

Directing moral inquiry:

A rejoinder to Cam, Sowe, Lockrobin, Splitter, Sprod and Knight

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Abstract

In this rejoinder to the foregoing responses to my article 'Moral education in the community of inquiry', I address what I take to be the four most fundamental objections to my proposed expansion of the community of inquiry (CoI) method. My proposal is that we make room in the CoI for *directive* teaching of moral standards we know to be justified or unjustified, in addition to *nondirective* teaching of moral standards whose justificatory status is unknown. The four objections I consider are: (i) that the dominant conception of the CoI method already permits directive moral teaching; (ii) that permitting directive moral teaching in the CoI would edge out other valuable kinds of inquiry; (iii) that all moral standards are controversial; and (iv) that the task of distinguishing justified and unjustified moral standards from controversial ones is unreasonably demanding. I argue that none of these objections is successful.

Key words

community of inquiry, directive teaching, indoctrination, moral formation, moral inquiry, moral justification, moral standards

Introduction

I am grateful to Phil Cam, Michelle Sowe, Grace Lockrobin, Laurance Splitter, Tim Sprod and Sue Knight for their critical reflections on my article 'Moral education in the community of inquiry' in this special issue of *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*. Although my proposed amendment to the dominant conception of the community of inquiry (CoI) method is a friendly one, I recognise that there are good reasons for the

dominant conception and that my respondents are all actively involved in the work of articulating and championing those reasons. So the constructive and collegial tone of their responses, notwithstanding some significant points of disagreement, is more than generous—and exemplary of the dialogical virtues the CoI method aims to cultivate.

I cannot hope, in this rejoinder, to do justice to my respondents' searching critiques or to address all of the concerns they raise. I shall focus on what I take to be the four most fundamental objections to my proposed amendment and try to show that they do not count decisively against it.

Recall that my proposal is for a more expansive understanding of the CoI method, such that there is room for *directive* teaching of moral standards we know to be justified or unjustified, in addition to *nondirective* teaching of moral standards whose justificatory status is unknown. That is to say, the CoI facilitator may have the aim of bringing it about that children accept the justification for justified moral standards, and reject purported justifications for unjustified moral standards, as well as the more familiar aim of bringing it about that children understand the arguments for and against controversial moral standards and can form considered views on them. Of course, the facilitator may not, in seeking to achieve her directive aims, teach didactically: the CoI is not the place for instructing, informing, expounding and explaining. But that leaves open the possibility of pursuing directive aims by non-didactic means: where the answers to moral questions are known, the facilitator should be permitted to guide classroom inquiries towards them.

The four objections I should like to consider, each raised by one or more of my respondents, are these:

1. the dominant conception of the CoI method already permits directive moral teaching, so no amendment is necessary;
2. permitting directive moral teaching in the CoI would edge out other valuable kinds of inquiry;
3. all moral standards are controversial, so directive moral teaching is never appropriate;
4. the task of distinguishing justified and unjustified moral standards from controversial ones is unreasonably demanding.

I will tackle each of these objections in turn, then attend briefly to two points of clarification.

Objection 1: The CoI method already permits directive moral teaching

The first objection is raised by Sprod (2020):

is it true that CoI theorists and practitioners believe that imparting moral beliefs is not permitted? My reading of the literature would lead me to a resounding 'no'. (p. 63)

Sprod immediately explains that the 'moral beliefs' he has in mind are the procedural rules of collaborative inquiry. He quotes Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan in support of his point:

a classroom discussion cannot proceed unless there are some implicit or explicit agreements as to ground rules such as 'no irrelevant talk will be permitted', 'no filibustering', 'no use of force', and the like. (Lipman et al. 1980, p. 87)

In other words, a readiness to abide by certain procedural rules is a *sine qua non* of collaborative inquiry, so inducing such readiness in children must be permissible in the CoI. Sprod anticipates that his objection will not satisfy me because procedural rules 'do not seem to cover all the values that Hand wishes to be taught directly' (Sprod 2020, p. 64). But my dissatisfaction runs a good deal deeper than that. First, the procedural rules of collaborative inquiry are not *moral* rules at all. Filibustering and irrelevant chit-chat are certainly inimical to focused discussion, but they are hardly moral wrongs. Breaking the rules of collaborative inquiry no more qualifies as immorality than breaking the rules of football or chess. And second, persuading children to abide by rules, moral or otherwise, is not at all the same as persuading them that rules are justified. Schools routinely manage to secure children's compliance with rules governing what they wear and how they speak, without coming close to convincing them that the rules are rationally defensible. So while it is true that CoI theorists and practitioners must uphold the procedural rules of collaborative inquiry, it certainly does not follow that they must endorse the practice of imparting beliefs about the justification of moral standards.

