

Against a Disguised Defence of Religious Initiation

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Introduction

Despite promising to deliver a defence of the humanities in higher education, Brett Bertucio seems to provide a spirited advocacy of religious initiation for children instead. He contends that Critical Theory (CT) cannot provide a substantive education all by itself, and ultimately faces us with a false dilemma: CT and nothing *versus* CT + religious initiation. I will argue that we are given no convincing reason for initiating children into grand theories of the universe, of which Catholicism is a paradigm example. Bizarrely, this view is sometimes expressed as encouraging a less negative relationship with the past.

POSITIVITY ABOUT THE PAST

Bertucio laments CT's "inherent antagonism toward the past," and the total "deconstruction of past ideas." Contra CT's valence, "it is essential for educators to recover a positive relationship to the past." Elsewhere, the claim is, more weakly, that a "more reasonable relationship to the past" be struck. The past is at best a mixed bag, which sometimes ought to be regarded with horror, shame, and other negative attitudes, so too ought many ideas of the past. Of course it is better to have a more reasonable relationship to the past than a less reasonable one. However, I would question whether our relationship with the past tends to be unduly negative. Both the US and the UK seem to owe their present wealth, power, and influence to a past of bloody oppression. In such cases, shame would seem to be a more appropriate attitude than pride, say.

TRADITIONS, THE PAST, AND *OLD* THEORIES OF EVERYTHING

Bertucio might not really mean the past, which I gloss as "earlier times." He might mean "traditions." Although again, what he means by traditions is unclear. Traditions are, it seems, supposed to be our salvation from the universal acid of CT, which he casts as that purely negative stance capable of affirming nothing and denying everything. That is surely a caricature. First, CT could not start criticizing without some set of standards from which to do so. The reason why one can criticize the slave trade or colonization, for instance, is that one is committed to liberal principles. Indeed, the very standards by which CT criticizes past eras, by taking issue with Western imperialism, for example, might be among those imparted to students. Second, if CT's criticisms are well founded, then we should hardly lament the criticism. All the same, there is much which is not rendered doubtful or dubious by CT, and it is a reasonable aspiration of education to impart this. If what is meant by "substantive education" is passing on of true claims, some of these might be less impressive than we might want: e.g. we do not know definitively what killed the dinosaurs. Some of our knowledge might consist in denials and negative stances rather than positive ones: we should not torture prisoners (to take Tim Crane's example of a good negative attitude). But that is to be humbly accepted.¹

The substantive alternative (or supplement) to CT that Bertucio advocates is initiation into a tradition. Since the essay starts by discussing academic disciplines, it might be reasonable to regard those as being examples of traditions. And indeed, one might have thought that it was the humanities that the essay was hoping to defend the place of. However, a tradition, we are later told, is “a potential explanatory hypothesis for life,” each would constitute a “hypothesis of meaning.” No academic discipline can reasonably make the claim to be any such thing, however. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suggest that next to nothing constitutes such a tradition, except perhaps for some religions, and so this argument lends no succour to the humanities.

Bertucio would do better to drop the terms “tradition” and “past,” and speak exclusively of “theories of the universe,” or perhaps “*old* theories of the universe,” if their age is an important consideration (hardly a plausible suggestion given that the most recent science gives us the best explanation of the physical universe).² It is really initiation into these that he is advocating. How successful is this advocacy? Not very, I think.

SUBSTANTIVE EDUCATIONS AS RELIGIOUS INITIATION

Bertucio argues that unless a child is initiated into an old theory of everything (and here Catholicism is clearly his gold standard), something bad will happen. We are warned about the alternatives: “subjectivism,” “skepticism,” children’s invention of “skewed” hypotheses of meaning, and their adoption of a majority view. More clarity on the bogeyman of subjectivism would be useful, as I do not think it is proper to fear the ethical subjectivism of Bernard Williams, say. One worry might be that children will embrace the view that there are no binding standards, and take this as licence to reject all values (nihilism), or arbitrarily plump for any old values. But where this is a problem, I do not think that the only or best solution is initiation into an old, codified theory of the universe. One can quite easily raise a child without so initiating them, discussing elements of the universe in a relatively piecemeal way, and without opening the door to relativism. Indeed, one can be a moral particularist and still accept external reasons (as does Jonathan Dancy).³

