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Intellectual Virtue and the Aims of Education Debate

Ben Kotzee
University of Birmingham
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School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbastion
Birmingham

Intellectual Virtue and the Aims of Education Debate

What the ultimate aims of education are is a perennial question in the philosophy of education. Some of the answers given to this question have included that the ultimate aims of education are autonomy, the creation of good citizens or personal flourishing. A recent development in this debate is an exchange between Alvin Goldman and Harvey Siegel regarding truth and critical thinking as educational aims.

Goldman and Siegel on the Aims of Education

In *Knowledge in a Social World* (1999), Goldman starts from what he thinks is the basic goal in our cognitive lives: information seeking. Information seeking may be driven by curiosity or by simple practical interests. Importantly, what we seek when we seek information is *true* information. (1999: 3) Such true information can be sought from different sources: we can seek it ourselves by paying attention to evidence that is available to us such as observation or experiment, or we can seek it from other people – informants who, we think, know the truth. Goldman (1999: 4) notices that much epistemology has focussed on the first of these: the individual approach of finding out the truth for oneself. "Individualist epistemology" amounts to the study of justification, the study of how individual thinkers should gather and use evidence in order to determine what to believe. By contrast, Goldman notes that the second matter, how we gain true information from other people, is relatively un-explored (at least in standard epistemology). In addition to the concerns of individualist epistemology, Goldman thinks that epistemology should study the social practices that we engage in to share true information between people. He calls this enterprise "social epistemology".

On Goldman's conception of social epistemology, the enterprise of social epistemology should be "veritistic": social epistemology should study how social processes of gaining knowledge collectively and sharing it between people enhance the stock of true beliefs held by individuals or social groups. Goldman examines some general mechanisms by which people gather true beliefs together and share them – for instance testimony (the telling of truths) and argumentation (convincing others of truths). More interesting in the current context, Goldman also investigates a number of forms of social organisation that has the collection and dissemination of knowledge as their purpose: the social structures that are science and education, but also the legal system and parliamentary democracy have as their central aim the gaining and sharing of information.

Let us look specifically at what Goldman holds about education. He writes:

> "The fundamental aim of education, like that of science, is the promotion of knowledge. Whereas science seeks knowledge that is new for human kind, education seeks knowledge that is new for individual learners. Education pursues this mission in several ways: by organizing and transmitting pre-existing knowledge, by creating incentives and environments to encourage learning, and by shaping skills and techniques that facility autonomous learning..." (1999: 349)

It would be fair to say that a transmission model such as Goldman's is out of kilter with much current educational thinking – a fact of which Goldman is very aware. Thus, he defends his veritistic view of the aim of education against a number of other views, such as the multicultural view that what is true is relative to a culture, the postmodernist view that there is no such thing as ultimate truth for education to transmit and the view that the aim of education is not so much that students end up believing specific truths (or even believe a sufficiently large stock of truths whatever they are), but that students should be able to think critically for themselves.

Especially this last objection – that the ultimate aim of education is critical thinking amongst students and not true belief as such is important. Harvey Siegel has formulated the following criticism of Goldman's position. Siegel points out that critical thinking or rational processes of belief formation is educationally valuable independent of whether they lead to true beliefs or not. In making the argument, Siegel points out that mere true belief, held without rational justification cannot be the aim of education. If it were, that would imply that educational methods such as brainwashing or indoctrination would be acceptable, as long as they ended up in students believing truths. (Siegel, 2005: 350) Or take this (slightly fanciful) example: imagine that one could get students to believe a large number of truths by giving them some kind of pill (or by subjecting them to some kind of brain manipulation process); Goldman would have to applaud such a method as having a high veritistic value and, hence, as being educationally laudable. Our educational instincts, however, are tilted against the idea that this would be laudable; the very point of education, we would be inclined to say, is not just that students end up believing truths come what may, but that they begin to believe them because they understand them or

can begin to see – rationally – that they are true. In geometry, for instance, we aim not just at students knowing the various geometrical theorems, but also that they be able to demonstrate them; the very point of teaching geometry is that students will not just believe the truth about various geometrical relationships, but that they can make sense of them. We see this quite clearly in the educational practice of testing. (Siegel, 2005: 351) Not only in mathematics, but in other disciplines too, we test for justification of answers alongside the correct answer; in a mathematics exam, for instance, we mark not just the answer, but also the students' workings – an incorrect answer with some good workings is worth something and a correct answer without good workings is defective. What this shows is that education does not just aim at instilling true beliefs, but aims, instead, at instilling *justified* beliefs.

