Deconstructing a Dilemma:
The Need for an Adequate Conception of (Practical) Reason

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Professor Curren draws attention to worthy efforts implicit in recent programs in "character education" to combine cultivation of thoughtfulness with training in desirable habits. Clearly sympathetic to these programs, as a philosopher he is struck by the conspicuous absence from their supportive "knowledge-base" of two formidable theoretical arsenals: reflection on moral education rooted in the venerable tradition of virtue-theory, and a large accumulation over recent decades of work on "critical thinking" that can also claim considerable sanction from the western philosophical tradition, ancient and modern. He identifies these two parties as adversaries and suggests that the surprising absence of both from the practical scene (that is the "character programs" in the schools) is motivated by the same consideration: that each reads the scene as one that is only too likely to be hospitable ground to the *other* — so that, for both, uncompromised aloofness is the only alternative to incoherence or muddle.

Is the practical project incoherent? Curren's way of addressing this question (which I take to be the primary question of his essay) is quintessentially dialectical. He adduces six *aporias* or objections that can be raised against it, three from each of the dissenting counter-positions. He then exposes these objections to winnowing by the philosophical tradition. Two (one from each side, "foreclosed options" and "local variation") are discounted, since they have not been elucidated or tested in the canon; and two others (again one from each side, "force" and "skepticism") are discarded on the grounds that, while they have indeed been so tested, resources for answering them have been shown to be available. Two objections then remain ("indoctrination" and "free-riding", each again representing one side), which seem to present intractable difficulty. For not only is each one, separately, of considerable weight, but any attempt to answer one seems to push us into the embrace of the other and so, together, they impale us on the horns of a dilemma. The whole essay may be seen as *aporetic* in that its climax occurs (about three quarters of the way through) with the statement of this dilemma (or "paradox"). Nothing thereafter is advocated as a solution. A quick reconnoiter of the tradition proves inconclusive (unsurprisingly perhaps when the dilemma itself was posed on the other side of an earlier such foray); or, rather, we are perhaps to conclude that *for us* what the classical tradition has to offer is unacceptably elitist, while the mainline answer of modern philosophy must seem naively optimistic and complacent. Four possible lines of escape from the dilemma are then identified and (with just a hint of authorial preference for the fourth) commended to our attention.

I think I am in broad sympathy with what Curren is driving at in his elegantly constructed paper. I have a question, however, about how the dialectical exercise is intended to get him there, for two quite different interpretations of what this exercise is about seem to me to be possible. Early in the paper an image is suggested of two

skulking giants being lured down from their mountain redoubts so that, joining hands in the valley below, they might aid a worthy enterprise already underway there. This imagery suggests a task of reconciliation or — a word that occurs early in the paper — of "synthesis." Both parties put obstacles in the way of reconciliation, but the whole point of trying to remove, or otherwise deal with, these obstacles is precisely to effect a synthesis between them. But on another interpretation, both positions might be seen less as mutually irreconcilable than as separately untenable (though for reasons that reveal them as reverse images of each other). Resolving the *aporias*, then, would aim not at synthesizing but at deconstructing both positions from which the dialectical trap is sprung — so that there would be nothing left to impale us. What would be left, rather — and perhaps this is what was already available in the valley anyhow — is one coherent, defensible position, the merits of which we can demonstrate by showing how it partakes of the unsustainable lopsidedness of *neither* of the two discredited positions. I am not sure which (if either) of these interpretations of his intent Curren would accept; for he does not bring us up either mountain to get a closer look at its resident giant. But perhaps I may indicate briefly why the second one seems to me the more attractive.

It is not difficult to identify two positions here which are both antagonistic and mutually sustaining — insofar as each may find enough self-justification in simply rejecting the foolishness of the other. On one hand, there is a process of instilling certain qualities in children as "right" or "proper" (or "American," and so forth), without engaging their love or their reason, or evincing sensitivity to ambiguity in themselves or to diversity in situations in which they are involved. The difficulty with this can be seen as its disabling renunciation of reason, and a really "strong" conception of reason can then be counterposed to it and set up as normative for all knowing. From my perspective, this conception of reason is the great bug-bear in the whole discussion raised by the paper. We have, I believe, the task of extricating ourselves from it (a task which is pre-eminently philosophical in that it is in our own philosophical tradition that it is most deeply entrenched), and in doing so of replacing it with an adequate account of knowing — including, though not as a highly special case, moral knowing.

While I clearly cannot sketch either of these accounts of reason, I should provide some summary indication. The first one puts heavy emphasis on knowledge as *apodictic*, as subject for its truth or validity to procedures or criteria that are independently available and fully formulable, and construes this kind of knowledge as residing in a subject who is detachable from, or — in achieving it — clairvoyant about, contexts and engagements in which she is already inescapably taken up. In the second account, by contrast, knowing arises within a prior establishment and comportment in the world, and is carried forward through practices that are themselves densely embodied, linguistic, and historical. In this second conception, especially with regard to our moral or spiritual bearings, we learn through "insight" or refocusing of our "perceptions." To be sure, our propositional utterances will change with these insights, but the latter are not typically (if at all) gained through addressing the relationships between already formulated propositions. A proper concern for making epistemic progress will certainly entail critical reflection (in one

way or another, *self*-reflection). We shall have far too untextured a picture of this reflection, however, if we cast it in terms of a continuum from "critical" to "gullible." Other characterizations, for instance along axes from "perceptive" to "obtuse" or from "deep" to "shallow," are no less significant — however elusive to formulation they may also be. And in neither of these cases is it clear that a person can move to the positively indexed end of the continuum just be dealing with "evidence" or "arguments" presented for his direct consideration.

