

Commentary on 'Fact, value and philosophy education'

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In *Fact, value and philosophy education* I tried to show how philosophy can help to overcome the fact-value divide that continues to plague education. In attempting this, I applied John Dewey's suggestion that philosophy may help to integrate beliefs about matters of fact with values in society at large, to the curricular division between subjects that deal with knowledge of matters of fact and those that are largely devoted to subjective understanding and personal expression.

The paper centres on the claim that philosophical dialogue about what we should believe and value can help to effect a mutual adjustment between our reason and our sentiments and bring us to think as whole human beings. It argues the case by first looking at the use of reflective practical reason to effect a change in our desires and conduct when we deem them to be undesirable. The use of reason to provide us with courses of action and other practical remedies to deal with what we see as defects in our character suggests that our cognitive and affective powers are capable of working together through mutual adjustment.

By extension, I argue that reason can help us to examine the moral dimension of problems and issues in various areas of study, while making our understanding of them responsive to our feelings. The introduction of an educational means to give effect to this mutual adjustment brings us back to the role of philosophy. Philosophy provides the opportunity for reasoned dialogue that brings the factual material that students encounter into connection with what they are learning to value. It brings a normative cast to the study of history, society, literature, art, science and technology and enables the knowledge that students gain through their studies to be applied to matters of value. In general, it brings moral sensitivity to all kinds of subject matter and enables students to apply their knowledge and intelligence to the formation of values.

In the years since I wrote this piece, I had the privilege to assist with the initial draft of documents on ethical understanding as a general competence in the Australian national curriculum and of constructing and implementing a pilot program for ethical inquiry in New South Wales primary schools, which led to ethics becoming an option for students who do not attend religious instruction. In different ways, both experiences brought home to me the importance of incorporating considerations of value throughout the curriculum and the value of philosophical inquiry as a means of doing so. Reflection on these experiences resulted in my book *Teaching ethics in schools* (ACER Press 2010).

Original article

Fact, value and philosophy education¹

*Man has beliefs which scientific inquiry vouchsafes, beliefs about the actual structure and processes of things; and he also has beliefs about the values which should regulate his conduct. The question of how these two ways of believing may most effectively and fruitfully interact with one another is the most general and significant of the problems which life presents to us. Some reasoned discipline, one obviously other than any science, should deal with this issue. Thus there is supplied one way of conceiving of the function of philosophy. (John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*)*

The fact-value distinction

There is a doctrine classically associated with David Hume concerning the distinction between facts and values. Hume entered upon it in his discussion of morals, when he argued that morality ‘consists not in any *matter of fact*, which can be discover’d by the understanding’ (Hume 1975/1739, p. 468). According to Hume, there are no facts to be found even in such a vicious act as wilful murder that entitle us to call it vice. Rather than depending upon the facts of the case, our judgments of vice and virtue are expressions of our feelings. ‘So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious’, says Hume, ‘you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it’ (Hume, p. 469). Hume goes on to remark that authors writing upon morality are in the habit of reasoning from what is and is not the case to what ought or ought not to be so, but that this inference from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ is entirely illegitimate. Recognition of this fact alone, says Hume, ‘wou’d subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv’d by reason’ (Hume, 1975/1739, p. 470).

The educational implications of these claims are immense. On a Humean view, there is a realm of objective facts that can be discovered by the understanding or perceived by reason, and another quite distinct realm of subjective values that depend upon the nature of our feelings. Since all matters of fact may be presumed to differ from matters of value in this way, Hume’s division between facts and values provides the theoretical underpinnings of a thoroughgoing curricular dualism. Simply put, there are those teaching and learning areas that deal with matters of fact and that appeal to reason, and there are those that are concerned with values and that appeal to the sentiments. From here it is not such a large step to that lingering division in teaching and learning between the cognitive, objective and value-free, on the one hand, and the affective,

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2000 FAPCA conference held in Melbourne. My apologies go to those who have pressed me for copies of it. The paper was subsequently divided in two, and it has taken me far longer than might be expected to present this part of the original in what I hope is an acceptable form.

subjective and value-laden, on the other: between the physical sciences, as it might be, and literature and art.²

