that is reason enough to call my view 'foundationalist', I shall not object to the label. But it is plain that White and Tillson want more from a foundationalist moral theory than this. What they seem to want is an account of how and why anything at all gives us reason to act. That, at any rate, is the implication of White's insistence that the foundationalist will 'press further' than the survival value of morality and ask what reason there is to survive. But the justification for morality I defend does not purport to justify any and every exercise of practical reason; in that sense it is a rather less ambitious theoretical undertaking than White and Tillson take it to be.

The problem-of-sociality justification assumes that people have reason to pursue the things they want – and that they want a wide variety of things. It assumes, too, that they have reason to comply with the standards they subscribe to – and that they subscribe to standards of many different kinds. It asks whether a person who does not yet subscribe to moral standards, and therefore does not yet have reason to comply with them, has any good reason to change that state of affairs. And it concludes that she does: for her own sake and the sake of those she cares about, she has reason to take seriously the propensity of human social groups to outbreaks of conflict and breakdowns in cooperation, and to recognise that ameliorating the problem requires universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to some basic standards of conduct.

So Tillson is right that I have not produced 'a self-justifying moral belief': indeed, I take it as read that morality is *not* self-justifying. And White is right that I have not attempted to justify the non-moral reasons invoked to justify moral subscription: it is not the force of *those* reasons on which the question 'Why be moral?' casts doubt. The problem-of-sociality justification may or may not be a kind of foundationalism, but it is not the kind White and Tillson have in their sights.

The moral free-rider

Another objection to the problem-of-sociality justification advanced by both White and Tillson is that it founders on a free-rider problem. White writes:

Suppose an articulate student in a Hand-based moral education programme says ‘I can see why if there were no rules forbidding things like breaking promises and stealing, social life would break down, but if I steal sweets from the newsagents after school that won’t cause such chaos. So the likelihood of social breakdown is not a reason *for me* not to steal, however cogent a reason it might be in some more general way. I don’t have an interest in holding myself to a rule of conduct like this one.’ Since, on Hand’s view, moral education involves giving learners reasons why they should follow moral rules, he needs to say more than he does. (White, 2016, p.453)

And Tillson puts it like this:

Hand’s theory fails to address the problem of the free-rider. That is, it fails to address the sneaky strategy one might have of (in one’s self-interest) disregarding the requirements of morality where it will go unnoticed, while benefitting from other people following them. (Tillson, 2017, p.170)ⁱ

Let me begin with a point of clarification. The problem-of-sociality justification is supposed to give people a non-moral reason for *subscribing* to moral standards, not an in-the-moment reason to *comply* with them. The thought is not, of course, that a child tempted to steal sweets from the newsagents after school might be dissuaded from doing so by the prospect of a breakdown in social life. What should dissuade her in the moment is her subscription to the standard ‘do not steal’ – her commitment to not stealing, her habit of resisting the temptation to steal, her aversion to the guilt and shame attendant on theft. The thought, rather, is that she may, from time to time, stand back from her subscription and ask what value there is in having this cluster of conative, affective and behavioural dispositions. It is in these moments of calm reflection, when she entertains the possibility of shedding her inclination to hold herself and others to the prohibition on stealing, that the problem-of-sociality justification does its work.

I hope this clarification shows that the justificatory appeal to social breakdown is not as eccentric as it may appear in White’s example; but it does not directly address the problem of the free-rider. For it remains true that peace and productivity depend on the subscription to moral standards of *most* but not *all* people. A handful of non-subscribers, though certainly troublesome, will not fatally compromise the enterprise of averting conflict and sustaining cooperation. So it appears to be an option for rational agents merely to *feign* subscription to moral standards, while actually being willing to violate them whenever their interests are served by doing so and the chances of detection are low. They can then enjoy the benefits of belonging to a community of moral subscribers without having to pay the costs of subscription themselves. They can, that is to say, free-ride on the morality of others.

In fact, however, free-riding on morality is *not* an option for rational agents, at least not for rational agents with recognisably human interests and sympathies. Three considerations count against it, and collectively they are decisive. The first is the obvious point that, if *everyone* reasoned like the free-rider and opted merely to feign subscription to moral standards, the enterprise of averting conflict and sustaining cooperation *would* soon collapse. There is plainly something amiss with a reason for action that only looks plausible if most people are unmoved by it.

The second point is that feigning moral subscription is rather more difficult than it first appears. To subscribe to moral standards is to have a stable set of conative, affective and behavioural dispositions, to be the sort of person who intends to conduct herself in a certain way, habitually does conduct herself in that way, and feels ashamed of herself when she does not. Successfully convincing others that one is a person of that sort, when in fact one lacks these dispositions and is entirely at ease with conduct that violates the standards, is no mean feat. The pretence must be kept up more or less continuously and with more or less everyone, including those with whom one has intimate personal or familial relationships. To borrow terms from David Gauthier (1986), human beings may not be *transparent* (that is, such that their dispositions are fully and unmistakably accessible to others), but they are at least *translucent* (that is, such that their dispositions are at least partially and defeasibly accessible to others). It is easy enough to pretend to be something one is not in a brief meeting with a stranger, but our translucency makes it difficult to maintain the illusion for long or with close acquaintances, let alone permanently and with all acquaintances. The cost of feigning subscription to moral standards, in terms of the effort required to keep up the pretence, may be significantly higher than the cost of actually subscribing.

