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From persons to propositions

Is virtue necessary to learning? Mark Schwehn argues that it is, and his argument will enable us to develop in more detail our contention in the last chapter that a desire to live out Christian virtues implicitly commits us to rethinking teaching and learning.

Schwehn argues that we should understand learning itself as in part a *moral* affair, and not simply a matter of technique or cognitive processes. Learning, he argues, “depends not simply upon the possession of certain cognitive skills but also upon the possession of moral dispositions or virtues that enable inquiry to proceed”.¹ We should not therefore think of virtue as something added to learning in the form of character education, but rather as something intrinsic

¹ Schwehn, 1993:44. Schwehn draws upon Palmer, 1983, and both authors are drawing from older Christian traditions which see learning in spiritual, rather than merely cognitive terms.

to learning. Any community of learning is informed by a certain ethos or spirit of inquiry. We should, Schwehn urges, examine this ethos and explore how the processes of learning depend upon the exercise of particular virtues.

He is particularly concerned to explore the social virtues, those which are bound up with “care taken with the lives and thoughts of others”.² Humility is one example which he considers at length. He argues that an apparent lack of motivation among students may be rooted in a lack of humility. He cites an occasion when some of his students were reading a text from Augustine on friendship and loss. They concluded from a quick reading of the text that Augustine was just obscure and mistaken, and dismissed the passage as unworthy of further attention. Acknowledging that he may have failed as a teacher to motivate them, Schwehn nevertheless argues that:

My students could have overcome my failings had they been sufficiently humble; had they presumed that Augustine’s apparent obscurity was *their* problem, not his; and had they presumed that his apparent inconsistencies or excesses were not really the careless errors they took them to be. Humility on this account does not mean uncritical acceptance: it means, in practical terms, the *presumption* of wisdom and authority *in the author*.³

Without some measure of this kind of humility we are unlikely to learn much from a text which is initially difficult or which does not reinforce our existing ideas. Accordingly, Schwehn argues that “*Some degree of humility is a precondition for learning*”.⁴ Growth in humility could help with problems of motivation. It could also help prevent poor learning resulting from superficial interaction with the material under study.

Schwehn goes on to discuss the educational relevance of other virtues such as self-denial (being willing to relinquish cherished ideas in the light of new learning) and charity (reading the work of others carefully and in the light of their best intentions). He argues that we

² Schwehn, 1993:44.

³ Schwehn, 1993:48.

⁴ Schwehn, 1993:49.

need a reorientation of learning which aims not simply at technical mastery, but at a reintegration of moral and intellectual virtues.

The controversiality of virtue

This might sound like an obviously worthy enterprise – who could object to an increase in charity and humility? Well, it is important to realise that the virtues which Schwehn discusses are not simply self-evident. As he points out, spirits of inquiry differ in their emphases and inspiration. He cites Enlightenment philosopher David Hume as an example of a thinker for whom some of the virtues discussed are deeply unattractive. Hume characterised qualities such as humility and self-denial as *vices* which “serve to no manner and purpose” since they do not advance our fortune in the world or contribute to our enjoyment. In a cultural context in which the Christian Scriptures have historically exerted a great deal of influence, advocacy of humility and charity can sound like stating the obvious. This is, however, far from being the case.

If we take a broad historical perspective we find further signs that Schwehn’s virtues are controversial. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, catalogues the contrasts between the Bible’s conception of virtue and the conception influentially expounded by Aristotle. He points out that “Aristotle, in considering the nature of friendship had concluded that a good man could not be the friend of a bad man...But at the centre of biblical religion is the conception of a love for those who sin”.⁵ He adds that “there is no word in the Greek of Aristotle’s age correctly translated ‘sin’, ‘repentance’ or ‘charity’”.⁶ Perhaps most strikingly, humility, which is a central biblical virtue, seems to count as a vice for Aristotle, the opposing virtue being nobility of soul. The Christian and the classical strands in the fabric of Western culture do not speak with one voice.

Turning to present day educational debate we find that the virtues emphasised in the Bible remain controversial. Susan Mendus, for instance, argues in a recent article that while humility may be an attractive ideal, it is unavailable to us as a goal for education in a

⁵ MacIntyre, 1984:174.