Hume's stance gives classical expression to the 'gap' that Dewey seeks to close when he calls for a rapprochement between our empirical knowledge and the values by which we regulate our conduct. One of life's great problems, says Dewey, is to bring our empirical modes of belief and our approach to values into fruitful engagement with one another. Of special note is Dewey's contention that philosophy itself might take on this task of helping to integrate them. While this is not the only way to look at philosophy, it is a conception that has much to recommend it when we come to consider what we may accomplish by engaging students in philosophical inquiry. This is even more so if we take Dewey's task to involve attending not just to appropriate subject matter, but also to the cultivation of philosophy as an educational method. So far as subject matter is concerned, philosophy could help to integrate the curriculum, bringing what students are learning about the objective relations between things in the world into connection with what they are learning to value. Yet it is not only through its breadth of subject matter that philosophy can help to lay down connective tissue. When conducted in the right way, philosophical inquiry is a process through which reason is adjusted to feelings and feelings to reason, and is thereby a means of learning to approach moral and other matters of value with intelligence and of reasoning with sensitivity in all things. Otherwise put, philosophy becomes a discipline that can teach us to think and feel as whole human beings.

I will try to show how philosophical inquiry may secure these ends. In attempting to do so, I will be working with a vision of philosophy that is approximately Socratic. That is to say, I will be viewing philosophy as reasoned dialogue between people who are inquiring into how they should conduct their lives, including, of course, what they should value and believe. To connect this idea of philosophy with the function that Dewey confers upon it is to see philosophy as a deliberation concerning life's possibilities that appeals to all of our sensibilities and the whole of our intelligence, which brings into consideration all that we know, believe, feel, hope for, fear, imagine or desire. This makes philosophy a studied extension of everyday practical deliberation much as scientific inquiry is in many ways an extension of everyday empirical inquiry.

² While Hume denied that there are logical relations between statements of fact and statements of value, he did not deny the existence of causal relations between our feelings and the operations of our reason. In fact, Hume famously sought to invert the traditional relation between reason and the passions by taking reason to be not the master but 'the slave of the passions' that 'can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them' (Hume 1975/1739, p. 415). Therefore, from a psychological point of view, consideration of matters of fact, intellectual inquiry and cognitive performances of all kinds should not, according to Hume, be thought of as operating independently of our feelings and of what we value. On the contrary, since 'reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will' and 'can never oppose passion in the direction of the will', our most deliberative and reasoned acts are entrained by our feelings, which provide their impetus and motive (Hume 1975/1739, p. 413). This means that, for Hume, the refinement of our feelings is an educational task of the first order. Otherwise reason, however well developed, is destined to remain the servant of an uneducated master.

Given this conception of philosophy, it will be useful to begin with the more general context of everyday practical deliberation. My object will be to show that when we begin to reflect upon ourselves in a reasoned way, to consider our attitudes and values, or more simply our desires, then we are on a path that leads to philosophy and to a narrowing of the gap between 'is' and 'ought'. For simplicity's sake, I will explore this idea just in terms of reflection upon our desires, and draw attention to the bigger picture only at the end. I will deal with this in the next two sections.

Two kinds of 'ought' in practical reasoning

Elementary practical reasoning involves deciding what we should do, given our desires and what we know or believe about the relevant circumstances. I want to fly to Melbourne for a conference and to pay the cheapest fare. I hear that the cheapest fares are to be found on the Internet. So I decide to look for a fare on the Net. While many episodes of practical reasoning are tacit and perfunctory like this, others are more consciously deliberative and complex. They may combine more complicated motivational conditions, like hopes, fears and aspirations, as well as more elaborate intellectual processes, such as attending to complex information, ordering priorities and projecting alternative plans.

If I were to explain why I came to a certain decision or acted as I did, I would be likely to cite my relevant desires, beliefs or other attitudes as my *reasons*. (I am looking on the Net because I *want* to find a cheap airfare to Melbourne and I *believe* that's where I can find one.) By rational reconstruction, my *reasoning* may be summarized in similar terms. (Since I want a cheap fare and I believe that the Internet is the place to find one, I tacitly reason that I ought to look on the Net.)