Third, and most importantly, the case for free-riding rests on the false assumption that human beings are purely self-interested. Even if the cost of feigning subscription to moral standards is lower than the cost of actually subscribing, this calculation leaves out of account the cost *to others* of the free-rider's violations. But human beings are sympathetic as well as self-interested. Our sympathy is limited, to be sure, but it is a salient feature of our motivational set. And it plays an important role in the problem-of-sociality justification for morality. The good reason I have for subscribing to basic moral standards is that their currency in society makes life safer and easier for me *and everyone else*. Because I am strongly invested in my own welfare and at least somewhat invested in the welfare of others, the fact that everyone benefits from my moral subscription is a significant part of its rational appeal. My prudential and altruistic preferences are in alignment in my judgment that subscription is justified. Moral free-riding only looks attractive to those unmoved by the harmful impact of moral violations on others; and that is not what human beings are like.

The alternative accounts

I turn, finally, to the alternative accounts of moral education proposed by White and Tillson. Here I must be brief: I shall do no more than indicate what I take to be the principal deficiencies in their proposals.

White's recommendations for moral educators are, in fact, strikingly similar to my own. We both think moral education should involve cultivating children's subscription to

basic moral standards, and that children can and should be given good reasons for subscribing to these standards. We differ only on what we take those good reasons to be. For me, they arise from our collective need to ameliorate the problem of sociality; for White, they arise simply from concern for the wellbeing of others:

What I *do* say is that [basic moral] rules are so fundamental that every society needs them, and I itemise dispositions not to lie, break promises, harm people physically or mentally, in the list of dispositions that I think should constitute an education in altruism. My argument is not, therefore, that education in altruism should replace the content of moral education as Hand understands it, but that it should incorporate it. It does this by giving not lying (etc.) a rationale in terms of the protection or promotion of people's wellbeing and building up dispositions directed towards these. (White, 2016, pp.456-7)

My theory of moral education explicitly allows for the possibility that there may be other good arguments, besides the problem-of-sociality justification, for subscribing to basic moral standards. If there is a good argument premised solely on concern for the wellbeing of others, then I should happily endorse its promulgation, alongside the problem-of-sociality justification, in moral inquiry. Unfortunately, White does not spell out the argument he has in mind, and I am not sure how it would run. If sympathy or concern for others were sufficiently stable, motivating and catholic in scope, it is not clear why we should need moral standards at all. The necessity for universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to standards arises because our sympathies are *limited*, in the sense of being unevenly distributed and only intermittently motivating. Hume puts the point like this:

[The poets] easily perceived, if every man had tender regard for another, or if nature supplied abundantly all our wants and desires, that the jealousy of interest, which justice supposes, could no longer have place; nor would there be any occasion for those distinctions and limits of property and possession, which at present are in use among mankind. Encrease to a sufficient degree the benevolence of men, or the bounty of nature, and you render justice useless, by supplying its place with much nobler virtues, and more valuable blessings. (Hume, 1896 [1739], pp.494-5)

Perhaps White's argument takes this into account, and couples a reliance on concern for the wellbeing of others with a recognition that sympathies are limited and resources moderately scarce, making it necessary to supplement altruistic concern with moral obligation. But, if so, I am at a loss to know how his preferred justification for basic moral standards is supposed to differ from mine.

Tillson's approach is rather different. Whereas White and I agree that there are good reasons educators can present to children for subscribing to a determinate set of basic moral standards, Tillson appears to reject this idea. He proposes, instead, that moral educators should proceed by a method of reflective equilibrium that helps children to render coherent the set of moral judgments and principles to which they are intuitively drawn. Fairly obviously, insofar as different children are intuitively drawn to different moral judgments and principles, the coherent moral schemes they end up with will be different too. Tillson does not shrink from this conclusion:

It may be that people start off with different intuitions, and that the process will just bring people to different systems in light of that; this is a legitimate worry that I cannot completely defuse. Indeed, while we might attempt to persuade one another, there is no guarantee that we will all be able to converge in our opinions through rational discourse. (Tillson, 2017, p.178)

Tillson's account seems to me unsatisfactory for three reasons. First, and most obviously, I think there are sound non-moral reasons for subscribing to basic moral standards that are quite independent of children's moral intuitions. We do children a serious educational disservice if we fail to acquaint them with those reasons.

Second, the recommended procedure of reflective equilibrium is only a way of rendering a set of moral judgments and principles internally coherent; but internal coherence carries no justificatory weight. If the moral judgments and principles to which a child is intuitively drawn are all quite wrongheaded, then no amount of moving back and forth between them, no amount of adjusting, balancing and reconciling, will serve to justify the resulting moral scheme. The scheme one gets out of a reflective equilibrium procedure is only as justified as the judgments and principles one puts into it. A child raised to be morally appalled by masturbation, premarital sex, oral sex and homosexuality may have no difficulty in rendering her moral intuitions internally coherent, but it hardly follows that her highly restrictive sexual morality is justified.

And third, Tillson mysteriously ignores the part of moral education that determines children's moral intuitions in the first place: *moral formation*. What a child finds morally objectionable or commendable, repugnant or admirable, depends on the moral formation she receives in the earliest years of life – the things she is instructed to do and prohibited from doing, the things for which she is rewarded and punished, the things for which she sees others being praised or condemned. A fundamental aim of my own account of moral education, and I think of White's too, is to furnish parents and teachers with guidance on the proper content of moral formation, not just on the methods and purposes of moral inquiry. But Tillson sidesteps the question of formation entirely, treating children's moral reactions and inclinations as givens, as the data with which they will work in their moral inquiries. That evasion rather reduces the interest of his account.

I am grateful to White and Tillson for their close engagement with my theory of moral education; in my judgment, however, the objections they raise miss their mark, and the alternatives they offer do not pass muster.

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ⁱ In fact I *do* address the problem of the free-rider in the book-length presentation of my theory (see Hand, 2018, pp.69-75), but White and Tillson wrote their critiques before the book was published.