Mutual Understanding:
The Basis of Respect…and Ethical Education[1]

Robert Kunzman
Indiana University

We are convinced that it is ignorance, not knowledge, that makes enemies of men.[2]

Assertions such as these are common in both politics and multicultural education, in part because they contain important truths about social relations. But the often implicitly accepted converse — mutual understanding fosters social harmony — does not bear up under scrutiny. Sometimes, the more we know about someone else, the more familiar we are with their way of life, the less inclined we are to co-exist peacefully. Greater understanding amidst ethical difference does not necessarily lead to more harmonious relations. Nevertheless, mutual understanding *is* a vital goal of civic/multicultural education — but the argument is more appropriately grounded in a conception of mutual respect I defend here: in order to respect others, we must understand their ethical frameworks, the narrative structures that shape their visions of the good life. Such understanding is a necessary, but not sufficient, element of mutual respect. As I will explain, the depth of understanding required for respect varies according to social context; the less ethical common ground we share, the greater our civic burden of understanding others becomes. In our contemporary society marked by great diversity of ethical projects, mutual respect requires significant effort toward understanding those projects, and points to the need for students to learn how to engage thoughtfully across ethical difference.

An introductory word about my use of the term "ethical education": Bernard Williams has observed that, unlike our modern conceptions, the ancient notion of ethics included not only a focus on moral obligations, but also a concern for what makes a full and meaningful life.[3] The focus on obligation has been particularly evident in educational psychology, the discipline most influential in the development of current moral education curricula. Psychologist Lawrence Walker concedes that the field of moral education "has been overly focused on moral rationality." Morality is also an intrapersonal enterprise because it is integral to the how-shall-we-then-live existential question — it involves basic values, lifestyle, and identity."[4] In this light, an ethical education involves not only considerations of right and wrong, but explores how our broader — and differing — conceptions of human flourishing influence how we navigate those considerations.

MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER

My argument rests on the foundational premise that we owe respect to others as persons. This raises the question of what it is about humans that is inherently worthy of respect. Stephen Darwall offers a dual notion of respect: recognition respect and appraisal respect. The latter is what we usually mean when we say someone deserves our respect; we evaluate and commend features or characteristics of a person, such as honesty or generosity. By contrast, Darwall explains,

> To have recognition respect for a person as such is not necessarily to give him *credit* for anything in particular, for…we are not appraising him or her as a person at all. Rather we are judging that the fact that he or she is a person places moral constraints on our behavior.[5]

Recognition respect emphasizes the incommensurate worth of others. It is an egalitarian attitude that, unlike appraisal respect, makes no distinction based on merit. It is the respect owed to (all) others as equals. This universal emphasis resembles a Kantian version of mutual respect, in which each person is treated as an instance of the universal and thus accorded respect simply by virtue of their personhood. While the egalitarian nature of recognition or universal respect is vital, such a conception alone is insufficient because none of us are mere instances of the universal. Rather, we are particular individuals whose very uniqueness constitutes our worth and hence the respect we are owed.

What we need is a conception of respect for persons that integrates the universal unconditionality of Kantian respect with one more attentive to human particularity and personal identity. One promising possibility is offered by Loren Lomasky, who points to humans' natural pursuit of "projects" as a foundational rationale for mutual respect. He describes projects as the ends of human actions which "reach indefinitely into the future, play a central role within the ongoing endeavors of the individual, and provide a significant degree of structural stability to an individual's life."[6] Projects are, in a sense, a narrative structure. Some projects address external states of affairs, such as a goal to help cure cancer. Others focus on the kind of person one wishes to be: someone who values a happy family life, for example, over career advancement.

The status of humans as project pursuers merits this integrated notion of respect we need, involving both impersonal and personal elements. It is impersonal in its applicability to everyone, but personal in that ultimate value resides in the particularity of each project pursuer. Gregory Vlastos suggests the image of parental love to analogize the relationship between universal respect and attention to individuality.[7] A parent properly loves his or her child unconditionally, but this love manifests through an intimate understanding of the child's individuality; a love missing either facet would be found somehow wanting. Similarly, others are not merely dim reflections of a universal Platonic good worthy of respect. The universal respect we owe others finds its locus of value in the particularity of individuals as project pursuers.