Interestingly, Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan are at pains to stipulate that, if and when a collaborative inquiry addresses the justification of its own procedural rules, the facilitator of the inquiry should remain neutral:

The teacher, we have pointed out, should normally be neutral when moderating discussions among students about specific substantive issues in which value questions predominate. But the teacher in such discussions should definitely be partial to and insistent upon the rules of procedure by which the discussion is carried on. *Should these rules happen to become themselves the substance of the discussion, then the teacher should endeavour once again to assume a neutral attitude towards them.* (Lipman et al. 1980, p. 186, my italics)

So I do not think it can plausibly be maintained that the dominant conception of the CoI method already permits directive moral teaching.

Objection 2: Permitting directive moral teaching would edge out other kinds of inquiry

Sowey and Lockrobin worry that, if CoI facilitators were to take on the directive task of persuading children that basic moral standards are justified, it would result in a neglect of other important elements of moral education. They fear that my proposal to *expand* the dominant conception of the CoI could in fact serve to *contract* it:

Although directive teaching might efficiently lead students to a more widely-accepted justification (while perhaps also securing their commitment to the basic moral standards with which Hand is concerned), these benefits would come at the expense of a more full-bodied kind of ethical inquiry which we take to be fundamental to the (nondirective) moral CoI. We are referring to a kind of inquiry concerned not merely with moral justification, moral subscription and code compliance, but concerned more broadly with the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues and dispositions that will serve young people in the face of novel and complex predicaments. (Sowey & Lockrobin 2020, p. 38)

Because my proposal 'reduces moral inquiry in the CoI to argument over the content and justification of moral standards' (p. 47), Sowey and Lockrobin warn, at least three

important domains of ethical inquiry are overlooked. First, children miss the opportunity to explore 'reasonable disagreement over the meaning, scope and significance of moral concepts' (p. 38); second, attention is drawn away from 'controversy over the application of moral standards and concepts to particular cases' (p. 42); and third, there is little or no time for 'investigation of Aristotelian questions concerning what is worthwhile in human life' (p. 47). Understandably, Sowe and Lockrobin are unwilling to endorse a proposal that involves the eclipse of these domains.

I confess to being puzzled by this objection. It seems that my argument for *adding* a new directive task to the existing range of nondirective inquiries in the CoI has somehow been construed as an argument for *replacing* the existing inquiries with the new task. I do not know what has given rise to this construal, but it is far from the truth. For the avoidance of doubt, let me be explicit: I think significant controversies about the meaning of moral concepts, the application of moral standards and the nature of the good life should continue to be explored, deeply and comprehensively, in the classroom CoI. I begin my recent book on moral education (Hand 2018) with John Rawls' description of the plight of liberal democratic societies:

The political culture of a democratic society is always marked by a diversity of opposing and irreconcilable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines. Some of these are perfectly reasonable, and this diversity among reasonable doctrines political liberalism sees as the inevitable long-run result of the powers of human reason at work within the background of enduring free institutions. (Rawls 2005, pp. 3-4)

Rawls is surely right. People profoundly and reasonably disagree on many moral and ethical questions, so the only way to prepare children adequately for adult life is to enable them to think intelligently and independently about those questions. I am wholeheartedly in favour of the 'full-bodied kind of ethical inquiry' Sowe and Lockrobin are anxious to preserve.

Indeed, even the phrase 'adding a new directive task' is misleading insofar as it implies that other things must be squeezed to make room for the newcomer. Questions about the content and justification of morality are already routinely discussed in the CoI. My proposal is simply that, for a small number of moral standards (those that are demonstrably justified or unjustified), and for a small number of justificatory arguments (those that are demonstrably sound or unsound), the CoI facilitator's aims should be directive rather than nondirective. There is no

reason why this adjustment in pedagogical aim for certain questions already commonly addressed needs to take up additional curriculum space.

One thing that troubles Sowe and Lockrobin is the suggestion in my book that educational attention to deliberation about the application of moral standards belongs under the heading of *moral formation* rather than *moral inquiry* (Sowe & Lockrobin 2020, p. 43). The same thing troubles Sprod (2020, p. 61). The concern here is presumably that, since I do not put learning to deliberate in the category of moral inquiry, I will not want to see it given much airtime in the CoI. But this concern is quite unfounded. My analytical distinction between moral formation and moral inquiry separates out two core purposes of moral education: (i) to bring it about that children subscribe to and competently apply basic moral standards, and (ii) to facilitate their critical reflection on the nature, content and justification of morality. Helping children work out what to do when their moral standards conflict, or when it is not clear how a standard bears on a situation, is integral to the first of these purposes. However, as I emphasise in the book, the analytical distinction between formation and inquiry does not imply a rigid separation of the two in educational practice. Questions about the justification of a moral standard will sometimes give rise to questions about the difficulties of applying it, and vice versa—and the classroom CoI is ideally suited to exploring questions of both kinds.