At this point, it must seem that I have diverged from Professor Curren by concentrating fire on just one of the two sides which he treats so even-handedly. An obvious question then arises: Is "Critical Thinking" to be implicated in the wider distortion of reason that I have been alleging? Here I must answer awkwardly that I do not know. For while I am aware of the existence of a large body of work under this rubric over the past few decades, I am not familiar with it. Given this unfamiliarity, however (which might itself be taken as telling), I must acknowledge a lack of enthusiasm for what he calls "full fledged instruction in critical thinking" or "training in critical thinking and moral case analysis" — though I cannot foreclose the possibility that visits to schools where this actually goes on might alter my perception.

There is, of course, a reason-renouncing position on the *other* side (though I quite definitely would not identify it with Aristotelian virtue-theory); it was in reaction to it that I introduced the picture of a "strong" but (as I have suggested) distorted "reason." But reaction can also be seen as running the other way: this position resigning itself to its own nonrationality in face of the impossible standard set by the strong notion of reason, or vindicating itself by pointing to the latter's manifest inappropriateness and flat-footedness in areas of concrete reasoning. The crux, I suggest, is to replace the distorted picture of reason with an adequate account — which will, I believe, be at the same time an account of *practical* reason. From the perspective of such an account, "indoctrination" and "free riding" will not be inescapable problems; they only seem to be so from the perspective of a deeply misleading account which will have been rejected in its favor. "Indoctrination" (if we want to persist in giving it only a pejorative connotation) and "free riding" will remain, of course, as terms to designate processes that may well happen (though we are likely to focus these concepts differently: In the case of indoctrination, for instance, our concern for the rational integrity of pupils will be framed more firmly within a concern about the reasonableness of the whole process in which they participate). So far from its being the case, however, that one or other *must* happen in every educative exchange, each can now be exposed as debasements of the proper pattern of acquiring or exercising moral knowledge.

Of much else in Curren's rich paper that might be taken up, I shall conclude with a few comments on an issue which remains recessive in his discussion but which may betray some real problems in the project which he seeks to bolster. The issue can be presented in the form of *another* dilemma. It is clear that a precondition of programs in "core values" is that they enshrine a cross-community consensus. But perhaps the price to be paid for consensus is triteness of content. Or, conversely, if we want substantive content perhaps we can get it only at the cost of division. The question

then is whether consensus is available without a damaging and unfounded contraction of what children will come to understand as the moral domain. To be sure, civility, thoughtfulness, and mutual respect are not trifling virtues: they are indeed core to the practices both of education and of democracy. Nor can they be accused of being "neutral" — for at least they are not neutral with respect to the violence, exploitation, and abuse to which many children are exposed. Still, there is a question as to how they interact with the issues on which consensus is unavailable. And this question becomes more acute if we lift one of the self-imposed constraints in the essay — the quite avowed bracketing of the *political* in considering the "moral" domain. Such bracketing is highly problematic (for classical thought it would have been simply impossible) — a fact of which Curren, needing to make *some* exclusions if he was not to overload an already heavy vessel, must be only too well aware. But it may not be out of place to mention here a few ways in which acknowledgment of the political dimension would impact on the discussion.

It would first of all bring greater understanding of the causes of the "immense and growing deficiencies in the care and upbringing of children," which, as the paper suggests, has been the main catalyst for the whole initiative in schooling which its analysis is designed to address. Second, it would bring within the ambit of moral reflection such topics as capital punishment or the slave-labor of textile workers in southern Asia: topics that could hardly be considered extraneous to issues more obviously embedded in children's experience — bullying and punishment, or the moral status of clothes worn by themselves or their classmates. Finally, it would expose to more searching scrutiny the putative coherence of, for example, espousing as objectives in the same program the maintenance of what Curren calls a "caring community" and "capacities for self-management…and social success." For if by the "political" we mean not only constitutional and legal enactments and formal mechanisms of government but practices and lifestyles that are more or less systematically entrenched throughout a whole society, then it may only be within this wider horizon that we can adequately grasp the processes by which some qualities and not others come to be endorsed as "virtues" (so that we may better understand the profile of "capacities for self-management…and social success" even as we also gain a sharper sense of their potential for conflict with the notion of "caring community"). Unless there is a wider context for the articulation of issues of this kind, it is hard to see how children would in any substantial sense learn either civility *or* (and here we seem to have escaped the horns of the essay's core dilemma) habits of critical reflection. I am aware that Curren himself does not give uncritical assent to the idea of "core values," but his reservations are framed only within a concern for fallibilism and the possibility of a "progressive morality." I do not myself reject this fallibilism (though we need to be very careful about how it is formulated), or for that matter the notion of deep and widely shared moral intuitions. But differences that may emerge between our descendants and us are hardly more important than differences already existing among ourselves now; and how, anyhow, are we to give impetus to cross-generational change if not by facing up to our contemporary disagreements? Dealing with all this in the context of *schooling* is of course the truly vexing issue for *us*.