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On Justification in Moral Education

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Teachers engaged in moral education face a puzzle. We aim to bring children up to believe in and subscribe to basic moral standards such as prohibitions against harming others and requirements to help when we can. At the same time, there is widespread reasonable disagreement about the content and justification of morality, and teaching standards as justified when there is reasonable disagreement is wrongfully indoctrinatory. I analyze two answers to the puzzle, posed by Hand (2018a) and White (2016), defending White's education in altruism approach against Hand's criticisms by drawing from an analogy with the teaching of standards and principles in other subjects. Moral standards need not be metaethically justified to children all the way down, like how we need not teach children the metaphysical foundations of math and science in order to teach the standards of math and science in a way that does not wrongfully indoctrinate them. I conclude in favor of a pluralistic approach to teaching the reasons to abide by basic moral standards.

Introduction

Moral education is an important part of human growth. As children, we often begin to learn about morality from our parents at home. We learn about it from social experiences with our peers. Some of us learn about it in church from faith leaders. Some moral lessons are imparted by teachers during formal schooling or in response to roughhousing during recess. Sometimes a moral lesson is verbal and direct, like when a parent chastises a child for hitting their sibling because it's wrong to harm others. Sometimes the lesson is indirect and experiential, like the kind of learning that happens when we realize we hurt a friend's feelings, and we experience a sinking, regretful feeling of our own. Some of the lessons come from the books we read, such as learning how to follow the golden rule from *The Berenstain Bears*, or from film and television, such as the lessons children learn about how to be good to their neighbors while watching *Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood.*

This essay focuses on a puzzle that arises for moral educators. In *A Theory of Moral Education*, Michael Hand (2018a) argues that there is a tension that all moral educators face (both in school and in the home). On the one hand, morality is something that must be learned. We teach children to understand what morality requires of them with the goal that they will subscribe to moral standards and believe those moral standards to be justified. On the other hand, there is widespread reasonable disagreement about the content and justification of morality, and teaching standards as justified when there is reasonable disagreement is wrongfully indoctrinatory.

I analyze two possible answers to the puzzle, one posited by Michael Hand (2018a) and the other suggested by John White (2016). Both Hand and White agree that there are basic moral standards that we can teach to children alongside their justification while avoiding wrongful indoctrination. Hand argues that the justification for basic moral standards that we teach to children should be of a rational moral contractarian sort while White suggests a justification based on considerations of human wellbeing. In defense of White's view, I respond to Hand's charge that White does not fully spell out the argument for the wellbeing justification for basic moral standards. I argue that White's suggested justification needs no

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further argument, drawing an analogy with the teaching of standards and principles in other subjects. I conclude in favor of a pluralistic approach to teaching the reasons to abide by basic moral standards.

Teaching Morality Without Indoctrination

The basic moral standards at issue in this essay are almost universally uncontroversial and widespread across human societies. They include prohibitions on killing, harming, stealing, and lying, and requirements to help those in need and treat people fairly. Few could disagree that these central moral ideas are things we should instill in children beginning at a young age. However, we may (along with Hand) wish to avoid indoctrinatory methods and aim to teach these ideas in a way that gives children good reasons for believing them. When teachers of morality direct children to follow these standards and a thoughtful child quizzically asks, "Why?", we should have a good answer to offer them.

In contrast to these basic moral standards, Hand claims that controversial moral standards—for example, moral prohibitions on eating meat—should be taught nondirectively with the aim of getting children to autonomously form their own views. With respect to moral veganism, we should teach the controversy, explaining the reasons for and against the view and leaving room for children to decide for themselves. The reason to teach controversial standards nondirectively is that teachers of morality ought to avoid indoctrination. Indoctrination is contrary to what is often thought to be a central aim of upbringing and education—to increase the student's capacity for rational thought.

