

On What Education Is For

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Dini Metro-Roland and Paul Farber have done an excellent job. In dealing with online instruction and highlighting issues such as the wide array of settings from which those involved choose to connect (which presupposes the capacity to attend to just what one wants or needs right now) they have focused on what may possibly be lost. Accepting “that the students construct their own knowledge in useful and self-fulfilling ways” and that they thus derive something from their experience that better equips them to achieve their personal interests, they also want to stress the limits of such instruction. Thus, they call to mind the redemptive moments of teaching that surpasses the utility of presence, characteristic of the logic of online instruction. The redeeming quality of traditional instructions emerges from the integrity of presence, that, the de-centering characteristics of the forms of respect for the subject matter and those present. This, they argue, broadens and deepens the perspective of those involved.

Implicit in their approach is Aristotle’s distinction between *techne* (instrumental reason) from *phronesis* (practical judgment). The situational appreciation that is involved in the latter refers to a kind of alertness, sensitivity, and attunement to the subject, instead of the mastery characteristic of instrumental and technical reason. It is, moreover, open to further experience and has an ethical side to it that technical rationality lacks. In such cases goods are produced to ends which are specified by considerations external to the process of doing or making; in cases of practical judgment, by contrast, the good to be realized is sought through the action and not as an independently specifiable aim. This involves, as Richard Smith argues, “Questions of character, of what kind of person the individual exercising judgment is...it does not simply come down to what ‘skills’ he or she is exercising.”¹ In the practical judgment, the *phronimos* who displays practical wisdom, knowledge, and feeling draw on each other: “Our feelings help us to pick out what is salient in a given situation. We have a sympathetic understanding of things in their own terms, of what they mean to the agents involved, instead of supposing we are grasping them as ‘objective phenomena’.”² Such is as well characteristic of the teacher as it appeals to the student.

This presupposes indeed that teaching should go beyond individual tastes and wishes. Individualism, initially driven by emancipation and a desire for personal freedom, has been replaced by desires and wants and has become fully private (ends and projects instead of a political collective ideal of self-determination). Thus the need to justify oneself has disappeared and the subjective standpoint becomes legitimate on its own terms. Social relations are treated in terms of demand and offer, of producer or service provider and client, and so we became familiar with life-long learning, the idea of managers of a life plan, and the entrepreneurial self.

What Metro-Roland and Farber talk about revives not just the integrity of the present, but also integrity in a more encompassing sense and what makes life meaningful. The educator is not necessarily a hidden manipulator. When she makes clear the weaknesses of her own position while making explicit what she stands for, she can, through such integrity, appeal to those to be educated. Cheshire Calhoun discusses three pictures of integrity: the “integrated self” (integration of parts of oneself, that is, desires, evaluations, commitments into a whole), the “identity” view (fidelity to those projects and principles that are constitutive of one’s core identity) and the “clean hands” stance (maintaining the purity of one’s own agency especially in compromising situations).³ All three are lacking: simply acting according to one’s own reasons is insufficient and identifying oneself with a desire does not entail that this person also endorse that desire; and though the third kind of integrity is without a doubt important for educators, it also needs completion. All three accounts, moreover, see integrity as a personal rather than as a social virtue. Calhoun develops the notion of standing for something as central. Such a person thinks that it matters to stand by one’s judgment as to the good or the just. As a social virtue, integrity is tightly connected to viewing oneself as a member of a community that makes judgments of value and to caring about what that community endorses: “Having and acting on identity-conferring commitments is thus valuable, not because of the sheer fact that they are one’s own, but because having and acting on deep commitments is part of any admirable, flourishing life worth living, and *that* kind of life is what has value.”⁴ Persons of integrity believe their own judgments matter, or ought to matter, to fellow deliberators. It helps to show why we care that persons have the courage of their convictions; at the same time such integrity calls us to take seriously others’ doubts about our convictions.

The richness of an approach, which focuses on practical reason as typical of the way teachers as persons can deal with subjects, can be illustrated by an example of detective fiction. A particular kind focuses foremost on understanding the “why” (that is, historical circumstances and the interplay of the characters as part of a particular social environment and social practices) rather than on the physical evidence (such as in what is nowadays popular, for example, in the television program CSI) — which is not to say that this does not remain important. In an episode of the French series *Maigret*, the story is told of an attempted murder of a tramp:⁵ While he was sleeping under the Pont Marie, someone had hit “Doc” over the head and tossed him into the Seine to drown, but a couple of Belgian bargemen nearby had fished him out in time to save him. His identity card reveals that he is François Keller, from Mulhouse, where, coincidentally, Mme Maigret’s sister lives. Thus Maigret learns that he had been a doctor there, left his wife and daughter and gone off to Gabon, in Africa, to work “like Dr. Schweitzer.” But things hadn’t gone the way he had hoped, and for the past 15 years or more, he had been a *clochard* in Paris, working as a sandwich man to buy his bottle of wine. Maigret interviews his daughter and mother, but there seems to be no motive or contact. He goes down the Seine to find the bargeman again, and learns that his wife’s father had owned the

barge until he had drowned two years before, near the bridge at the Quai de la Rapée, where Doc had slept at the time, but not since. The former owner of the barge used to beat his daughter, and when he found out that his daughter had a relation with the present bargeman, Jef van Houtte, the situation became unbearable. Though this was labeled “accidental death,” Maigret is convinced that the bargeman Jef van Houtte is guilty, but he denies all, and Doc is no help — he refuses to say anything. Maigret is finally forced to let Van Houtte go, but a few months later a chance comment by Doc that “it’s impossible to pass judgment” convinces Maigret that he was right, though Doc maintains that he had said nothing. Clochards have their own idea of justice and do not want to get involved in other people’s affairs. Here we have a case where the kind of investigation that Maigret conducts is stopped, because no witnesses (who are willing to speak) come forward. He takes into account the situation of the daughter (before her father was “drown”) which was never reported to the police (and therefore no action to stop this was undertaken), that that no “justice” was done to her father, and the possible “injustice” that would result from further efforts to clear things up completely concerning the attempted attack. Following the simple logic of crime and punishment is in danger of creating more injustice. To live this complexity may be more than many are inclined to do, yet the nature of the situation one finds oneself in seems to require it.⁶ It is not only reductionism that looms at the horizon; it becomes moreover quite difficult to get the balance right again.

Education should not only give us the opportunity to learn subject matters, but moreover to become persons of integrity who care about what they are taught and about others. Redeeming what may be lost through virtually only online teaching is indeed of vast importance.

1. Richard Smith, “Technical Difficulties: The Workings of Practical Judgment,” in *Educational Research: Why “What Works” doesn’t Work*, eds. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 165.

2. Smith, “Technical Difficulties,” 168.

3. Cheshire Calhoun, “Standing for Something,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 92 (1995): 235–60.

4. Calhoun, “Standing for Something,” 255.

5. “Maigret et le clochard” (Maigret and the dossier), in the television series *Maigret*, directed by Laurent Heynemann (Paris: Dune France 2, 2004).

6. Other examples are “Morse” or “Waking the Dead,” both of which are television programs.