

Good Judgment and Moral Outrage

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Given the social and political climate we currently find ourselves in, David Hansen's reflections on educating judgment are quite timely. In the wake of terrorist attacks in the United States, devastating destruction in Afghanistan, growing unrest in the Middle East, daily occurrences of crimes motivated by hatred, and in general, the continued and increasing global divide between the wealthy and the poor, it is obvious that good judgment is all too often in short supply. Moreover, the concern that Hansen argues motivated Montaigne, the need to develop tolerance and humility in the face of civil strife, is one we share today. I thus appreciate Hansen's efforts to revisit Montaigne's ideas for resources that may speak to our moment. The outcome of his efforts is engaging and provocative. Not only do Montaigne's ideas seem to resonate, and concurrently support, those of many contemporary progressive thinkers, but he also offers us thoughtful perspectives on a number of virtues worth exploring more deeply in schools today, such as humility, compassion, solidarity, patience, hopefulness, self-reflection, and respect. The strength of Hansen's essay lies in how he reflects on these ideas and relates them directly to our roles as teachers, to our conceptualization of curriculum, and to our vision of the ultimate purposes of education in a democratic society.

Throughout his essay, Hansen shows the variety of ways in which Montaigne's ideas are still timely and relevant. He nicely supports his assertion that Montaigne's ideas presage many influential contemporary thinkers. In fact, it seems that we can see in Montaigne's *Essais* much of what we know about good, progressive, ethically grounded education. Teachers should facilitate and guide learning, not fill students heads with information and facts. Students should be engaged in their own learning, and be allowed to make meaningful educational decisions for themselves. Selecting a stimulating environment is one of the most important aspects of teaching well. We should harness the power of literature, history, poetry, biography, and philosophy to inspire students and to provide them with models of both good and bad ethical decision-making and judgment. Moral sensitivity and consciousness should be at the heart of teaching and learning. And ultimately, schooling should help students to develop the habits needed to engage the world around them optimistically, yet critically, and with a sense that they can bring about more enriching lives for themselves and those around them. In many ways, good judgment parallels thinking critically. It involves the disposition to seek out evidence, to respect ideas, to tolerate uncertainty, and to search for more harmonious ways of living. There is no doubt that schooling conceived in these ways would help to develop more considerate citizens who exercise better judgment than we see now.

Yet despite the power in the ideas that Hansen reclaims from Montaigne, I cannot help but think there is something important missing, especially if our aspirations are peace, and greater human fulfillment, throughout the world. While the habits of good judgment that Montaigne outlines are necessary, I do not think

they are sufficient to challenge the ever present, and growing, suffering and unrest we see all around us. More specifically, I am not convinced that good judgment alone inspires a passion for social justice, or the kind of moral outrage that would compel people not only to think differently, but also to uphold passionate commitments and act upon them. As I read Hansen's reflections, I am reminded of David Purpel's critique of public education, and his fear that matters of ultimate human concern are eschewed in schools in favor of a type of critical thinking that is often theoretically morally conscious, but practically morally bankrupt; incapacitating rather than enabling. He writes, "our critical studies have taken us to spiritual and moral inarticulateness if not silence; our detachment has led us to the emptiness of the marginality of interested but paralyzed bystanders; and our tolerance has forced us into an unwilling consciousness of moral relativity."¹ In light of these concerns, what seems missing from the conception of good judgment that Hansen builds from Montaigne are compelling criteria, or an inclusive vision of the good life, from which to contextualize our judgment. While such virtues as tolerance, humility, and solidarity are powerful in the abstract; I think we need to connect them to a broader guiding vision of democracy and social justice. This vision would call upon social critique and ameliorative activism as additional virtues necessary for an expanded notion of good judgment. Adding these could better help us, for example, to become intolerant of ethnic cleansing, outraged rather than humbled when our fellow citizens are denied basic human rights, and resistant to solidarity with the rampant greed and destruction of global capitalists.

At least two interconnected ideas that are part of this democratic vision could help to complement the portrait of good judgment drawn by Hansen: the cultivation of both conscientization and moral outrage. Echoing Montaigne's concern that schooling too often fills rather than forms minds, Paulo Freire is an equally ardent critic of a banking style education. In its place, he argues that a problem posing pedagogy could help students to engage the world around them, formulate their own ideas and judgments, challenge oppression and exploitation, and create more enriching and empowered lives. He claims that education should foster conscientization, which involves "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."² Freire calls for good judgment that leads to moral action. This is something we do not talk enough about in schools, as students are rarely implored to apply what they are learning to the task of making the world a better place. In fact, they are rarely taught to think beyond education for self-fulfillment, or to deeply consider the relationship between self and social betterment. Education that promotes conscientization along with, or as part of, good judgment stands a better chance at the kind of "transcendence downwards...to individual expression outwards in the shared life of humanity" that Montaigne called for.

A sense of outrage in the face of unnecessary pain and suffering closely parallels conscientization. Maxine Greene argues that conscientization entails "heightened social consciousness, a wide-awakeness that might make injustice unendurable."³ At its heart, moral outrage is the inability to endure inequity and injustice. It starts with accepting that our individual choices often contribute to perpetuating the

suffering of others, even despite the good intentions that we can convince ourselves that we maintain. It further entails accepting our human responsibility for changing conditions that lead to poverty, war, discrimination, hunger, and unnecessary illness and disease. Purpel suggests that a pedagogy of moral outrage is not aimed at inducing guilt, but at changing our consciousnesses so that we truly see our lives as connected to others, and global harmony as something we each need to work for on a daily basis. Among the worst possible outcomes of schooling are apathy and blindness to the suffering around us, yet they all too often characterize the posture of students and citizens alike. Montaigne accurately opines that we need more than just knowledge to exercise good judgment. Similarly, we need more than just good judgment to bring people and nations together. Intolerance in the face of suffering, commitment to social justice, and faith in our ability to weave good judgment together with moral action are all necessary to meaningful social change. Purpel offers that “what is needed to reduce unnecessary human suffering is not more knowledge,” to which I would add not solely good judgment, “but the will to follow through on our most profound commitments.”⁴ This further entails ongoing discussion and recognition of the kinds of commitments we ought to uphold to one another so as to bring about a more peaceful world.

These most profound commitments gain meaning when they are linked to a moral vision that can help provide the criteria upon which to base our judgment. In terms of this vision, I think the best we have come up with is a Deweyan inspired sense of democracy, where we balance the freedoms and rights of individuals with responsibilities toward others. Such a democratic vision would minimally involve ongoing critical analysis of social problems, openness to change, celebration of diversity, active civic participation, and faith in our human capacity to reduce suffering and create a more just world. The cultivation of good judgment is no doubt an important part of this democratic vision. I especially value the provocation of Hansen’s timely reflections on the contributions of Montaigne to imagining the contours of this vision. According to Montaigne, in reading the ideas of others we “should not be learning their precepts but drinking in their humours.” Hansen argues that this involves tasting “the author’s sense of judgment” and absorbing some of it into our own. It is in this spirit that I have offered my own reflections on Hansen’s ideas. I appreciate how they have helped me to orient my own thinking about the role of good judgment in educating for social justice, moral consciousness, and global peace. Surely good judgment is a necessary component to such education.

1. David E. Purpel, *Moral Outrage in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 190.

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 35.

3. Maxine Greene, “Introduction: Teaching for Social Justice,” in *Teaching for Social Justice*, ed. William Ayers, Jean Ann Hunt, and Therese Quinn (New York: The New Press, 1998), xxx.

4. Purpel, *Moral Outrage in Education*, 19.