The concept of indoctrination is contested. Theorists disagree about whether indoctrination is always wrong and about whether a teacher's intentions matter with respect to whether a practice is indoctrinatory. White's (2016) conception of indoctrination is such that a teacher indoctrinates when she intentionally tries to prevent a student from reflecting on a belief through methods such as isolating the student from those who might challenge the belief. White writes:

> Methods of isolation can include separate schooling with a school ethos that reinforces certain taken-for-granted beliefs; control of the internet; punishment for associating with skeptics or disbelievers; surrounding the teacher with an aura of infallibility. (p. 452)

White claims that indoctrination is wrong because it "aims at preventing people from thinking for themselves and so threatens their intellectual autonomy and their wider personal autonomy that depends on this" (p. 452). In Hand's conception of indoctrination, "[t]eaching propositions as true, or standards as justified, when there is reasonable disagreement about them, is indoctrinatory" (2018a, p. 5). According to Hand, indoctrination involves "non-rational belief transmission" (2018a, p. 47). Beliefs that are held non-rationally are resistant to reassessment—since these beliefs are not founded on evidence or argument, counter-evidence and counter-argument are not effective (Hand, 2018a, p. 7). According to Hand, indoctrination harms us because it is difficult for us to shift beliefs that we come to hold non-rationally, whereas beliefs that are based on reasons are open to critical revision.

In what follows, I shall assume for the sake of argument that teachers of morality should avoid indoctrination in both senses. Following White, teachers of morality should not prevent students from reflecting on their beliefs by isolating them from other perspectives. Following Hand, teachers of morality should seek to give children good reasons for their beliefs and avoid teaching ideas that we have no good reason to believe. Both educational aims are worthy of our adherence.

Two Pictures of Justification for Basic Moral Standards

The Problem-of-Sociality Justification

The puzzle for moral educators set out by Michael Hand is suggested by the following propositions:

> 1. Moral education aims to bring it about that children subscribe to moral standards and believe them to be justified.
> 2. There is reasonable disagreement about the content and justification of morality.
> 3. Teaching propositions as true, or standards as justified, when there is reasonable disagreement about them, is indoctrinatory. (2018a, p. 5)

According to Hand, the difficulty we face in reconciling these three propositions poses a serious threat to moral education. It is important that we educate children in morality and teach them to believe that subscription to moral standards is justified. But perhaps we cannot do this without resorting to wrongful indoctrination or non-rational belief transmission, since the content and justification of morality are contested. Hand takes the threat to moral education to apply not just to teaching the most controversial moral standards, but even to the basic and uncontroversial ones, since there is widespread disagreement about what justifies these standards (even when there is consensus that the standards are correct). Some of the contested justificatory stories for basic moral standards include various philosophical moral frameworks that sometimes conflict with each other, including deontological frameworks, consequentialism, and moral contractarianism.

Hand's solution to the puzzle says that the basic moral standards are decisively rationally justified, and we can teach these standards directively alongside the decisive rational justification for subscribing to them. By teaching basic moral standards to children alongside the justification for subscribing to those standards, we can satisfy our duty to teach morality to children while avoiding indoctrination. Hand argues that subscribing to the basic moral standards is justified through a contractarian justification. Teachers and parents should teach basic moral standards alongside this justification. This will amount to non-indoctrinatory rational moral education. According to Hand, basic moral standards do have decisive justification that is not subject to reasonable disagreement—the justification for these standards is that they ameliorate what David Copp (2009) calls the problem of sociality.

The problem of sociality is this: All human beings living alongside others in groups are confronted with an unavoidable practical problem. Human social groups have a standing propensity to conflict and breakdown in social cooperation owing to contingent circumstances—rough equality, limited sympathy, and moderate scarcity of resources (Hand, 2018a, p. 60). Human beings can ameliorate the problem by means of universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to basic moral standards. According to Hand, the problem of sociality and the ameliorating role of basic moral standards amounts to "a justification for subscribing to a core moral code that counts decisively in favor of doing so—and which children can therefore be persuaded to accept in the context of directive moral inquiry without recourse to indoctrination" (2018a, p. 60).

