

A Theory of Moral Education (Michael Hand)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Review of

A Theory of Moral Education

by Michael Hand. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018

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It is a fact that reasonable people disagree quite a bit about morality. They disagree about what is moral and what immoral. And even when they agree on that, they often disagree about the reasons *why* what is moral is moral. Reasonable people often disagree on the content of morality and on the correct justification of shared moral standards.

According to Michael Hand, this state of affairs presents moral educators—including parents and school and university teachers—with a serious dilemma. Moral education involves aiming “to bring it about that children subscribe to moral standards and believe them to be justified”; it aims at what Hand usefully calls “full moral commitment” (p. 5). However, it is (supposedly) indoctrinatory to teach “propositions as true, or standards as justified, when there is reasonable disagreement about them,” since the presence of reasonable disagreement means that the evidence and argument relevant to evaluating the proposition is subject to more than one conflicting and “plausible interpretation” (p. 6). Consequently,

[i]f a teacher wishes to persuade a learner that such propositions are true or such standards justified, she cannot do so by rational demonstration ... She must instead resort to non-rational means of persuasion, to some form of manipulation or psychological pressure, to bring about the desired beliefs. (p. 6)

If that is correct, and reasonable disagreement runs wide and deep, then in Hand’s view, moral educators must either refrain from educating children morally—thus failing to do their part to bring it about that children become moral persons—or else do their part to bring it about that they become moral persons, but only through irrational, indoctrinatory means. While taking the first horn of the dilemma may have obvious social costs, the latter horn, Hand believes, would also constitute a serious wrong to children if it would leave them holding their beliefs on non-rational grounds.

In this book, Hand articulates and defends a bold solution to this problem. He claims simply that a core set of moral standards—namely all those that humans need in order to maintain social cooperation—is in fact supported by a decisive rational justification. They are thus not subject to reasonable disagreement and so full moral commitment to them can be taught rationally and without indoctrination. The book pursues this position while also helpfully clarifying many aspects of moral education, including the nature of moral standards and of commitment to moral standards (chapter 2); the pedagogy of moral education (chapters 2 and 6); the nature and extent of reasonable disagreement about morality (chapters 1 and 4); the justification of moral standards (chapters 4 and 5); the right

division of labor between parents and teachers or schools for the moral education of children (chapter 6); and the ugliness of moral education (chapter 8).

In this review, I will selectively summarise Hand's discussion in order to explain and briefly critique his proposed framing of the book's major problem, as well as his proposed solution. Hand's book constitutes a major contribution to the literature on moral education despite possibly containing at its core a *non sequitur*, namely that if it is possible to reasonably disagree about (the justification of) a standard, then teaching for full moral commitment to the standard is inevitably indoctrinating (or to contrapose this, teaching adherence to a standard can be *non-indoctrinating* only *absent* reasonable disagreement about it). I return to some difficulties for this view below. But regardless, Hand's book addresses focal concerns of moral educators in incredibly helpful ways, framing important debates in a manner that scholars can usefully draw upon in advancing well-defined and provocative positions.

To fix the target of discussion, Hand provides a stipulative definition of moral standards distinguishing moral from non-moral subscription to them. Subscription to standards is *moral* (as opposed to ethical or aesthetic or whatever) if and only if (1) "the subscriber not only intends and inclines to comply with the standards in question, but also desires and expects everyone else to comply with them too" and (2) the subscriber is inclined "to endorse penalties for non-compliance" (pp. 20–21). In other words, moral standards are those Hand calls *universally-enlisting* and *penalty-endorsing*. Justifying moral standards thus involves justifying these two aspects, and it is partly why reasonable moral disagreement threatens the legitimacy of moral education; justifying moral standards is so demanding that it may seem to be impossible.

Hand then follows Bernard Williams in suggesting that ethical standards are distinct from moral standards in consisting of "those to which I subscribe on grounds that I consider them integral to a life worth living" (p. 27). Consequently, moral and ethical standards will sometimes overlap, but not always; the reasons we have for subscribing to ethical standards—that subscription is part of living well—will differ from those we will have for subscribing to moral ones. Moreover, these reasons "are not, in and of themselves, the kind of reasons one would need to justify moral standards" (p. 28). They are pragmatic and not moral in that they are concerned with our good, and not right/wrong action *per se*, and are not necessarily universally-enlisting or penalty-endorsing.

The target thus clarified, Hand usefully divides the business of moral education into *moral formation* and *moral inquiry*. Though they tend to work together, moral formation more directly serves cultivating subscription to moral standards and involves issuing prescriptions, rewarding compliance, punishing non-compliance, modelling compliance, and modelling reactions to the compliance and non-compliance of others. Since it is sometimes not clear just what morality requires, a secondary component of moral formation is "improving children's thinking about the application of their standards" (p. 35). Standard expository and discursive methods are appropriate here, and especially discussion "about how to meet one's moral obligations in specified circumstances, both real and hypothetical" (p. 35).

Moral inquiry more directly serves the aim of helping children develop justified beliefs about the justification of moral standards. It involves "investigating the nature of moral standards, asking how subscription to such standards might be justified, and examining the strength of suggested justifications" (p. 37). Moral inquiry can be either *directive* or *nondirective*, however. Directive moral inquiry attempts to persuade children that a moral standard is (not) justified through either didactic or nondidactic means (e.g., subtly or not-so-subtly guiding inquiry so that students come to adopt the

intended conclusion). Nondirective moral inquiry simply avoids attempting to guide the conclusions students draw.