In a later paper, Goldman (2006) reacts to Siegel's point about appropriate methods in education and acknowledges that the aim of education is knowledge read in the traditional sense as justified true belief (rather than in the veritistic sense of true belief). Yet, Goldman maintains that the justification condition is not terribly hard to meet: because of the anti-reductionist stance that Goldman takes towards testimony, he holds that students are justified in believing what their teachers say without further evidence that their teachers are good sources of knowledge. (Goldman, 2006: 11 – 2) One might say that, for Goldman, the hard problem will still be to ensure that education transmits true beliefs; that those beliefs will also be justified can be taken "as read" on the basis of features of the social situation and as a result of the testimonial authority of the teacher.

Truth, justification and the value of knowledge

Above, we saw that – aside from a remaining dispute over the justification of teachers' testimony – both Goldman and Siegel hold that the aim of education is to foster justified true beliefs amongst students. (Of course, education also has certain moral, political or aesthetic aims that Goldman and Siegel do not underestimate; to what extent these other aims depend on education's epistemic aim is in itself an interesting question.) Yet, while Siegel (and Goldman, on the revised account) seeks to reconcile the aims of education with what is manifest about educational practice, the account seems of limited use to general epistemology. Siegel may conclude that our aims in education must include both justification and truth, but this does not imply that justification and truth are *general* epistemic aims outside of the classroom. More seriously, perhaps, simply seeking to reconcile education's aims with what is manifest in our educational practice provides no explanation for *why* it is that we *should* promote beliefs that are at once true and justified in the classroom.

One shortcoming is that Goldman and Siegel do not say anything about a major problem that faces the classical account of the nature of knowledge as justified true belief – the problem noticed by Edmund Gettier (1963) that even justified true belief could arise due to luck and may, therefore, not amount to knowledge. (I skip over the problem fairly lightly to avoid technicality.) A second problem is that neither Goldman nor Siegel say much about what is so specifically *valuable* about justified true belief that people should seek to have it and that our education system should transmit it. I will take these in turn and hope to illustrate the advantages of an account focussed on the development of intellectual character as the fundamental aim of education.

Within the field of epistemology, what has become known as "virtue epistemology" turns the focus away from matters such as knowledge, justification and evidence in the abstract and focuses on the properties of knowers – the real people who know or come to know things. When focussing on people as knowers, "credit" accounts of knowledge stress that what we expect of real people is not just that they believe the truth and or hold justification for what they believe, but that they have certain stable abilities, skills and habits that generally result in their believing the truth about things. (Besides such fairly basic natural propensities to believing the truth, we may also expect higher forms of responsible intellectual behaviour from them that we may call intellectual virtues, such as being intellectually open-mind, intellectual honest, etc.) Writers such as Sosa (2007) and Greco (2010) have stressed that what matters is not just that someone believes the truth, but that they believe the truth through their own intellectual efforts in such a way that we can give them credit for what they believe. The major technical advantage of shifting the focus to the intellectual performance of the person who does the believing is that it deals with the luck problem that Gettier identifies. It is not good enough that someone simply believes the truth with justification, for that could still have come about through luck; demanding true belief that arises through a successful intellectual process takes care of the luck problem.

On the credit theory of knowledge, it is not just important that we believe the right things, the fact that someone believes the right thing in such a way that they can be given credit for that belief is more valuable. However, the question is what is so specifically valuable about *knowing* the answer to something, as opposed to just happening to believe the truth about it. In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates asks whether we should believe a blind man who describes for us, the way to Larissa from Athens – if the blind man describes the way correctly, the point is,

that mere correct description will help us reach our destination whether the blind man knew for certain or not that it is the correct description.

What added value is there in knowing something as opposed to simply believing the truth about it? Sosa (2007: 70 – 91) holds that it is fundamentally important that someone knows something through their own efforts and Greco (2010: 97 – 8) holds that this is both "...intrinsically valuable and constitutive of human flourishing." Whether Sosa and Greco's accounts succeed, however, is another matter. Baehr (2012) holds that there is not much of a value problem to do with knowledge and that Sosa and Greco do not solve it in any case. In contrast with Baehr, I do think there is a problem, but I also think that Sosa and Greco do not solve it. Let me explain how I think we should think about the question.

The educational value of good intellectual character

Above, I said that there are two value problems at work in this area: (1) what is so specifically valuable about knowledge that we should seek not just to believe the truth about things, but to know it? and (2) what is so specifically valuable about knowledge that we should teach students knowledge and not just true beliefs? The two questions are subtly different. The second is, I think, the way that we should tackle the issue between Goldman and Siegel.