Subscription to basic moral standards can provide the motivation necessary for us to keep cooperative agreements and treat each other in non-harmful ways, resolving the problem of sociality, at least to the extent that everybody or most of us do the same (Hand, 2018a, p. 66). Since we have an interest in ameliorating the problem of sociality, we have an interest in subscribing to basic moral standards. For Hand, the idea of subscribing to a moral standard "consists in intending to comply with it, feeling good about complying with it and bad about failing to comply with it, and being in the habit of complying with it" (2018a, p. 66). This conception sees subscription to moral standards as habitual and dispositional. Since the problem of sociality will not be resolved unless everyone, or almost everyone, abides by conflict-averting and cooperation-sustaining standards, Hand emphasizes teaching children to subscribe to moral standards in a way that is concerned with the regulation of other people's conduct as well as one's own. According to Hand, we need the help of "seeing our non-compliance as liable to punishment" (2018a, p. 67).

The result of Hand's theory is that moral educators seeking to avoid indoctrination should be prepared to teach children that basic moral standards are grounded in the need to ameliorate the

problem of sociality. Hand claims that this justificatory story supplies children with good reasons to believe that they should subscribe to basic moral standards.

Hand's approach has received widespread attention in the philosophy of education literature (see Zrudlo, 2021; Aldridge, 2019; Tillson, 2019; D'Olimpio, 2019; Ferkany, 2018; Clayton & Stevens, 2019). A common refrain among critics is that the contractarian approach fails to appreciate the importance of sympathy in moral education. For example, Tillson (2019) points out that Hand's problem of sociality justification relies on the fact that the basic moral standards are those that will produce an outcome of stable conflict-averse societies, but such societies may be consistent with attitudes of bigotry toward outsiders and impermissible practices including slavery. Tillson writes: "… it would seem to be an impoverished moral education that did not seek to cultivate sympathy with outsiders, and prohibit their abuse" (p. 652). Similarly, D'Olimpio (2019) argues that social contract theory does not suffice to address the historical exclusion of oppressed people from the benefits of the social contract, emphasizing a need to supplement Hand's approach by considering the role of virtues such as sympathy and compassion. D'Olimpio writes, "A key aspect of moral education should be devoted to extending our sympathies beyond ourselves and our small circle of loved ones" (p. 520). Aldridge (2019) argues that if the approach stands, it only does so owing to the fact of human sympathy. For instance, Hand resists an objection that says that the social contract cannot extend to the infirm by leaning on "the important psychological fact about human beings that they are sympathetic to one another" (2018a, p. 75). Aldridge (2019) writes, "If Hand's efforts at moral justification ultimately rest on an appeal to sympathy, it makes sense to give priority to efforts to cultivate such sympathy rather than to spend much time on the justification" (p. 639). One issue commentators have taken with Hand's theory pertains to the particular *contractarian* justificatory story he offers; another issue concerns the strategy of developing a justificatory story based on non-moral or pragmatic grounds; another is in the idea that we should have prioritized the telling of a justificatory story in the first place.

I agree that a reasonable conception of moral education must appreciate the role of human sympathy in moral life. Given the various issues that have been raised against the contractarian approach, if there are other candidate justificatory stories to tell, then we can be more optimistic about the prospect of a non-indoctrinatory directive moral education. Other justificatory stories may be consistent with abiding by Hand's more general point that non-indoctrinatory moral education involves the teaching of justifications and (on some level) answering to the "Why be moral?" question. Aldridge (2019) calls for a more detailed consideration of White's (2016) argument on nurturing children's capacity for altruism, which I turn to next.

The Wellbeing Justification

White proposes that moral education must incorporate an education in altruistic dispositions, foregrounding the importance of bringing children up to feel positively about caring for people's wellbeing: "Coming to care is all the bedrock needed" (2016, p. 455). White contends that basic moral rules are "so fundamental that every society needs them" and argues that the cultivation of dispositions "not to lie, break promises, harm people physically or mentally" should feature into an education in altruism (2016, pp. 456-457).