I hope these reassurances will suffice to allay the worry that permitting directive moral teaching in the CoI would edge out other valuable kinds of inquiry.

Objection 3: All moral standards are controversial

Because I only advocate directive teaching of moral standards we know to be justified or unjustified, the question of whether such teaching should be permitted in the CoI becomes moot if, in fact, all moral standards are of unknown justificatory status. And that, according to Cam, is how things are:

it is not obvious that we have the decisive arguments upon which Hand depends. A glance at the history of moral philosophy makes this clear. Think of Kant ... Although Kant takes his arguments to be decisive and generations of Kantians have promulgated them, they are otherwise regarded as controversial, at best. The same is true for all the other arguments with which students of moral philosophy will be familiar ...

If the best arguments in philosophy are hardly decisive, commonplace reasons for subscribing to these moral standards are almost certain to fail the test. (Cam 2020, p. 23)

This objection, of course, takes us beyond the scope of my argument in 'Moral education in the community of inquiry'. There I assume, rather than defend, the claim that some moral standards are demonstrably justified or unjustified. I do, however, put some effort into defending the claim in *A Theory of Moral Education* (Hand 2018), and it will perhaps be helpful for me to sketch the contours of my defence here.

Many of the moral standards to which people subscribe are matters of reasonable disagreement, but not quite all. There are a handful of basic moral standards that enjoy the support of a rationally decisive justification. And there are at least some moral standards whose justifying arguments have been decisively refuted.

The list of justified moral standards is a familiar one: it includes prohibitions on killing and causing harm, stealing and extorting, lying and cheating, and requirements to treat others fairly, keep one's promises and help those in need. The argument that vindicates these standards is that their currency in society ameliorates *the problem of sociality*—the standing propensity in human social groups to breakdowns in cooperation and outbreaks of conflict. Social groups have this propensity because of three contingent but permanent features of the human condition, sometimes dubbed the 'circumstances of justice': (i) rough equality, (ii) limited sympathy and (iii) moderate scarcity of resources. Under the circumstances of justice, we can rely on neither prudence nor altruism to keep the peace: we must commit to holding ourselves and each other to some cooperation-sustaining and conflict-averting standards of conduct.

There may be other good reasons for committing ourselves to basic moral standards; and there may be good reasons for committing ourselves to other moral standards too. But we can say with confidence—and, importantly, *teach* with confidence—that subscription to at least these standards is demonstrably justified by at least this argument.

An example of an unjustified moral standard is the prohibition on homosexual acts. Various arguments have been advanced in support of this standard (in the book, I review the argument from scriptural authority, the 'perverted faculty' argument and the 'basic human goods' argument), but not one of them stands up to scrutiny.

Although many people endorse a moral prohibition on homosexual acts, they have no business doing so: reason demands that they withdraw their endorsement.

Cam (2020) explicitly rejects this verdict. While acknowledging that the prohibition on homosexual acts has 'largely been rejected by Western societies', he considers it to be 'an open question whether the reasons for this are more rationally compelling than arguments to the contrary in other societies' (p. 23). This way of putting the point unhelpfully conflates epistemic and geographical considerations. What matters with reasons and arguments is how good they are, not how widely they are accepted in different parts of the world. I find it hard to believe that Cam seriously considers it to be an open question whether the case for the permissibility of homosexual acts is more rationally compelling than the case for their impermissibility; but if he does, I hope he will take the trouble to set out the arguments for prohibition he judges to be persuasive, before settling too firmly on the view that 'the proper starting-point is to treat these matters as intellectually controversial' (p. 24).

I have been able to do no more here than gesture towards the arguments I have made elsewhere for the claim that some moral standards are demonstrably justified or unjustified. Let me conclude by noting that, even if Cam were right that 'the best arguments in philosophy are hardly decisive', it is surely undeniable that the *worst* arguments in philosophy have been decisively refuted. If so, and if there are some moral standards whose only support comes from the worst arguments in philosophy, we should resist the conclusion that all moral standards are controversial.