As Hand sees it, the risk of indoctrination (in circumstances of reasonable disagreement) arises specifically for directive moral inquiry. It is perhaps noteworthy that this is in part because Hand reserves indoctrination for the teaching of beliefs through non-rational means (p. 78), apparently denying that efforts to shape (through any means) students' desires, motivations, and affects can be indoctrinating. This might be an overly narrow conception, one presupposing an artificial bifurcation of the role of beliefs *versus* desires and emotions in human moral psychology. It is a stock insight of Aristotelian theorizing, by contrast, that proper training of desires and emotions is crucial if children are to mature into persons who can see the force of the reasons on behalf of right moral standards; if their wills are so misshapen that the things they like and desire are bad, they cannot be moved by reasons in favor of the good things. Thus, rational directive moral inquiry that will help children become adults with sound moral beliefs cannot be pried apart from moral formation using non-rational, non-argumentative methods. So the threat of indoctrination might be deeper than Hand admits, and more difficult to resolve. More controversially, it may suggest that indoctrination is in fact inevitable in moral education (maybe all education), so that the real interesting issue is not how to morally educate without indoctrination, but how to avoid indoctrinating *illegitimately*, or in ways that constitute a moral abuse of teacherly power.

In Hand's opinion, however, the problem is not (or not simply) that directive moral inquiry (in circumstances of reasonable disagreement) involves an attempt to influence which moral standards and beliefs the learner will come to accept. Rather, the putative wrong is that the relevant arguments and evidence do not rationally settle the matter, so that any teacher who wishes to ensure that her students adhere enduringly to her views will have to resort to non-argumentative persuasion, with the result that learners will adhere to it non-rationally.

I believe this framing of the indoctrination problem confuses importantly distinct issues. Teaching children so that they will enduringly adhere to one side of a controversial issue on non-rational grounds is one potential sort of wrong. Teaching them to adhere to one side at all, whether through argumentative or non-argumentative methods, is another. Even in the context of reasonable disagreement, it is quite possible to attempt to teach students to adhere to your side of the argument through largely argumentative means, for example, by simply saying more on behalf of your side than the other. This would be wrong, but not especially less outside the argumentation game, nor less strategic, than the business of moral educating as usual, which is always a mixture of the two. The use of non-argumentative persuasion with older children is especially liable to backfire, and Hand agrees that beliefs held on non-rational grounds are liable to be very unstable (p. 10). This is why it is a *non sequitur* to say that teaching for full moral commitment to a standard can be *non-indoctrinating* only *absent* reasonable disagreement about it; the presence of reasonable disagreement does not determine whether argumentative methods will be most effective, and even legitimate moral inquiry that will lead to full, rational moral commitment must be preceded by moral formation using non-argumentative methods.

In any case, Hand rejects various solutions to the problem he frames, only one of which I will mention here. According to this approach, directive moral education should be limited to moral standards that can win the allegiance of a Rawlsian overlapping consensus. This supposedly misfires because that some standards can win an overlapping consensus does not give individuals reasons to subscribe to those standards. Thus, "[t]o tell children that a moral code has gained the support of an

overlapping consensus is not, therefore, to give them a reason to endorse it” (p. 54). This is not obviously correct, though if it is, that will be because it gives them at best the wrong kind of reason, namely a pragmatic, non-moral one.

Having dismissed solutions to the focal problem of the book that operate within the terms in which it is framed, Hand somewhat jarringly defends one that rejects those terms: Some directive moral inquiry is ultimately justified because there exist some standards “whose justificatory status is beyond reasonable doubt, because there is an argument for subscribing to them that has decisive rational force” (p. 59). The relevant standards are all those we subscribe to in order to solve the “problem of sociality,” that is the “propensity in human social groups to breakdowns in cooperation and outbreaks of conflict, arising from the contingent but permanent circumstances of rough equality, limited sympathy and moderate scarcity of resources” (p. 66). They include standards against “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” (p. 68). *Moral* subscription to these standards, or subscription that is “universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing,” is justified because universal, culpable subscription to them is a necessary condition of maintaining social cooperation. Thus not only are we justified in subscribing to them, but responsible for “actively encouraging others to comply and for standing ready to punish them when they do not,” as well as for ensuring that “their authority is recognised by everyone” (p. 67).

Hand’s defense of this solution is possibly at odds with the book’s conception of moral standards and reasons, and with the reasons offered against the overlapping consensus solution. Contractarian arguments construct morality out of our pragmatic concern for our own well-being, and thus do not advance a distinctively moral justification of them. So it cannot be claimed that these standards can be taught as those having a decisive and rational *moral* justification; they are not justified morally at all, but rather pragmatically. Perhaps it was not Hand’s goal in the first place to say that some standards have a decisive moral justification, but that is not obvious from the problem-framing in the book.

Still, Hand’s book is must-read material that helpfully touches on numerous important and often hidden problems of moral education. Chapter 6 outlines the overall shape of moral education in light of the ideal articulated in the book and addresses how school teachers should deal with parents committed to unreasonable moral codes. Chapter 7 helpfully discusses how the ideal applies to teaching three controversial moral standards, including those concerning giving offense, sending one’s children to private schools, and homosexuality. If the aim of the book was to pull the chair out from under defenders of parents’ right to teach their children whatever arbitrary moral ideas they happen to hold, the book is fairly successful. The likelihood of any reasonable justification for such arbitrariness looks dim by the book’s end, and this is a significant contribution to the moral education literature.

About the Author

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