While altruistic sentiments are fundamental in White's picture, the wellbeing starting point still has room to satisfy Hand's requirement that children should be given good reasons to abide by basic moral standards. White gives an example of a familiar situation faced by parents providing early moral education at home: "Three-year-old Jason has pushed his toddler sister Alice over and made her cry. 'Don't do that, Jason,' says his mother. 'Look, you've hurt her. Give her a cuddle to make it better'" (2016, p. 454). White contends that this is a case of teaching a child a basic moral standard—refraining from harming others. White writes:

> The mother has provided Jason with a reason for this: he has caused his sister pain. The justification is in terms of her wellbeing. This is reinforced by the suggestion of a cuddle and making things better for her. (2016, p. 454)

White contends that justifications based on other people's wellbeing suffice, as opposed to Hand's justificatory starting point of ameliorating the problem of sociality. Other basic moral standards, too, can be justified on the grounds of the wellbeing of others. These include prohibitions on lying, stealing, and breaking promises, and requirements to help others in need and treat others fairly. Although White has been interpreted as providing an approach that "eschews reasons" in favor of cultivating caring sentiments (Tillson, 2017), White (2017) argues that the approach does not eschew reasons for moral commitment. Rather, his argument is that we need not teach a rational justification "in relation to the bedrock" (p. 340). We can teach Jason that he has reason not to push his sister because it causes pain—but we do not need to offer a deeper justificatory story like Hand's, which can give a further reason not to hurt others based in the amelioration of the problem of sociality. In White's view, that we should care about other people's wellbeing constitutes a bedrock, but "we cannot provide arguments for this bedrock itself" (2017, p. 340).

White argues, further, that the wellbeing justification has the advantage that (a) it looks as if a wellbeing consideration itself grounds the problem of sociality justification, and further, (b) that it comes into the moral education picture more immediately:

> Preventing radical breakdown in cooperation is important so that together we can make our lives more bearable than they otherwise would be. This is a wellbeing consideration. But a Handian argument that goes all the way back to the necessary conditions of social life is not needed in a moral education programme: considerations of wellbeing can come into the picture much more immediately, as in the story of Jason and Alice, rather than via appeals to preventing major social breakdowns. (2016, p. 455)

The wellbeing justification seems to meet the threshold that Hand sets for justifications that we teach to children—that the justifications supply good reasons and are not themselves a matter of reasonable disagreement. White claims that while the notion of wellbeing is in some ways controversial, there is general agreement about many matters of wellbeing: "people's wellbeing suffers if they are hungry, in pain, have no income, have their plans thwarted, etc.; and it is these kinds of misfortune that are at issue in this debate" (2016, p. 455).

Justifications based on wellbeing do not seem to be among those about which there is reasonable disagreement, at least when it comes to justifications for basic moral standards as opposed to, say, justifications for standards of action that apply to controversial moral dilemmas. For example, one might appeal to maximizing wellbeing as the justification for pulling the lever in a trolley problem, allowing one person to die in order to save five. Standards of behavior for trolley problems are controversial in content—they are the subject of reasonable disagreement—and thus would be among those that should be taught non-directively according to Hand's framework. But standards of action in response to moral dilemmas are not basic moral standards nor among those thought to be important to impart to children at a young age. Wellbeing considerations are controversial in the domain of moral dilemmas, but not controversial as reasons we appeal to in order to explain why we should not physically harm people, or why we should help those in need.

That it harms someone is a reason not to cause them physical harm, steal, or lie to them; that it enhances someone's wellbeing is a reason to help them when we can. These seem to be quite good reasons and of the common sort we offer to children to explain these moral standards. Indeed, wellbeing considerations are reasons that can be appealed to that are often agnostic between normative ethical theories, even while there is widespread reasonable disagreement about the theories themselves. As White argues, our wellbeing is a central reason to prevent social breakdown, and preventing social breakdown is seen as a source for moral standards on a moral contractarian account. Additionally, wellbeing considerations feature prominently in consequentialist theories; utilitarianism, for example, sees the

maximization of wellbeing as the fundamental moral principle governing human behavior. Even deontological moral frameworks—which determine the rightness or wrongness of an action independently of the consequences—make room for considerations about the wellbeing or ends and desires of others. Although Kant (1785) famously does not base his moral theory on anything like a fundamental principle to maximize wellbeing or happiness, contributing to the happiness of others is among the select few examples of moral duties he describes in the *Groundwork*. While it is controversial whether wellbeing constitutes the fundamental consideration in morality, wellbeing considerations are among those that reasonable people can agree feature into the justification of basic moral standards.