While not committing to the terminology of "project pursuit," Thomas Hill, Jr. suggests a similar route via a "modified" Kantian conception of morality." What is called for is not merely respect for the general capacities and rights they share with others" — Darwall's recognition respect —"but also appropriate attention and response to what they, as individuals, count as most significant about 'who they are.'" Hill offers a synthesis that merges the universal and the particular. He continues, "Respecting humanity, then, requires more than a proper attitude toward people in the abstract; it requires respect for people as particular individuals, whose 'identity' (as we say) is bound up with particular projects, personal attachments, and traditions."[8]

We should note that the broader Kantian conception is not left behind, however. The emphasis on personal uniqueness, the individuality of our projects and the specificity of our social location, can be carried to an extreme that seeks to deny any common basis for moral reasoning. Our projects vary widely, and our social

experiences generate perspectives that others do not share, but nevertheless we all have projects and we all navigate social space. Our social roles may shape our projects in deeply significant ways, but we ought not regard others entirely in terms of the roles they occupy.[9] Our equal status as project pursuers should not be overwhelmed by the need to recognize and understand our particularities.

The requirements of this mutual understanding are determined by context. Here, Lomasky's notion of humans as project pursuers can help illuminate the contextual link between mutual respect and understanding. In some interpersonal circumstances, we have a familiar and implicit understanding of others' projects and the ethical frameworks that inform them, at least to the extent that is necessary for respectful interaction. But on a civic level, this familiarity cannot be assumed. In a diverse society, our projects (what counts as significant about who we are) will vary widely. To merely acknowledge that these projects vary, however, without seeking a deeper understanding of their particularities, produces a civic realm marked by ignorant tolerance. Such tolerance does not constitute the respect I describe here.

To illustrate the contextual requirements of respect, consider the issue first at an individual level. "Do I have to understand someone's projects, her ethical framework, in order to respect her?" the objection might begin. "Surely I can respect people — acquaintances, even strangers — without such deep understanding! If not, there are not going to be too many people I truly respect." In response, we should recall that this thick notion of respect merges universal and particularistic elements. The universal requirements of respect — recognizing the humanity we all share and the obligations of tolerance it invokes — can and ought to exist between strangers as well as soulmates. So while these expectations are a baseline constant, the requirements of respect I have described in terms of project recognition exist on a continuum, determined by social context. Ordinary, low-stake interactions with strangers, such as paying for groceries or sharing a park bench, do not carry extensive requirements of respect and thus deeper understanding. Even someone's right to worship according to their own religious tradition, for instance, is a generally accepted notion in American society; the respect involved here doesn't usually require understanding of particular traditions. But if I sought to restrict a particular form of worship (refusing to sanction workbreaks for an employee to pray at appointed hours, for instance), the context introduces significantly greater requirements for mutual understanding if respect is to be realized between us.

But what about the many relationships we characterize as significant and enjoying more than universal respect, an objector might persist, but that have never involved a deliberate exploration of one another's projects? Is this assumed deeper respect merely illusory? Here we should recognize that people may interact using similar ethical conceptions while never explicitly voicing them. This would explain why I can interact with many professional colleagues in an atmosphere of significant mutual respect without us having explicitly considered one another's ethical sources. Total harmony is far from assumed here, however; just because I share with my teaching colleague general support for autonomy in adolescents does not mean we will not someday find ourselves in serious conflict over the appropriate response

when one of our students engages in self-destructive behavior. At this juncture we will need to understand each other's ethical sources (as they inform our projects) more deeply if mutual respect is to be maintained. A sign of disrespect would be if I disagreed vehemently with my colleague but made no effort to understand the ethical sources that informed her position. Ethical conflict, in fact, seems one of the most likely sources of increased requirements for mutual understanding and the respect which motivates it.

Now let us extend these examples of individual interactions to a civic level. The previous illustrations suggest that low-stake interactions can occur with little effort toward understanding others' particularities, thanks to assumed ethical commonalities (for example, I will pay the cashier what he says I owe, or our students should be able to criticize a class text). The sustaining bulwark of common ethical commitments thins dramatically, however, in our broader American civil society. This is not to say that most Americans do not share many assumptions about moral obligation — character education advocates are fond of pointing to a common core of values, such as caring, honesty, fairness, and responsibility.[10] But the distinction between moral obligation and the broader ethical commitments that inform them is crucial here; the value of responsibility, for instance, makes sense only within a broader ethical framework that addresses questions such as, "For whom am I responsible, and under what circumstances, and why?" So on a civic level, while most citizens would share the value of caring for the poor, the ensuing public policy choices are at least as plentiful as the many visions of the good life people in our society hold.