⁶ MacIntyre, 1984:174.

modern liberal democracy. Our modern commitment is to qualities such as individual autonomy, self-affirmation, self-assertion and self-evaluation. She argues that the commitment of modern liberal culture to fostering such qualities through education is in tension with a genuine commitment to growth in humility.⁷ As far as Mendus is concerned, it is humility which must, however regretfully, be sacrificed.

Virtues such as humility, charity and self-denial are deeply rooted in Scripture. “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility” urges the New Testament, “because ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’”.⁸ Schwehn in fact goes further not only to argue that the virtues he discusses are rooted in religious tradition, but to ask whether any resources other than religious ones can sustain them. Given that they have historically been sustained in communities of faith, are they likely to be sustainable under wholly secular auspices?⁹ If the Bible fosters these virtues, and if these virtues are indeed controversial yet vital to learning, then the connection between the Bible and education envisaged here is far from incidental or superficial. We have here an instance of the Bible contributing something distinctive and substantial to educational reflection.

The shape of teaching

This contribution affects not only the teacher, but the shape of teaching. Schwehn refuses to reduce the virtues that he discusses to matters of individual morality. He recognises that taking them seriously will not only make demands on teachers in terms of their personal capacity for virtuous living. It also requires them to think through the formative effects which different ways of teaching and learning might have upon students. As he puts it, “to ‘teach’ these virtues means first to exemplify them, second to order life in the classroom and throughout the academic community in such a way that their exercise is seen and felt as an essential part of inquiry”.¹⁰

⁷ Mendus, 1995. Mendus does not explore the possibility of forms of self-evaluation which could promote humility.

⁸ 1 Peter 5:5, citing Proverbs 3:34.

⁹ Schwehn, 1993:57,63.

¹⁰ Schwehn, 1993:60.

If we take these virtues seriously, Schwehn says, we must first exemplify them. This resonates with the ‘incarnational’ emphasis described in chapter 3; talk of virtue tends to ring hollow if it is not accompanied by virtuous living. If we believe in a particular vision of what is good and right for human character and relationships, we must seek to live it out as educators in the classroom context. In doing so, we will be modelling it for students, wordlessly inviting them to aspire to and grow in the same character qualities. Teachers who wish to promote humility must themselves be open about the limits of their expertise, open to others’ views and willing to confess failures.

But we should not stop there. We must also, Schwehn says, attend to the ways in which teaching and learning are ordered. We must examine the fruits of our ways of organising things, our ways of interacting with learners and with subject matter. We need, he argues, to order life in the classroom so that the desired virtues are supported and fostered. A classroom in which self-assertiveness is consistently rewarded with attention and success may do little to foster humility. If we rely on behaviouristic, drill-oriented teaching methods, we must ask ourselves whether they could possibly foster growth in charity. As in the French teaching example described in chapter three, we find our attention shifting from our own personal qualities as teachers to the approach to teaching and learning which is evident in our classroom.

If we believe that these virtues are important enough to be worked at in our own lives and modelled, then there would seem to be some inconsistency if we do not attend to how our teaching can foster or undermine them in our students. Questions of curriculum and pedagogy cannot then be excluded from the picture. This is not to say that the Bible has offered us a developed pedagogy or a set of answers to all of our questions about how to teach in present-day classrooms. It has, however, led to a certain set of questions, to an idea of the kind of inquiry that is needed and the kind of answers we are looking for. Schwehn’s ideas thus confirm the point that we made in the last chapter, that an ‘incarnational’ emphasis on personal character spills over into a reshaping of teaching processes if it is taken seriously enough. However, we are also implicitly required to take another step further.

From a view of personal growth to a view of the world

One evening some years ago, while visiting a young biker who had recently come to faith and joined our church, one of the authors ended up in conversation with another visitor. He called himself Sprog, and was a young man who looked back with little affection on his school days. His school career had been prematurely curtailed when he was expelled for stealing. His own evaluation of his education and its inconsistencies was summed up in something like the following words: “They taught me that life was all about the survival of the fittest, then when I stole stuff they threw me out.”