In Defense of the Wellbeing Justification

In this section, I defend White's proposed method against Hand's criticism. First, I'll note that Hand emphasizes that the problem-of-sociality justification is not the only good reason to abide by basic moral standards. He writes: "Different justifications for the same standards can sit quite happily alongside each other; acceptance of one does not necessitate rejection of all others" (Hand, 2018a, p. 69). Rather, Hand claims that the problem-of-sociality justification has the advantage that:

> unlike other justificatory attempts, it is not a matter of reasonable disagreement among reasonable people. It is beyond serious dispute that human beings must contend with the problem of sociality, and that they can and do ameliorate that problem by subscribing to basic moral standards. (2018a, p. 69)

This means two things for an analysis of Hand's argument. First, we should not read Hand as claiming that moral contractarianism is the full normative justification for the whole of morality. Second, we should not read Hand as, at least in principle, excluding the possibility that other justifications can be taught to children in a non-indoctrinatory fashion. Rather, the view is that other justifications could fit into the non-indoctrinatory teaching of basic moral standards so long as those justifications provide children with good reasons that are not a matter of reasonable disagreement. Thus, my argument in this section may simply amount to a friendly amendment to Hand's picture of rational moral education, in which he does not yet accept the directive teaching of justifications other than the problem-of-sociality justification.

In reply to White's contention that concern for wellbeing is a good reason we can give children for subscribing to basic moral standards, Hand writes:

> If there is a good argument [for subscribing to basic moral standards] premised solely on concern for the wellbeing of others, then I should happily endorse its promulgation, alongside the problem-of-sociality justification, in moral inquiry. Unfortunately, White does not spell out the argument he has in mind, and I am not sure how it would run. If sympathy or concern for others were sufficiently stable, motivating and catholic in scope, it is not clear why we should need moral standards at all. The necessity for universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to standards arises because our sympathies are limited, in the sense of being unevenly distributed and only intermittently motivating. (2018b, p. 374).

In this passage, Hand raises two points. First, he contends that we need a further argument for the wellbeing justification before we can endorse its promulgation in the directive moral education of children. Second, he suggests that justifications that point to concern for others are unstable because our sympathies are "limited." I take it that Hand is here suggesting the wellbeing justification will not result in sufficient uptake of basic moral standards. The first point is mistaken. The second point is either mistaken or can easily be mitigated by teaching the wellbeing justification alongside the problem-of-sociality justification. I'll take these points in order.

First, does the wellbeing justification need a further argument before it can be considered a good reason to give children? In the previous section, I argued that wellbeing justifications for basic moral standards are not the subject of reasonable disagreement, even while it is controversial whether there is a fundamental moral principle to maximize wellbeing or whether wellbeing considerations govern standards of right action in the context of moral dilemmas. White's remark that concern for others constitutes a sort of "bedrock" suggests that wellbeing as a justification for basic moral standards is itself basic. White (2016) endorses a Humean position according to which sentiment, not rationality, constitutes the fundamental ground of morality. This is a metaethical position according to which the description of our moral reasons goes no further beyond sentiment. However, other metaethical positions are such that morality is ultimately grounded in rational agency (e.g., Kant, 1785; Korsgaard, 1996). In contrast, robust realists posit a mind-independent, external moral ground (e.g., Enoch, 2011). There is more we can aim to say in an argument concluding that wellbeing serves as a reason to abide by basic moral standards. But the "more to be said" brings us into the territory of metaethical theorizing, which is not required in the context of early moral education.

Consider what more could be said in favor of the following proposition expressing the wellbeing consideration: "The fact that someone's wellbeing suffers if we physically harm them is a reason not to hit them." The justification here seems to have been stated in full, but if we are looking for a further argument for this claim, there is more that we can say about why the fact of suffering is a reason not to harm, or what makes the proposition true. The further explanation for the truth of that proposition might point to the source of moral claims like this one—one familiar further explanation might say that we should not cause suffering because God wills this to be so. Another might point to facts about human nature that give rise to moral standards, or facts about rational agency that ground propositions like this one. Both of these further claims are the subject of reasonable disagreement, but now we are theorizing about the truth-makers or grounds of moral propositions. This is metaethical territory that we do not generally approach in the moral education of children.