In his account of the intellectual virtue of truthfulness, Bernard Williams (2002) sketches an account of how it could have come about that human beings divide epistemic labour – that people share knowledge with each other and save cognitive effort by relying on others' knowledge. That people today share knowledge with each other, through science, the media, education and so-on, is one of the most important things about how our society is organised – we live, as they say, in a knowledge society. But how did this knowledge society come about? How did the social organisation of intellectually uncooperative cavemen, for instance, change in order to become the intellectually cooperative society that we have today? Williams does not seek to give an empirical account of how this happened – that is the job of anthropology, psychology and the like. Rather, Williams is interested in how the development of moral trust between people is a key ingredient in making sense of knowledge sharing. Williams thinks that the fact that we share knowledge can only have developed given that we have developed a sense of obligation to each other to be, as he calls it, *truthful*. Being truthful, for Williams, involves being accurate in how one forms beliefs and sincere in how one shares them. That both accuracy and sincerity are essential to truthfulness is straightforward. Information is only *worth* sharing with others if it is accurate – that is, if it depicts something about how the world is pretty much as it is. Besides taking care in forming beliefs, however, one also needs to take care in transmitting beliefs sincerely to others – one needs to take care that what one says actually reflects what one believes; one person having accurate beliefs about the world is no good to other people if that person does not pass it on faithfully. (Kotzee, 2011)

Let us take an example of some very basic cooperation between people – say cooperation in identifying healthy berries to eat. Say I know which berries are good to eat and you do not - what do I gain by telling you (or showing you) how to identify the good berries? A first thing to say is that we will be able to cooperate in finding berries from now on and two berry pickers are often better than one. However, imagine that the "you" in question is a child. What sort of thing do I gain by teaching the child to identify healthy berries? The answer is two-fold: the child will become able to pick berries for itself – I will no longer need to find berries for her; furthermore, if I'm lucky, the child may one day begin to pick berries for me or on my behalf.

An important *caveat* needs to be entered here: I will only be prepared to eat the berries that the child brings me if I trust that the child will bring me only berries that are good to eat (if the child's berry-identification is, in the ordinary as well as the technical sense "safe"). If I am not just going to let the child pick berries for herself, but also bring me berries, I will build into my teaching of berry identification extra safeguards to make sure that she picks the right berries and only the right berries. (Because it is *a* child, or more likely *my* child I will do this not only for my own sake, but also for hers, but we do not have to assume altruism to make the story work.) I will want to convince myself not just that she will generally or for the most part pick the right berries but that I can always trust her to pick the right ones. When I can do that, I can "outsource" my berry-picking activity to her and, perhaps, get on with something else. Importantly, what I am doing through this outsourcing is not just berry picking, but much of the process of *thinking* about berry picking and getting it right about berries – I not only do not have to physically pick berries anymore, I can leave the whole issue of finding and identifying berries to her. When our cooperation has reached this stage, we have not just physical, but intellectual cooperation, because she will, in a sense, be thinking for me as well as doing something for me.

From, this, we may begin to see how knowledge is valuable over and above just true belief. If one is not just going to act on a belief oneself, but cooperate intellectually with other people (as in doing something on another's behalf, passing beliefs on to them, etc.) what is valuable is more than just that that belief is most likely true – the belief should be *demonstrably* fit for others to believe. If one takes into account not only one's own ends, but one's epistemic responsibility to others when forming beliefs, one's beliefs should be, as Elgin puts it 'solid'. Importantly, '[p]roviding reasons to believe that our grounds for believing that p are solid is different from simply providing additional grounds for p'. (2008: 380) If one is going to be prepared to communicate a belief to someone else, one wants the grounds for one's belief to be of a certain kind – not likely to shift, not vulnerable to one little piece of evidence turning out wrong, not being over-specific and so forth. All of these responsibilities as a believer are left out if one only focuses on the truth of belief and not on how truth and justification must come together in the character of the knower.

It is no accident that the example I appeal to above is an educational one. It is meant to illustrate what is valuable about not only passing on beliefs to children that are true and justified, but forming their skills and habits of mind in such a way that they can be trusted to cooperate with one both practically and intellectually. One might say that this formation of intellectual character not only creates the sort of people that one can trust, but, provides for the very possibility of such cooperation. If cooperation were the point of education it would pose a challenge not only to the idea that the aim of education is justified true belief, but also to the old idea that the aim of education is autonomy.

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