Notice that the conclusion I draw is of the form 'I *ought* to do so-and-so', whereas the premises are statements about what I believe and desire. So I reason from the relevant facts about what I want and what I believe about how to get what I want, to what I ought to do. This looks like reasoning from 'is' to 'ought', but let me immediately point out that even the most exhaustive and careful deliberation *at this level* can only ever settle what I ought to do in the satisfaction of my desires.³ The 'ought' is one of practical implication. It remains silent on whether those desires are ones that I should act upon, morally speaking. If my desires themselves were called into question, it would be no defence to say that, given what I desired to do and the circumstances I faced, I did what I ought to have done. This would be like saying that given my overwhelming desire to abuse those who take a view that differs from my own, and my belief that Smith is such a person, I ought to abuse Smith. While this is what I ought to do if I am to satisfy my

³ Even then there are various humdrum ways in which such inferences can go astray. I may have neglected to factor certain competing desires into my deliberations, for example, or failed to consider relevant information.

desire, my reasoning tells me nothing about what I ought to do from a moral point of view.⁴

It is obvious that the psychological states of belief and desire that figure in our deliberations cannot guarantee that morally we ought to do what practical reason dictates. Yet even if the inference from what we desire to what we ought to do implies nothing about whether the action in question is morally desirable, I believe that we can make a kind of progress in closing this gap through the activity of practical reasoning. I will argue that this begins when our reasoning becomes reflective about desire. While this may not provide us with a logical inference from 'is' to 'ought', it does signal a movement from being merely as we find ourselves to be toward being as we would want to be upon reflection. And this kind of movement is the most that is humanly possible in attempting to approach the Form of the Good.

Becoming reflective about desire

John Stuart Mill courageously claimed that the only mark of the desirable is that people actually do desire it (Smith & Sosa 1969, p. 61). Yet the reduction of the desirable to the desired seems so implausible, so open to counterexample, that one would have to be firmly in the grip of a theory such as Mill's even to think of affirming it. There are ways of improving upon this view, all the same. It is a commonplace that people have desires (and motives, attitudes, feelings and propensities) that they do not find desirable. An angry man who feels the desire to strike his child may grievously regret his desire and struggle to contain it. A woman may have fought for years against feelings of bitterness that she realizes are destroying her chances of happiness. People may desire to eat and drink much more than they know is good for them, and this may lead them to earnestly desire to curb their cravings. In such cases, we have a conflict between desires that do not operate on the same level. These cases are unlike that of the child who is torn between strawberry and chocolate ice cream. The person with the eating disorder wants not only to stop eating so much, but also to overcome an almost uncontrollable desire to eat. Here the desire for food is, we may say, a *primary* desire; and the desire to bring that desire under control, being directed upon a primary desire, we may call a *secondary* desire. Similarly, the man who is painfully aware of his urge to hit his child and who desperately wishes to contain his desire has a secondary desire in addition to the primary one. And again, the woman whose life is being eaten away by bitterness has a secondary desire directed toward a change in her feelings.⁵

⁴ Nor will it do to plug in the needed 'moral' premises. Suppose that my strongest desire is to abide by the Golden Rule that I should do unto others as I would have them do unto me. Assuming that I do not wish to be abused by Smith, and given my desire to abide by the Golden Rule, I ought not to abuse Smith. This is still not a moral 'ought', even though it involves the application of a moral rule. It simply tells me what I am to do in order to satisfy my desire.

⁵ Harry Frankfurt long ago made the distinction between primary and secondary desires in terms of what he calls first-order desires and second-order desires. See his (1971) 'Freedom of the will and the concept of a person', *Journal of Philosophy*, 58(1), pp. 5-20. Frankfurt thinks that in addition to second-order desires one

These secondary desires take us a step beyond that which is merely desired. From the viewpoint of our reflective judgment, we recognize that some of our desires are not desirable, or not unreservedly so; and having condemned them, or at least brought them into question, we may take all kinds of steps to deal with them. These are normally steps toward what we regard as moral improvement. They are possible for us only because of our capacity for reflective judgement, without which we would not be moral agents at all. This is not to say that our reflective judgements about such matters are unquestionable, or that they reveal to us some indubitable truth about what is desirable and what is not. Rather, our capacity for reflective judgement is something that we can develop, strengthen, make more coherent, more prescient and reliable. Greater coherence and reliability rather than indubitable truth are all that we should expect of reflective practical reason.