We need not give the full metaphysical or epistemological story behind propositions that express moral justifications in order to consider the reasons, justifications, or standards expressed within them as rational, non-indoctrinatory, or the subject of agreement among reasonable people. Importantly, moral principles and standards have this in common with principles and standards in other subject matters, notably science and mathematics.

In the philosophy of science, there is a longstanding debate about the nature of scientific knowledge. Some forms of scientific realism say that scientific theories do or aim to give true descriptions of the world, while scientific antirealists supply different metaphysical or epistemological stories about the status of scientific knowledge. Similarly, in the philosophy of mathematics, there is more than one story to be told about the nature of mathematical truths. Platonists argue that mathematical objects like numbers exist in the world independently of us while others regard numbers as a social construction.

There is importantly more to be said about what we should believe about scientific and mathematical truth beyond the standards and theories we teach children in school—and they might learn about in college if they take a philosophy course—but we do not need to provide the full story in order to engage in rational, non-indoctrinatory knowledge transmission about these subjects. What is more important is that we can give students reasons at some level of abstraction that support the standards and principles, and that these reasons are not the subject of reasonable disagreement. We can rationally teach children standards in math and science, giving them good reasons to believe these standards, all without supplying any particular philosophical theory of the metaphysical grounds that make mathematical and scientific principles true. The same goes for teaching basic moral standards. There is widespread disagreement in metaethics about what makes moral propositions true and widespread disagreement in normative ethics about which moral theory is correct. Nonetheless, there are a great number of moral propositions and justifications for those propositions at a lower level of abstraction about which we do not find widespread and intractable disagreement. It is this level of abstraction we are engaged in when we supply reasons for moral behavior to young children.

The second point Hand raises against the wellbeing justification suggests that it may not result in sufficient uptake of basic moral standards given limited human sympathy. I believe this point is mistaken—when we express to children that concern for the wellbeing of others is a reason to abide by certain basic moral standards, we are helping children grow in sympathy and modeling a caring disposition that they can take up for themselves. Limited sympathy is not a challenge for the justification, but rather, a reason to promulgate it in early moral education, a point that has been suggested by several of Hand's critics (Aldridge, 2019; Tillson, 2019; D'Olimpio, 2019).

Nonetheless, if it is true that limited sympathy points to the possibility that the wellbeing justification will result in limited uptake of basic moral principles, I suggest there is an easy solution. We can accept that the wellbeing justification is just one of many good justifications for basic moral standards and include it alongside others that may help bring about uptake, including the problem-of-sociality justification.

Indeed, if there are limitations to the wellbeing justification, we may equally recognize limitations to the problem-of-sociality justification. Hand's idea is that basic moral standards—prohibitions on killing, harming, lying, stealing, and requirements to keep promises and help those in need—are robustly justified by the fact that subscription to these standards helps prevent social breakdown. We have good reason to think that these are the standards required to ameliorate the problem because these are the standards subscribed to in stable societies. Regarding our standing propensity to outbreaks of conflict, Hand quotes Hobbes: "… if any two men desire the same thing, which neverthelesse they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End,… endeavor to destroy, or subdue one an other" (as cited in Hand, 2018a, p. 64). Since this is part the rational justification for the basic moral standards—we need the standards or else people in society will seek to destroy or subdue one another—Hand's theory suggests that we should instruct children in the Hobbesian fear of a war of all against all.

We may worry that this is not the right way to introduce the fundamental importance of morality in a human life to children, even if it's true that the problem-of-sociality justification serves as one good reason for subscription to basic moral standards. This justification for moral standards emphasizes human propensity to violence and distrust of others. But fear and distrust of others is just one of many attitudes that drives human moral life—the care and concern for others emphasized by the wellbeing justification is important, too. I conclude that a pluralistic approach that includes teaching the wellbeing justification alongside the problem of sociality justification is warranted in directive moral education.

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