Your Feelings Are Wrong

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ABSTRACT: *We live at a time when many aspects of our educational culture are declared to be in crisis. Increasingly, the STEM movement dominates initiatives at the same time that there is less agreement about what constitutes a Humanities or liberal arts education. Relatively broad consensus indicates that it should make students somehow "better". Within the field of pre-college normative ethics surveys, a survey of textbooks shows that most agree on what a course like this should look like. In evaluating the effects of an ethics curriculum, however, most show diffidence to claim moral transformation in their students. At least part of this problem seems to stem from mainstream philosophy's longtime bias against and misunderstanding of emotions. A closer look at emotions and how they might be educated offers a very different picture how a successful ethics curriculum could look.*

A typical ethics curriculum of any level presumes that a course neutral in regards to which, if any, of the normative ethical theories covered is true. However, any such course begins with a host of implied values that might not necessarily be shared with the students. If it's the case, as contemporary moral psychology suggests that at the very least, our rational minds inform our behavior and moral judgments far less than we might have thought, then a course in normative ethics needs to engage emotions far more effectively. Martha Nussbaum's recent work Political Emotions suggests some important ways that desirable emotions like civic love and undesirable emotions like disgust might relate to a curriculum. With the right approach, perhaps we can begin to claim that a moral philosophy course might make someone more moral.

Your Feelings are Wrong[1]

We live at a time when many aspects of our educational culture are declared to be in crisis. Increasingly, the STEM movement dominates initiatives at the same time that there is less agreement about what constitutes a humanities or liberal arts education. Relatively broad consensus indicates that it should make students somehow "better". One of my own employers, with a past tradition linked to the Marist Brothers, demands every graduate take an Ethics course. Within the field of introductory normative ethics surveys, scanning textbooks shows that most agree on what a course like this should look like. In evaluating the effects of an ethics curriculum, however, most show diffidence to claim moral transformation in their students. At least part of this problem seems to stem from mainstream philosophy's long time bias against and misunderstanding of emotions. A closer look at emotions and how they might be educated offers a very different picture of how a successful pre-college ethics curriculum might look.

Much to the delight of many popular news sources, and to the chagrin of teachers of ethics, Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust have shown through a series of experiments that teachers in this field are indistinguishable from their peers in their moral behavior. Perhaps even worse,

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however, they are strongly distinguishable in their moral judgments. Schwitzgebel describes in one survey, like this: "although U.S.-based ethicists are much more likely than other professors to say it's bad to regularly eat the meat of mammals (60% say it is bad, vs. 45% of non-ethicist philosophers and only 19% of professors outside of philosophy), they are no less likely to report having eaten the meat of a mammal at their previous evening meal." ("The moral behavior of ethics professors") Randy Cohen, formerly the author of the "Ethicist" column in the *New York Times Magazine* describes a similar phenomenon in his farewell column. He says that, "Writing the column has not made me even slightly more virtuous… What spending my workday thinking about ethics did do was make me acutely conscious of my own transgressions, of the times I fell short. It is deeply demoralizing." ("Goodbye") These two examples suggest that thinking about, studying and teaching ethics may help us become more judgmental, but may not make us conventionally "better" at all.

A typical ethics curriculum presumes a course neutral in regards to which, if any, of the normative ethical theories covered is true. Given that these courses will also traditionally use applied ethics cases to illustrate and ground the theories, this seems the only fair way to proceed: if an abortion case is being discussed, students will come to the course with deeply-held beliefs. An ethics survey would aim not to convince them of a particular view but to be able to articulate arguments for contrary positions. All this goes without saying. The narrator of Matthew Lipman's influential Natasha: Vygotskian Dialogues puts it this way: "the curriculum has to be representative of the entire tradition of academic philosophy, just as an encyclopedia of philosophy has to represent every philosopher, every movement, and every school fairly and dispassionately. As the editor of the curriculum, I try to be impartial, so that every point of view gets a hearing…" (p.92). And in response to why this is the case, he succinctly puts it, "for the good of the children" (91) implying both that it would help them learn to reason well and that it would actually benefit them as people.

However, the unspoken and unacknowledged system of values underlying not only these courses, but schooling from the start is worth overtly investigating. One key area to look at involves how an ethics course fits into the community as a whole. I currently work at a formerly Catholic college and a Quaker high school. The former requires a survey course in ethics yet doesn't address it in any ways outside of the classroom. As a result, in this setting, the students tend to see the material as alien and divorced from their concerns. In contrast, the Quaker high school uses value-laden language in many areas of the school. As a result, students generally see theoretical ethics as intrinsically linked to themselves since their community is one where moral competence is expected. John Dewey made this idea a centerpiece of his work: "the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs." (Dewey, p. 443) When ethics curriculum is presented as abstract knowledge, it will be received as impersonal and purely cognitive rather than emotive. What is the effect of seeing morality purely abstractly? It fails to affect behavior. Jonathan Haidt has made a career from the simple but powerful insights built into his influential paper, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail." In this paper, he suggests that philosophical ethics "stress the power of a priori reason to grasp substantial truths about the world" (p. 814). This position as a result has a hard time accounting for why the fact that almost everyone taking the surveys Haidt carefully designed to inspire feelings of moral revulsion at stories that feel wrong but have had the rational reasons to support these feelings proactively removed actually do feel this moral disgust. The paper opens with this infamous story:

> Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love? (p. 814)

Most people morally condemn Mark and Julie; however they usually can't explain why. Haidt suggests that most moral reasoning follows similar patterns, that it is in effect, an *ex post facto* process. He goes on to explain it this way, "The central claim of the social intuitionist model is that moral judgment is caused by quick moral intuitions and is followed (when needed) by slow, ex post facto moral reasoning" (p. 816). If Haidt is correct, moral reasoning is quick, emotional and seemingly unconscious. This fits with oft-shared ethics classroom stories where students ardently resist Kant's **Inquiring Murderer** example without really trying at all to refute it: it just seems obviously wrong. The overwhelming amount of literature on trolley problems follows the same trajectory: for most people it's clear you should throw the switch but not push the man off the bridge even if the two stories suggest the same underlying moral perspective. Numerous other fields have been examining ways that cognitive biases, priming, unconscious context cues, smells or found dimes can affect how we act. What should we make of all of this? It's not necessary to accept all of the often shrill claims in the press about the consequences of this and other studies showing that we're far less rationally oriented than we may have hoped, that rational moral reasoning is illusory and ineffective. It is worth taking seriously however. This branch of scholarship suggests we would do well to not only think about the *content* of ethics curricula (which surveys of introductory textbooks show to be remarkably consistent) but to think about the idea of educating the emotions. How can we make students feel *better, more effectively*?

Thirty-five years ago, Alasdair MacIntyre famously claimed that the Enlightenment had interrupted a long-established culture of the cultivation of virtue. In trying to find a secular, universal ground for moral judgment, he suggests, earlier answers from wisdom traditions developed over hundreds of years of experience were thrown out. With the failure of the Enlightenment project, MacIntyre tells us, the old answers are gone, but no new system of value has replaced it; on his narrative, ever since then, we've been trying, but failing to decide a new way to help us decide how to live. According to MacIntyre, modern attempts to show some form of value have taken the form of the *Therapist*, the *Manager* and the *Rich Aesthete*. Simply, MacIntyre sees the post-Enlightenment world offering us a value system that can be measured using pleasure, success or if these two fail to offer a thriving life, ways of reducing pain. (<u>After Virtue,</u> p. 88) MacIntyre describes them like this: "The central characters of modern society thus embody emotivist modes of manipulative behavior: the aesthete specializes in seeing through illusory and fictitious claims; the therapist is most likely to be deceived into believing his own claims to power, despite the fact that devastating hostile critiques of the standard therapeutic theories of our culture are easily available; and the manager is the figure interested in effectiveness, the contrivance of means ... to the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behavior" (73,74).

Given that these seem to be the reigning systems of value in most schooling systems, MacIntyre claims this leads ultimately to the "confrontation of one contingent arbitrariness against another," (p. 33), which he calls the Emotivism that leads to nihilism. In practice, this would suggest that a school system would prime students to be quite effective in method and ability with

no sense of what to orient their skills towards other than the obvious lucrative professional careers or the advice of bland graduation speakers exhorting them to pursue their passions without explaining how passion is formed and what it should be directed towards. Emotions are left to the extracurricular.

The past thirty years have produced a lot of interesting answers to the concerns MacIntyre and a number of other critics raised at that time. Much moral philosophy in Virtue Ethics lately has combined with empirical psychological studies coming from across academic disciplines, the United Nations and many national governments. While for many, current trends of scientific incursion into traditionally Humanities areas is cause for alarm, it has the potential to inform how we evaluate wisdom traditions. This approach also fits into the Aristotelian notion of *endoxa* – of looking for the full range of what has been said on a subject to find something of value in even opposite claims. Aristotle's value here is twofold: the need for any useful moral system to engage the emotions and the need for it to be socially embedded. Despite the general loss of virtue education arising from Enlightenment rationalism, we can find both recent and older accounts that engage this idea. While Lipman suggests that "thinking and emotions are not necessarily opposed to one another," (Natasha, p. 115) the answer lies even beyond this: they may be not just connected but dependent on one another. If we can for the moment connect emotions with intuitions as unconscious starting-points, Haidt then claims, "Even if moral intuitions are partially innate, children somehow end up with a morality that is unique to their culture or group. There are at least three related processes by which cultures modify, enhance, or suppress the emergence of moral intuitions to create a specific morality: by selective loss, by immersion in custom complexes, and by peer socialization." (p. 827) We can't correct innate qualities, but the more one understands the social and emotional world of students, the more one can guide these. The questions in need of answering are what emotions should we try to give our students and how we train them. This process has just begun.