The formation of our secondary desires involves thinking about the character, consequences, relative import and propriety of our primary desires, and ordering, redirecting and reconfiguring them. It has as its natural accompaniment the projection and initiation of plans for altered courses of action. To take an extreme example, let us imagine that in reflecting upon the sorry state of my life, I come to desire a radical change in my person, and realise that if I am to accomplish this I will need to do something to curb my worldly desires. This will require me to develop some plan of action. To keep to the extreme, perhaps after further thought and reflection I finally resolve to become a monk or a recluse. Here my reflective reason is that through which my secondary desire takes shape and is transformed into a plan—that through which it takes shape in my life. Reason is the ‘clarifier and liberator’ of desire, not its servant.⁶ It helps to give desire its concrete form and unite it more adequately to circumstance. To the extent that I succeed in my plan, reason is also the agent of a wholesale change in my desires. It is through formulating and carrying out my plan that, if all goes well, I will manage to arrange things in such a way as to curb and redirect my desires. So reason can be as much the master as the slave of desire. This talk of slave and master is, in any case, to see reason and desire as confined to an eternal battle for the will. And why should we view such inner conflict as inevitable, rather than as something to be overcome? It is in the *mutual adjustment* of reason and desire to one another that we find the golden mean.

While the capacity for secondary desires is a natural endowment of persons, secondary desires themselves are not for the most part plausibly viewed as purely natural appetites. They are acquired and take shape through thought and reflection. Perhaps the angry man’s anguish over his temper could be seen as a natural response to the hurt

must also have second-order volitions in order to be fully a person. That is, one must want some desires and not others to constitute one’s will. I take the process through which second-order volitions are formed to be largely constitutive of our moral being.

⁶ This response to Hume is adapted from Dewey: ‘For thought is not the slave of impulse to do its bidding. Impulse does not know what it is after; it cannot give orders even if it wants to ... What intelligence has to do in the service of impulse is not to act as its obedient servant, but as its clarifier and liberator’ (Dewey 1930, pp. 254-255).

that he has seen his violent behaviour cause in the past. But my longing to rid myself of my worldly desires must surely have some personal story of behind it. Even if it is natural to tire of excess and to become disgusted by one's own dissipation, we have every reason to suppose that a response like mine takes the form that it does only through reflection.

It is clear that the tools of reflective thought have a hand in giving both form and substance to our secondary desires. Had I not been capable of thinking about where my life was leading me, or not able to envisage a different kind of life, or not capable of evaluating it, then I would not have been motivated to make the changes that I do. In other words, canonical phases of thinking such as exploring consequences, looking for alternatives, applying criteria and making comparative judgements are involved in the articulation of our secondary desires.

These considerations argue against the separation of our cognitive and affective powers. Given its creative and regulative functions, it is seriously misleading to think of reason simply as a power of judging relations between matters of fact. In the midst of life, a person's intellectual comprehension and emotional sensibility are continually evolving together. Elementary drives that once dominated thought can dwindle and be replaced by desires that are as much nurtured by our intellectual pursuits as the reverse. Projects grounded in an intellectually and emotionally mature life may eventually overtake those pursued with the carelessness of youth. The manner of these changes to the quality of our thoughts and feelings, indeed the whole complexion of a fully developed intellectual and emotional life, cannot be understood on the doctrine of the separation of powers.

Here we are verging upon the connection between moral deliberation and self-formation, thought of as deliberation that is guided by the consequences of our decisions and evaluations for the kinds of persons that we will become in making them. We may turn again to Dewey:

Moral deliberation differs from others not as a process of forming a judgment and arriving at knowledge but in the kind of value which is thought about. The value is technical, professional, economic, etc., as long as one thinks of it as something which one can aim at and attain by way of having, *possessing*; as something to be got or to be missed. Precisely the same object will have a moral value when it is thought of as making a difference to the self, of determining what one will *be*, instead of merely what one will *have* ... The choice at stake in a moral deliberation or evaluation is the worth of this and that kind of character and disposition. (cited in Gouinlock 1994, p. 142)

To say that moral deliberations are those in which we are concerned with what kinds of persons we will become in taking one or another course of action, is to view the deliberations associated with secondary desires as moral ones. For such deliberative concern with our primary desires and their consequences just is a concern with what sort of persons we are to become.