If I do not tell my children what is in the centre of the earth, they may make up some false theory. But there are infinitely many questions that children might raise - and answer - for themselves, and we cannot provide exhaustive accounts of the world. This should not bother us as parents or educationalists, however. Where children formulate false theories, we might help them to articulate these and see that they are false. We might also teach them to tolerate going long periods without answers, and that sometimes having a profound sense of the mystery of things is more epistemically virtuous than rushing to conclusions to alleviate the mystery.⁴ More significantly, Bertucio observes that children may be swept along with majority views that they are exposed to. If those views are noxious or mistaken, a little CT might come in handy. Indeed, a more pervasive critical attitude to such ubiquitous influence is desirable. There are two further arguments that Bertucio offers: 1) seemingly that such initiation is a precondition of understanding *tout court*, and 2) that it is, in some normative way, natural to be so initiated.

GADAMER AND UNDERSTANDING

One may desire to understand a text; a “text” being any artefact to be understood intentionally rather than causally, say (e.g. a cup, a garden, a book). Bertucio writes: “by grounding hermeneutic understanding in a substantive tradition, it insulates the interpreter from the more radical, a-historical subjectivism of Enlightenment rationalism.”⁵ On this account, reading a book requires being brought up either Catholic or something similar. Obviously that is absurd. Consider, how understanding is a precondition of belief, and that it must therefore precede religious initiation.

GIUSSANI ON NATURE AND LOYALTY

Giussani seems to offer a bizarre, moralistic, and semi-naturalist defence of inculcating children into traditions. Bertucio writes: “for Giussani tradition is inseparable from the person. It is “that complex endowment with which nature arms us” in order to “confront our surroundings.”⁶ However, parents, families, and communities can make *choices* about what to tell their children, what to initiate them into, what to insulate them from, what to encourage, discourage, and so on. The important questions are: to what extent and in what directions is it proper for parents or communities to concertedly cultivate their children’s beliefs, interests, and characters? Bertucio cites Giussani as saying:

Let us say that a man is launched on life’s path with a tradition in his hands. Suppose he throws it away before putting it to use with a loyalty coming right from the very core of his being, before having really verified it. His refusal of something so inherent to his nature would betray a fundamental disloyalty in other aspects of his life as well, particularly with respect to himself and his own destiny.⁷

Consider a baptised child undergoing religious formation, who finds the religious teachings highly implausible. It hardly makes sense to say to him: “You clearly do not care about yourself, or your destiny, you disloyal cretin!” After all, loyalty is not a proper motivation for belief. That really is the sort of irrational consideration that Habermas was right to object to.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The deep questions at play here are these: what are we permitted to initiate children into, what are we obliged to initiate children into, and what are we obliged not to initiate children into? Here the idea seems to be that we are obliged to initiate children into some old comprehensive theory of the universe. And I have been resisting that conclusion. None of these issues are easy to handle and Bertucio does well to source interesting material and apply it to exploring some deep and profound questions underlying the debate. I hope to have highlighted some specific weaknesses in the particular argument Bertucio sketched, and look forward to wide ranging and substantial conversation about the ethics of formative influence.

1. For a more positive account of criticism for human knowledge, see Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: an Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). Tim Crane, “Why Humanism,” 3rd UCL Bentham Lecture, University College London, 20 November 2007, available at: http://www.timcrane.com/uploads/2/5/2/4/25243881/why_humanism.pdf

2. Bertucio provides further definitions of “tradition”: “prejudices,” “notions we bring to a question,” “seemingly arbitrary products of our particular historical position,” and “inherited concepts.”

3. Jonathan Dancy, *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 125.
4. What I say here is somewhat indebted to Nagel's general remarks about philosophy. Thomas Nagel, "Preface," *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
5. Bertucio, this volume.
6. Ibid.
7. Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997), 38.