Martha Nussbaum has long been one of the most intriguing thinkers about emotions. Her recent book Political Emotions directly takes on the uncomfortable idea of designing a curriculum aiming to inculcate certain emotions, describing the goal as "to engender sympathy without undue control" (p. 75). The idea that a planned curriculum would aim to guide students' unconscious thoughts seems inherently politically fraught, a Walden Two filtered through Clockwork Orange. It's likely though that as Dewey continually suggested, schools already do this; they just inculcate wrongful emotions such as despair, anger, shame and frustration.

Nussbaum focuses on love, in particular the type of love states need in their citizens: patriotism and civic sympathy. Elsewhere, she suggests that an "open society needs patriotism" (For Love of Country, p. 118) and that a mutual commitment needs to precede any policy of redistribution. (For Love of Country, p. 118) In the absence of a universal religion, Nussbaum suggests, we need the institutions (she suggests the states and schools) to serve this purpose: to train citizens into loving each other.

In Political Emotions, Nussbaum discusses the term Aristotle employed against Plato's *kallipolis*, "water-emotions" (p.219) to suggest that most moral philosophy offers paltry understanding of the strong motivations needed to actually behave morally. The suggestion is that being rationally convinced of an idea will be insufficient to move us to act without robust accompanying emotions. Even those in the tradition who addressed this issue (notably Mill in his "Rector's Address" about the role of a liberal education in inculcating compassion) do so by referring to the need without addressing specifically how. To simplify a complex issue, how can one both instill compassion and prevent the kind of disgust that leads to discriminatory behavior?

Here Nussbaum continues themes she has covered for years now – the effect of stories on the imagination. She suggests that, "If the other has been dehumanized in the imagination, only the imagination can accomplish the requisite shift" (p. 211). Following Mill's language, she describes the method here as "aesthetic education" (p. 80). The idea would be that poetry, literature, opera and the like would broaden one's feelings of compassion by expanding the circle of what one unconsciously and emotionally considers "like me" and resisting the category of otherness for those who might otherwise fall into this.

To illustrate this point, Nussbaum analyzes a number of works closely. Her discussion of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* and Tagore's *Gora* illuminate how stories of this sort could be used to expand civic love. Her discussion of Mozart is too extended and complex to go into detail here, but it suggests how the emotive qualities of music combined with the plot elements of the story combine to move us to feelings surprising for the 18th century – not just sympathy for the female characters but genuine compassion…a feeling "with" that demands full subjectivity and a respect for emotionally-based understandings of human behavior. In short, Nussbaum claims this opera inspires love, the kind of love that perhaps needs to preface actually enacting Kantian Respect for Persons or a Utilitarian Principle of Equality.

Nussbaum's discussion of *Gora* is likewise helpful. In this story, a tension arrives when a character raised by a lower caste maid suddenly comes to see her through the lens of disgust after years of feeling only sympathy for her. In this case, political passions stirred up at a nationalist rally prompt the protagonist to feel first shame at living with a low caste servant and then disgust. While disgust can be inspired by rational arguments tied to emotions, Nussbaum reminds us that "Given the late arrival of disgust in the developmental process, however – it is not in evidence before the time of toilet training – societies have more than the usual opportunity to mold its content and to extend it to other objects" (p. 183). In this case, disgust is educated for and has terrible consequences. The psychologist Paul Bloom also links this idea to the development of racism. Children who attend racially diverse elementary schools seem to resist categorizing racial others as disgusting, while those who attend racially segregated schools fall more easily into this way of thinking. The idea is that emotions like disgust are not innate and that they are tied to both education and imagination. Nussbaum stresses the way in which literature, in particular, allows us to avoid degust in areas we don't want it – towards racial, religious and sexual others.

Of course, moral disgust is an essential category. Steven Pinker, among others, has suggested certain categories of moral thinking are innate ("Moral Instinct"). He describes what he calls the Law of Conservation of Moralization. This concept suggests that the innate aspect of our moralization is that we do think in terms of moral purity/ disgust, but that the content of what we are disgusted by is not innate. Thus emotions are trainable. The task for an ethics curriculum and for schools in general would next be to honestly assess which emotions ought to be expanded and which ought to be defended. Should the goal of a moral philosophy class be to steer disgust and to broaden civic love? Walt Whitman in Democratic Vistas described the job of poets as "in his works, shaping, for individual or aggregate democracy, a great passionate body, in and along with which goes a great masterful spirit" (p. 33). Perhaps pre-college ethics classes should also aim to not be merely history surveys of great ideas, exercises to improve reasoning or great battles of ideas over time, but should really look to improve students. In expanding the imagination, this may well become possible.

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