Objection 4: Distinguishing justified standards from controversial ones is too difficult

The fourth and final objection is an interesting variation on the third. Sowe and Lockrobin (2020) are willing to concede that 'there are aspects of moral life that are firmly settled' (p. 33), but they are struck by the difficulty of distinguishing the settled aspects from the unsettled ones. Their concern is that, even if professional philosophers are up to the job, the average teacher almost certainly is not:

Hand assumes that teachers are adequately equipped to distinguish uncontroversial from controversial standards in a consistent and impartial manner. We note however that if a teacher were to misjudge a controversial standard as uncontroversial and go on to teach it

directively, she would indeed risk indoctrinating her students. We consider it highly likely that teachers will in fact make such errors of judgement on a frequent basis, due both to their susceptibility to biases ... and to the insufficiency of their theoretical knowledge in most instances. (p. 31)

Part of the problem, as Sowe and Lockrobin (2020) see it, is that teachers often carry out their work in splendid isolation:

Since individual teachers in their respective classrooms usually work alone, without the checks and balances of a self-correcting community of peers, they are particularly vulnerable to unconscious biases such as motivated reasoning and myside bias ... It may therefore be unwise to position any teacher as the ultimate arbiter of moral justification, or even to take for granted that her sense of being morally persuaded has its roots in reasoning at all. (pp. 43-44)

One thing to say here is that the position of the moral educator with respect to bias-susceptibility and knowledge-insufficiency is no different from the position of the science educator, history educator or art educator. It is an occupational hazard of teaching that one's biases sometimes interfere with one's objectivity and that classroom inquiry sometimes strays into territory where one's knowledge is insecure. Part of the job is to recognise these threats, to do one's best to guard against them, and to be honest about them with one's students. It is *not* part of the job to be deterred by these threats from the task of imparting knowledge where knowledge is available.

Another thing to say is that something has gone badly awry in the profession if teachers are finding themselves cut off from 'the checks and balances of a self-correcting community of peers'. To be a professional is necessarily to belong to a professional community, which community serves precisely to support, guide and regulate the activities of its members. Teachers cease to be professionals at all if they become isolated from the community of teachers. Contra Sowe and Lockrobin, however, I do not think it is true that most teachers 'work alone'. They meet regularly to plan and evaluate lessons, to share good practice and address problems encountered in the classroom, to discuss the needs, welfare and progress of pupils, and to participate in training and development programmes. I agree that no teacher should have to 'distinguish uncontroversial from controversial standards in a consistent and impartial manner' *on their own*, but I disagree that this is a predictable consequence of the implementation of my proposal in schools.

But perhaps the most important thing to say about Sowe and Lockrobin's objection is that it entirely overlooks the role of the curriculum. The primary task of the teacher, as ordinarily understood, is not to make idiosyncratic decisions about what to teach and how to teach it, but to teach the curriculum. Correspondingly, my proposal is not that individual teachers should allocate moral standards to justificatory categories and determine the pedagogical aims appropriate to each; it is that these allocations and determinations should be made by the community of philosophers and educators and laid out in a curriculum for moral inquiry. To be sure, teaching is not reducible to mechanical delivery of a curriculum: classrooms are too complex, too unpredictable and too human for that. But a carefully planned and publicly agreed curriculum remains the surest bulwark against the bias-susceptibility and knowledge-insufficiency of teachers.

While it is true, then, that teachers carry out their work under non-ideal circumstances and sometimes make mistakes, these facts carry little weight against the argument for permitting directive moral teaching in the CoI.

Clarifications

Finally, I should like to clarify two aspects of my position that have puzzled my interlocutors. The first has to do with my account of indoctrination; the second with my use of the term 'standards'.

Sprod notes that I define 'indoctrination' as the imparting of beliefs in such a way that they come to be held on some other basis than relevant evidence and argument. He also draws attention to my claim in *A Theory of Moral Education* that 'the process of cultivating moral attitudes and dispositions in children cannot itself be indoctrinatory because attitudes and dispositions are not beliefs and therefore not the sorts of things that can be indoctrinated' (Hand 2018, pp. 40-41). He infers from these points that indoctrination, as I conceive it, is a purely cognitive matter:

This stance seems to imply that indoctrination must be carried out entirely cognitively. Yet Hand says 'to indoctrinate someone is to impart beliefs ... non-rationally ... [by] means of persuasion ... some form of manipulation or psychological pressure'. This sounds to me like (at least partly non-cognitive) moral formation—but with the difference that the beliefs so imparted are ones with which we do not agree. If beliefs can

only be imparted cognitively, it seems to me that indoctrination would need to be carried out by presenting rational sounding arguments that ignore or gloss over fatal, rational objections. We are left with a very narrow scope for indoctrination. (Sprod 2020, pp. 62-63)