Fact, value and philosophical inquiry

Although I have been dealing with the formation of secondary desires, I hope it is clear how this topic connects with the general idea of an education that teaches us to think as whole human beings. The development of those secondary desires that mark our characters and through which we develop morally as persons ought to be of fundamental concern so far as *moral education* is concerned. When we broaden our focus, however, an emphasis on learning to think as whole human beings implies that education generally should be concerned to help us to find ways of closing the gap between 'is' and 'ought'. And this means that all areas of teaching and learning should be as much concerned with what 'ought to be' as with what 'is'.

This means that the study of society, history, literature, art, science and technology, should have a normative cast. It should never be just a matter of acquiring information, or even of developing understanding, without attention to what these things might mean to our lives. Students should be learning not only about contemporary life and society, but at the same time inquiring into how we should live. They should not only be discovering the natural world but also developing an intelligent care and concern for the natural environment and for the procedures of science.

Developing their cares and concerns should be as much a part of their scientific education as is an understanding of the theories and evidence they survey. Experience of literature and art should invigorate the study of history and society with aesthetic and human values, while at the same time those values should become richly informed by social and historical knowledge. Any scheme that sees the education of the empirical understanding as independent of the development of values will not help students to think and feel in ways that are humanly whole. It is not enough to attend to the growth of values and human sensibilities *in addition to* the development of students' empirical knowledge and scientific modes of understanding. We need a means of integrating these things.

I began with Dewey's claim that philosophy may take on the role of integrating our empirical beliefs and our values. In an educational setting, it is really only philosophy that can take on this role. Only philosophy combines the breadth of subject matter with the development of a holistic understanding in which both facts and values have their place. And only philosophy has the tools that are appropriate for such a reflective inquiry. This means that if programs of formal education are to help us learn to think as whole human beings then they will need to reserve a central place for philosophy. It probably matters less that philosophy should have a place of its own in the curriculum than that it should be honoured throughout the curriculum. By preference, of course, we should have both.

Not just any approach to philosophy would be appropriate to such educational ends, for philosophy itself is all too often taught as a rather esoteric and technical discipline. If education is to take on the task that Dewey assigned to philosophy, then it needs to be deliberately conducted in such a way as to draw upon student's knowledge of matters of

fact and their attitudes and values, and to bring these ingredients together in reflective dialogue. In this regard, philosophical inquiry should be an extension of the process of reflective practical reasoning about desire. It should, for example, help us to reflect upon the motives that have moved whole peoples and societies, and to consider whether we would want to be moved in that way. It should focus upon the attitudes and values that our society sanctions, and upon whether on reflection they are the ones we would want. It should bring us to consider the ways that people have thought to come by knowledge and whether upon reflection we should be guided by them. Such inquiries do not draw upon facts as opposed to values, or reason as opposed to feelings, but adjust each to the others in a way that is humanly whole. Nothing short of this can really begin to address the hiatus between our empirical knowledge and the regulation of our conduct, which Dewey identified as 'the most general and significant of the problems which life presents to us'.

I have said nothing here about the kinds of methods that are current in philosophy education, and the extent to which they may be suitable vehicles for the educational objectives with which I have been concerned. Those whose interests lie in school education and who are familiar with the concept and practice of the philosophical Community of Inquiry will no doubt be aware of the rich possibilities that it presents for carrying this project forward. This is not the place to expand upon this connection, which I have already done in a companion piece to this paper, and which in any case people in the philosophy in schools movement are quite capable of doing for themselves.⁷ My only purpose here has been to put forward this Deweyan conception of the role of philosophy education and to provide some theoretical background that may help us to understand how the process of reflection can help us to think as whole human beings and by this means to bridge the gap that all too often exists between our knowledge of the world and our values.

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⁷ See my 'Learning to think as whole human beings', which is a response to a target article by Matthew Lipman in *Ethik und Sozialwissenschaften*.

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