The educational implications of these requirements for respect are significant. The cognitive, empathic, and deliberative bar for such an ethical education is a high one. It requires a philosophy that, while seeking to explore a range of ethical sources, values depth over breadth. As Hill contends, "To study a wide range of cultures superficially, like sampling many dishes at a smorgasbord, may be personally rewarding, but is unlikely to contribute significantly to overcoming the problems of cross-cultural misunderstanding and disrespect."[11] Yet this seems to be the most common pedagogical approach in our K-12 schools: a thin sampling of many perspectives but little commitment to grappling with the challenges that such diversity presents. Unless we understand the ethical frameworks that inform deliberation about living together in society, we have not met the requirements of respect. Granted, this understanding will never be complete, but certainly a significant and vast expanse exists between willful ignorance of another's projects and first-person understanding. It is the movement from the former toward the latter that ethical education should foster, thus helping us fulfill our foundational obligation to demonstrate respect toward others.

It is important to recognize that seeking to understanding someone's project pursuit necessarily involves a level of evaluation, of placing those pursuits in relation to my previous understanding. Accordingly, I cannot adequately respect someone's projects without evaluating them. In fact, an attitude of unexamined acceptance can often indicate a *lack* of respect. What is crucial to distinguish,

however, is the *process* of evaluation from the *outcome*; respect depends on the former but not the latter. Respect requires that we take other ethical projects seriously enough to investigate and consider their values when the context demands; it does not require that we ultimately agree with their substance. Our respect for others is based on the recognition of the particularity of others' projects, not endorsement of the specific nature of the projects themselves. We can respect others while ultimately disapproving of some of their projects.

For example, respect requires that I give a full hearing to the parents and student who request an alternative classroom text, one more congenial to their religious beliefs. It may even require forbearance on my part that includes both my disapproval of their "project" and my willingness to accommodate them nonetheless. If I determine that a request entails disrespect for other's projects — for example, demanding that everyone use their proselytizing text — I might reasonably reject their request, but this outcome does not mean I have not shown them respect. Indeed, an indiscriminate acceptance of widely conflicting projects would often result in an incoherent ethical system in which respect is actually shown to none of them. I cannot approve of an ethical project based on racial superiority, for example, while also endorsing universal human rights.

A noteworthy but complicating corollary here is that respect need not be recognized by its recipient as respect. This seems particularly salient in situations where the understanding we gain of another leads not to greater acceptance but rather to intolerance of his ethical framework or at least its manifestations in his actions. Our intolerance will likely be inaccurately perceived by this person as disrespect, but as I have argued, the evaluative outcome does not determine whether respect has been given. Additionally, although evaluative criteria are often tremendously complex — involving not only analysis of discrete beliefs but also consideration of the relationship between a narrative and its social context — this should not leave us resigned to a subjectivism in which respect is purely a matter of individual perception. It is certainly possible, of course, that my evaluation involved misinterpretation, even when undertaken with the best of motivations. But the appeal to misinterpretation only makes sense if reliable criteria for evaluation do in fact exist. To insist otherwise is to concede that anyone's critique of another's ethical framework — or anyone's ethical framework itself — is beyond reproach or error.

ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

What implications does this "thick" notion of respect for others, involving efforts toward mutual understanding, hold for ethical education? To answer this question, we need to explore further what we mean by understanding others' projects, which entails understanding others in their particular selves, their personal identity. When we seek to understand someone's identity, or express our own, we come up against the question, "Who am I?" We answer by communicating what is of central importance to us, what provides the framework from which we determine what is worthwhile." Mutual respect obliges us to understand the ethical frameworks of others. Implicit here is the assertion that we all have such frameworks — if we claim to know where we stand on matters of importance to us, we have an ethical framework, and this framework helps shape our sense of identity.