In Sprog’s eyes at least, his school had failed to explore the connections between the vision of reality which it (perhaps only implicitly) promoted and the character qualities which it wanted to see in learners. Yet virtue does not stand in a vacuum. If the understanding of matters such as history, science, our use of natural or economic resources, or work and careers reflected in our curriculum is such that exercising humility or charity makes no ultimate sense, then virtue talk seems likely to ring hollow. If the content of the curriculum consistently implies that the purpose of money is to achieve a higher standard of living, that the heroes of history are those who succeeded in imposing their will, or that the weak are to be despised or ignored, the pursuit of certain virtues will lack plausibility.

There is debate concerning not only the list of virtues to be pursued, as we noted above, but also the meaning of virtuous behaviour. It has, for instance, been suggested that the existence of altruistic behaviour is connected to the limitations of human rationality in the face of a complex world. Some individuals tend to behave in a manner which does not contribute to their genetic fitness, i.e. their expected number of offspring. Herbert Simon has argued that this can be explained in terms of the evolutionary usefulness of people’s tendency “to learn and believe what they perceive others in the society want them to learn and believe”, and the human limitations on their ability to rationally examine every behaviour for its contribution to their genetic fitness.¹¹ Philosopher Alvin Plantinga has argued in response that Christians cannot accept such an explanation as adequate. If it is true that living for God’s glory fulfils our human nature and leads to

¹¹ Simon, 1990:1666.

eternal joy, then altruism must be seen as an example of supremely rational behaviour, not as a product of the limitations on our ability to weigh behaviours rationally.¹² It matters not only whether altruism-producing beliefs are socially useful, but also whether they are true.

Such debate leads us to the following question: would a curriculum which taught Simon's view of human behaviour as normative be likely to meet Schwehn's desire for teaching and learning to foster virtues such as humility and charity? Or would it be more likely to undermine such an attempt by leading learners to see such virtues as a result of the limits of human rationality? Having started from personal virtue, we find ourselves having to consider broader theories of human nature which may inform the school curriculum, theories which may affect the moral outcomes of education. The Good and the True turn out to be intimately connected.

Note that the focus now is on Christian *understanding* as much as Christian living. Plantinga's interest is in whether the content of Christian belief has discernible implications for the way we approach particular theories and ideas. As he explains in another essay, he sees the task of the Christian thinker as that of working out the implications of Christian beliefs for the subject matter of the various disciplines. This will involve working out and stating "a large number of propositions, each explicating the bearing of the faith on some part of the discipline in question".¹³ In other words, we should be developing a body of propositions which state that if a certain Christian belief is the case, the consequences for our thinking about psychology or ethics or natural science or any other discipline will be such and such. Scientific theories should be scrutinised in the light of Christian belief.

Here we find a second approach to the Bible's relationship to education coming into view. We began from an approach in which it was the teacher himself or herself who provided the connecting link by 'incarnating' the biblical call to live in certain ways. Plantinga's views suggest a different link, made by working out the logical connections and dissonances between ideas about education and propositions derived from Christian belief. Our first approach

¹² Plantinga, 1996.

¹³ Plantinga, 1990:60. Alternatively, Plantinga suggests, we could think of the result as "one enormously long proposition". See also Plantinga, 1998.

stressed the believing teacher's efforts to embody certain personal qualities inspired by a devotional reading of Scripture. This second approach stresses the need for the Christian educator to understand what the Bible teaches about the nature of the world and to work out what implications this has for education.

These two approaches are different, and are sometimes set over against one another. Advocates of consistent Christian *thinking* across the disciplines can show impatience with a privatised individual pietism. In turn they find themselves suspected of a dry and detached intellectualism which fails to foster personal devotion.¹⁴ We have been concerned here to show that the two approaches are necessarily complementary. Taking virtue seriously leads us to questions requiring more systematic thinking; the more conceptual enterprise of rethinking the ideas underpinning the curriculum will in turn require 'incarnational' integrity. On Schwehn's account, such rethinking will presuppose the exercise of certain virtues if it is to be done well. Moreover, the claim that altruistic behaviour is supremely rational will ring hollow if it hangs detached from daily living and contradicted by the teacher's own character. A view of how we should live and an understanding of the kind of world we live in are interdependent. Both can have educational consequences.

Relating Christian thinking to education

Having supplemented an 'incarnational' approach with a more propositional one we face new challenges. How does the connection between beliefs and their educational consequences actually work? We should, Plantinga argued, be developing a body of propositions of the form: if such and such a Christian belief is the case, then these things follow for our thinking about the world. What does it mean for an educational conclusion to 'follow' from Christian belief? After all, this was the central point attacked by Hirst. As we saw in chapter 2, he alleged that when we look closely, very few educational propositions can be said to follow strictly from Christian belief.

