

Integrity's Identity

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“Integrity” has a good reputation of longstanding. But integrity means different things to different people and whether its reputation is deserved depends on the particular conception (and practice) of the attribute under consideration. While we are critical of some of the specifics in John Covaleskie’s conception, we find it enormously thought provoking, and for that we are grateful. So where does this conception seem unhelpful or otherwise problematic to us?

FIRST CRITIQUE

In some ways, Covaleskie’s conception seems overly demanding. Covaleskie acknowledges that humans have to choose and act in various, often quite dissimilar, contexts. To have integrity is, in part, Covaleskie states, to act according to the same principles across different contexts. To illustrate a *lack* of such integrity, he describes teachers who behave differently in their professional and personal lives. Covaleskie expresses a concern that teachers’ high ideals for themselves as teachers “are not part of [their] personal lives outside the classroom.” We do not see why, generally speaking, this is a cause for worry. In order to flourish, humans need time for reflection, rest, and recuperation, and for most, this entails moments of escape from the workaday world. We see no benefit in holding teachers to *professional* standards in their *private* lives, and indeed see potential harm resulting from such a practice. Teachers, too, need time to let their hair down and relax, and lacking this opportunity would likely suffer on and off the job (and so, we think, would others around them in both contexts).

Further, from our vantage point, it is not apparent that acting on the same principles or ideals regardless of venue, professional or private in this case, will help one act *well*. (Disagreements over what is actually entailed in “acting well” notwithstanding, we believe that there are better and worse ways of behaving). Indeed, what looks like consistency from one perspective looks like inflexibility from another. Most observers, we think, would praise the teacher who acts according to the principle of impartiality in the classroom, but criticize her if she acts with impartiality toward her own child at home. Impartiality is widely understood to be appropriate in some contexts and inappropriate in others; and the person who adheres to this principle regardless of context will likely (and rightly, we think) be regarded as dogmatic and rigid.

More broadly, good and decent people sometimes act according to seemingly eclectic sets of principles or to no obvious principles at all. Consistency per se is value neutral. We fear that encouraging consistency for its own sake or for the sake of being able to claim “integrity” may have a very high moral cost. Recall, Covaleskie’s conception does not require teachers to adhere to specifically “good” principles or values consistently in both their professional and personal lives; he uses

the benign value “patience” to illustrate his view, but his conception of integrity allows for more sinister values to be substituted, an issue to which we turn shortly.

SECOND CRITIQUE

In another way, Covaleskie’s conception seems not demanding enough. At one point, Covaleskie states that integrity “cannot be about just anything.” This suggests that he might offer some normative content. Indeed, we were hoping he might argue that “integrity” is a good only in so far as the principles (or some other qualities) being integrated are themselves good. Instead, Covaleskie’s conception is, as far as we can tell, entirely content free. (By “content free” we mean that this conception does not require any substantive principles, virtues, commitments, or values.) Covaleskie claims, “The measure of one’s integrity, then, is not the correctness of the moral commitments one has, but the moral weight of those commitments and their centrality to one’s sense of identity.” Covaleskie does not explain the term “moral weight” and elsewhere uses the term “moral significance,” also without explanation. From his examples, we gather that these terms refer to anything that, for good or ill, might bear on the welfare of others. Since practically anything can bear on others’ welfare, the intended qualifiers “moral weight” and “moral significance” end up not providing any identifiable content to Covaleskie’s conception.

THIRD CRITIQUE

In still another, related way Covaleskie’s conception of integrity seems potentially dangerous. Lacking a commitment to any content or a means to select any content related to integrity, Covaleskie states:

I argue ... that a person may have a commitment to goals that are morally reprehensible, such as genocide or racial conquest, and be said to have integrity. What is required is not that the commitment be to goals that are morally *justified*, but that it be to goals that are morally *significant*.... I may be morally corrupt, but if I am committed to that corruption and the commitment is one that is within the domain of the moral, then I may claim integrity.

And elsewhere he adds:

There are those whose principles are unworthy, but held with deep conviction. Racists may be sincere, truly believing in principles of racial superiority, and live that vice consistently in their lives. It seems to me that we would grant to such people integrity. Certainly a suicide bomber who gives his life in order to kill in furtherance of a cause has integrity.

As he has described it here, “integrity” appears to be little more than a synonym for “strong commitment.” Our own intuition warns us against adopting a conception according to which racists and suicide bombers — committed haters — are held up as exemplars of integrity. Why, we ask, should a term of moral approval such as “integrity” be applied to racists?

FINAL CRITIQUE

Finally, Covaleskie’s conception seems to have anti-educational implications. Toward the end of his essay, Covaleskie discusses moral education in fairly broad and conventional terms. It is a discussion appearing earlier in the essay, where Covaleskie develops his conception of integrity that gives us pause. There, Covaleskie recommends, “What we should *do* depends on who we *are*.” Thus, the racist acts out his already hateful identity and is said to have “integrity.” Yet as Covaleskie’s own

essay reflects in places, it is difficult for most of us to imagine education without the basic idea of change in the direction of improvement, however improvement might be understood. "Growth" is the most common metaphor for education in the West, and perhaps the East as well. On this common understanding, it is not clear to us how merely rehearsing an existing "identity" or its constituent elements is an *educational* practice.

Perhaps what Covaleskie has in mind are practices designed to encourage children and youth to apply their self-chosen values, principles, and so forth across a wider range of contexts, and thereby to become more "consistent." But then the potential danger of his conception appears again, leading us to ask why we would want to help anyone more consistently exercise values, principles, and so on that are themselves morally wrong. What teacher would say to the racist student, having seen him or her expressing racial hatred in one context and behaving equitably in another, "you should have been more racist right then, but you failed to live up to your principles"?

CONCLUDING COMMENT

If our moral concepts are to have influence outside academic circles, then we need a moral vocabulary that enables us to talk about choice and action in the world where we live. This is not a plea for low standards. We wish merely to stress the need for standards that fit human experiences and, to our minds, this means including some room for, among other things, discretion, flexibility, and development over time.

Maybe our world is one where the idea of "integrity," whatever the particulars of that idea, is no longer especially helpful. But *if* "integrity" is to be retained as an encomium, we believe that it must refer to ways of being that are themselves thought to be morally good. We recognize that there are disagreements over what counts as morally good. Nevertheless, in our recollection, the term integrity is generally used in the following way: to refer not to a person who resolutely applies the same principles or enacts the same ideals in all the different corners of her life, but rather to the person who fairly reliably manages to "do the right thing" whatever that turns out to be — she is patient in one case, insistent and demanding in another, and so on, depending on the situation at hand.