The term "narrative" is used by many philosophers to describe the way our identities are shaped over time by a range of experiences and beliefs. Charles Taylor contends,

> In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.…My life always has this degree of narrative understanding, that I understand my present action in the form of an 'and then': there was A (what I am), and then I do B (what I project to become).[12]

While the notion of narrative is a particularly evocative one, this shouldn't be taken as merely a string of experiences that add up to a particular self. The self is not simply a series of attachments or evaluations. Rather, the various identifications that arise over a life's course contribute to a broader framework within which we stand to evaluate the world around us. Hill emphasizes this synergy of experience: "The whole of a life, a personal history with loved ones, and significant episodes within these often have for us an *organic value*, that is, a value in the whole that cannot be equated to any sum of values of 'parts.'"[13]

Our selves, then, are inextricably linked with — and in many ways defined by — our various ethical commitments (and the projects that inform them) as they comprise a broader framework. My use of—"ethical" here distinguishes them from the range of more trivial commitments that fill our lives — picking up the dry cleaning, for instance, or that cell phone contract we foolishly signed. Other commitments that we might consider rather humdrum, however — homeroom parent, city council member — may in fact point toward significant ethical beliefs, such as a determination to be deeply involved in our child's education or a conviction that we owe service to our community.

To genuinely respect someone, to strive to understand her identity, we need as full a picture as possible of her ethical framework, the horizon within which she moves and chooses and lives. This horizon often extends beyond that individual's actions and choices, however, and includes the various communities in which we participate or of which we find ourselves a part. Perhaps most commonly an ethnic or religious affiliation, multiple communal identifications often exist within the same individual (think for instance of a self-described Chicana, whose gender and ethnic affiliations significantly shape her identity). Borrowing Gadamer's terminology, Roberto Goizueta uses the image of "interpretive horizon" to emphasize how our social, cultural, political, and psychological presuppositions serve to both enable and limit our perspective: "A horizon both makes vision possible (without a horizon, we would be unable to make distinctions among different objects within the horizon or understand them in relation to each other) and, at the same time, limits that vision (we cannot see objects that lie beyond the horizon)."[14] Clearly, an ethical education based on mutual respect and understanding requires a wide-ranging consideration of what forms the identities of our fellow citizens.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING FOR ETHICAL EDUCATION

By now a sense of the educational implications of a commitment to mutual respect for ethical education should start to emerge, particularly when considered in light of current educational models. Both the overly narrow focus of "morality as obligation" curricula or the vague, decontextualized programs of much "character

education" do little to address the complexity of our particular ethical selves, and thus fail to foster the depth of understanding that mutual respect requires.

Moral education concerned solely with obligation and behavior clearly falls short of an ethical education rooted in mutual understanding. Structurally, a "thin" approach that seeks to affirm a universalistic moral core while denying its dependence on deeper ethical sources proves insufficient for an ethic of justice or care. As Eamonn Callan argues,

> Given that the thin ethical concepts are parasitic on the thick ones, a program of moral education such as Kohlberg's, which takes justice as its governing concept while claiming to discount the "bag of virtues," must be worse than misguided; it must be incoherent, because justice is virtually bereft of meaning when torn from its background in an array of thick ethical concepts. Without that background, the use of thin concepts can be little more than pure caprice.[15]

While Kohlberg's original, strictly rationalist approach to moral education has been largely abandoned, the emphasis on a universalistic moral core continues in much psychological research and the curricula it generates.[16]

Besides its structural weakness, the focus on obligation and behavior leaves us with a thin veneer of moral obligation that fails to resonate with many students inspired by far richer and more varied sources. James Davidson Hunter observes, "The net effect of this denial of particularity is to engage in some extraordinary evasions," resulting in an ethical life that is, in Taylor's evocative words, "narrowed or flattened."[17] The procedural rationality that is left when ethical sources are ignored is inadequate for students whose personal narratives include a range of influences. Universal precepts — whose status as the lowest common denominator serves as their primary justification — are by themselves insufficient for robust ethical dialogue.

Character education, on the other hand, with its focus on "core virtues," might be seen as escaping my critique which emphasizes the centrality of strong ethical sources. In fact, its detractors sometimes criticize modern character education because of its explicit endorsement of certain virtues and their implicit links to dominant religious sources. Character education advocates generally respond, however, that "these basic human values transcend religious and cultural differences and express our common humanity."[18] Either way, its practices neglect a concern for particularity. Simply insisting that we "all" share such standards will hardly make those standards students' own, at least in ways that will enable them to navigate the myriad ethical contexts of their lives.