What Hirst seems to have had in mind was a relationship whereby a Christian belief logically *requires* a specific educational

¹⁴ See Badley, 1996.

conclusion. The educational conclusion is *deduced* as an unavoidable consequence from the Christian belief. This way of seeing the relationship seems to have two implications. First, it seems to imply that if there is such a thing as Christian thinking about an educational issue, then it will lead to one and only one correct conclusion, since that conclusion is required by the belief in question. Second, it implies that if we have stated the Christian belief correctly and done our deductions well, our educational conclusion will be as secure and authoritative as the Christian premise from which it unavoidably follows. If the belief is true and the logic sound, then the conclusion must be true and secure.

Now this is clearly a very strong way of stating the relationship between a Christian belief and an educational proposition. Unfortunately, if we state the relationship in these terms we quickly find that Hirst had a point; it is very difficult to show that a detailed educational proposal follows necessarily and unavoidably from Christian beliefs – as we saw in chapter 2, it is not even clear that support for schooling as an institution is strictly required by anything in the Bible. We need a more flexible account of how biblical beliefs might influence educational ideas and practices.

Approach, design, procedure

A helpful model of the role of beliefs in teaching can be found in a classic article published in 1963 by Edward Anthony.¹⁵ Anthony argued that three levels of description are needed in order to make sense of a teaching sequence. At the lowest level are what Anthony referred to as ‘techniques’ and others have labelled ‘procedures’. These are individual actions carried out by the teacher. They might include administering a quiz, showing an image, arranging the

¹⁵ Anthony, 1963. Anthony was not concerned with the role of Christian, or even religious belief, but rather with the long-running discussion among foreign language specialists concerning how to describe and define the differences between different teaching methodologies (see e.g. Brumfit, 1991; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Prabhu, 1990). On this discussion and its relevance to Christian education see further Smith, 2000a, 2000b.

seating, or asking a question – in fact any single intentional act on the part of the teacher.

A casual visitor to a class sees mostly these individual actions. However, if he or she stays a while, it will become apparent that they do not occur randomly. Procedures are organised and patterned in certain ways, forming a way of teaching which has an overall consistency and direction. Individual procedures such as presenting words on a transparency, getting students to sort and reuse them, and reading a poem can come together to form a coherent sequence. This sequence or constellation of procedures was labelled ‘method’ by Anthony. A better term is ‘design’, which has the advantage of emphasising the teacher’s creative agency in building a coherent sequence out of individual procedures.¹⁶

At the level of design some pattern and order emerges, but Anthony argued that we still do not have the whole picture. We still have to explain why the teacher chose this design and not another, this sequence of activities and not a different one. A design is in turn dependent on a wider framework of assumptions and beliefs; it is a way of realising a certain vision of things. The teacher’s beliefs will influence the shape of the design. A teacher might, for instance, believe that it is of primary importance to make students feel emotionally secure in the classroom, and take relevant pedagogical steps to achieve this. Another teacher might believe that learning is mostly a matter of forming correct habits and teach accordingly. Anthony called this underlying network of beliefs an *approach*. In his words, an approach “states a point of view, a philosophy, an article of faith – something which one believes but cannot necessarily prove”.¹⁷ It might include a belief in basic human goodness or in the importance of humility. In sum, then, *procedures* are individual actions in the classroom, *designs* are repeatable patterns in the way teaching takes place, and *approaches* are the background beliefs, orientations and commitments which give rise to one pattern rather than another.

¹⁶ The change from ‘method’ to design’ was proposed by Richards and Rodgers (Richards & Rodgers, 1982; Richards & Rodgers, 1986); see also Strain, 1986. Of course, if the teacher is closely following course materials, the creativity may be that of the course’s author(s).

¹⁷ Anthony, 1963:64.

With this simple model in hand, we will delve further in the next chapter into the nature of an approach and the ways in which it shapes educational designs. As we do so, we will find the relationship between statements of Christian belief and educational proposals broadening out beyond the bounds of strict logical deduction. The role of belief in educational design is more complex than that, and also more productive.