The problem here is that Sprod conflates the *content* of indoctrination with the *methods* by which it is achieved. My claim (in line with most accounts of indoctrination in the philosophical literature) is that the content of indoctrination is necessarily cognitive: it is beliefs, rather than feelings, intentions, attitudes or habits, that are illegitimately imparted by indoctrinatory teaching. But it does not follow from this that the methods of indoctrination must be cognitive too. Indoctrination certainly can involve ‘presenting rational sounding arguments that ignore or gloss over fatal, rational objections’; but it invariably involves the exercise of psychological pressure, the inculcation of beliefs by charm, intimidation, cajoling or bullying. Far from denying that indoctrinatory teaching relies on non-cognitive methods, I make it central to my account.

To recognise this reliance on non-cognitive methods is not, however, to blur the line between moral indoctrination and moral formation. Moral formation, as I understand it, is the cultivation in children of the conative, affective and behavioural dispositions that constitute subscription to moral standards. These dispositions are precisely not beliefs. Because indoctrination is, by definition, a process of belief transmission, moral indoctrination cannot be subsumed under the heading of moral formation.

Splitter (2020) is suspicious of my use of the term ‘standards’. I begin my article by characterising moral inquiry as ‘a matter of investigating the nature of moral standards, asking how subscription to such standards might be justified, and examining the strength of suggested justifications’ (p. 5). This strikes Splitter as odd:

But what is the word ‘standards’ (which Hand uses to mean something like ‘rules, prescriptions, findings, outcomes’) doing here? In schematic terms, sticking fairly closely to his formulation, we could say that ‘X inquiry—i.e. inquiry into X—is a matter of investigating the nature (meaning) of X, asking how claims/beliefs about X might be justified, and examining the strength of suggested justifications’ ... However, including the term ‘standards’ or an equivalent term produces an important shift in emphasis: i.e. schematically, ‘investigating the nature/meaning of X’s standards, outcomes or rules, asking how such standards, outcomes or rules can be justified, and examining the

strength of suggested justifications of these standards, outcomes or rules'. This formulation assumes that the inquiry process is all about investigating outcomes which are known in advance. (Splitter 2020, p. 52)

I must admit to finding this passage a little opaque. I do not quite understand why Splitter takes 'standards' to be an approximate synonym of 'findings' or 'outcomes', or why he thinks my characterisation of moral inquiry tilts the playing field towards 'investigating outcomes which are known in advance'. I think the best I can do to address Splitter's unease is to clarify what I mean by 'standards' and explain why I favour the term over such alternatives as 'claims' and 'beliefs'.

Following David Copp, I take a standard to be 'anything that is expressible by an imperative' (Copp 1995, p. 20). A standard specifies something to be done and the person who subscribes to it commits herself to doing the thing specified. Standards are not, and do not entail, propositions, so subscription to them is not, and does not entail, assent to propositions.

I take it to be uncontroversial among moral philosophers that morality is *action-guiding* or *conduct-regulating*. The meaning of moral utterances is at least in part imperatival or prescriptive. The term 'moral standards' is designed to capture this uncontroversial feature of morality. Whatever else people might be doing when they sincerely assert that stealing is wrong, they are calling for compliance with the moral standard 'do not steal'.

By contrast, there is nothing approaching a consensus among moral philosophers on the questions of whether moral utterances have indicative or descriptive meaning, what that meaning might be, and whether any moral utterance is true. Cognitivists think morality has propositional content but non-cognitivists disagree; among cognitivists, realists think there are true moral propositions but error theorists disagree; and among realists, there are various rival accounts of what makes moral truths true. It is because talk of 'moral claims' and 'moral beliefs' has a distinctly propositional flavour, and because I think moral educators should avoid taking a stand in the debates between cognitivists and non-cognitivists, realists and error theorists, that I prefer to speak of 'moral standards'.

This terminological preference certainly does not signify a prejudging of the outcomes of moral inquiry. The word 'standard' no more implies 'justified standard' than the word 'belief' implies 'true belief'. Morality, insofar as it is action-guiding or conduct-

regulating, is a matter of subscription to standards; and it is a core task of moral inquiry to survey the panoply of moral standards to which people subscribe and try to determine when, if ever, subscription is justified.

Conclusion

There is much more to be said, both about the objections and doubts I have all-too-briefly addressed in this rejoinder and about those I have been obliged to pass over in silence. But I hope to have said enough to show that my proposal remains a live option for moral education in the community of inquiry. Thanks again to my respondents for their careful and cordial engagement with my argument: I look forward to continuing the conversation.

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