From where do these students' ethical sources originate? At the broadest level of response, we can point to whatever culture(s) surround us. In the parlance of multicultural education, "ethnic" is usually the assumed modifier when "culture" is used. The role of ethnicity is undoubtedly salient in the formation of students' ethical identities, but of course many other influences abound, including religion, gender, and sexuality. Ethical education needs to provide room for the expression and exploration of these various influences. The implications here are substantial. As Evelyn Sears observes, "Understanding of diverse human cultures necessarily includes familiarity with the theological and philosophical underpinnings of those

cultures. When those underpinnings are excised from the curriculum, what remains is simply that perpetuation of stereotypes via 'Heroes and Holidays' and 'Food and Fiestas' curricula."[19]

Of course, if all that mutual respect requires is a tolerance compatible with unswerving, ignorant adherence to one's own good, then a more evasive ethical education makes sense. We need not delve into the complexity of others' ethical frameworks, but can make do with a thin, formulaic approach to citizenship. But respect demands more than tolerance. In an ethically diverse society with wide interpenetration of groups — culturally, politically, economically, socially — ethical disagreement is inevitable. If such a society stops at mere tolerance, there is little to prevent inter-group relations from being characterized by an ignorant contempt. Mutual respect as I have described it does not guarantee any less ethical disagreement, but the mutual understanding it requires offers greater hope for relationships based on more than dismissive antipathy.

Mutual respect is not merely instrumental in the pursuit of the common good, but partly *constitutive* of it. To the extent that we do not respect others as project pursuers — and thus seek to understand their projects — we have neglected what is good in and of itself. There is no common good with mere tolerance. Certainly an absence of tolerance — a *modus vivendi* of individual goods constrained by instrumental truce, for instance — cannot claim to support a common good. But even a genuine moral tolerance along the lines of Rawls's constitutional consensus provides only a limited set of moral-political restraints as its highest value; the moral equality of all persons is not a substantive ideal, and thus the common good of just community cannot be fully realized. The justification for mutual understanding rests in its foundational role in demonstrating respect to others, and ethical education — as challenging as the task may be — should reflect this.

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1. My thanks to Eamonn Callan for his insightful comments on this essay.

2. Kofi Annan, untitled speech at *Global Knowledge 97* conference in Toronto, Canada on June 22, 1997; available from <http://www.icomm.ca/madmagic/kofi.html>.

3. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

4. Lawrence J. Walker, "Moral Exemplarity," in *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education*, ed. William Damon (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), 65-66.

5. Stephen L. Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, ed. Robin S. Dillon (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183, 192.

6. Ibid., 26; Lomasky includes a detailed argument for why children and mentally/physically disabled individuals share the status of project pursuers even while many of them do not pursue projects themselves.

7. Gregory Vlastos, "Justice and Equality," in *Social Justice*, ed. Richard B. Brandt and Kenneth Ewart Boulding (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 44.

8. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Respect for Humanity," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 18, ed. Grethe B. Petersen (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997), 28.

9. R.S. Downie and Elizabeth Telfer, *Respect for Persons* (New York: Shocken Books, 1970), 32.

10. Tom Lickona, Eric Schaps, and Catherine Lewis, "Eleven Principles of Character Education," published by The Character Education Partnership; available from <http://www.character.org/principles/>.

11. Hill, *Respect for Humanity,* 32-33.

12. Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," *The Responsive Community* 6, no. 3 (1996): 47.

13. Hill, *Respect for Humanity*, 25.

14. Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 48.

15. Eamonn Callan, "Tradition and Integrity in Moral Education,""*American Journal of Education* 101, no. 1 (1992): 4.

16. See, for example, the University of Illinois at Chicago's Office of Studies in Moral Development and Education <http://tigger.uic.edu/~lnucci/MoralEd/> particularly research and curricula related to domain theory.

17. James Davidson Hunter, "Leading Children Beyond Good and Evil,""*First Things*, no. 103 (2000): 37; Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 14.

18. Lickona, Schaps, and Lewis, "Eleven Principles of Character Education," principle no. 1.

19. Evelyn Sears, "Is There Room for Religious Subject Matter in Public School Curricula?" in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 227.