

Governing Classrooms Well: Pre-collegiate Ethics and the Ethics of Teaching

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Education is about, among other things, helping young people to become competent, informed, thoughtful, and responsible human beings. To achieve that goal it is necessary to reflect on what it would be for one to be a flourishing human being. It is obvious that, for many people, the attraction of drug- or alcohol-induced euphoria is irresistible. But a little philosophical reflection should help us all see that such euphoria cannot be perfect happiness. To live a happy life we need to think about what it would actually be like to live such a life (Matthews 2009, 175).

Gary Matthews, Matthew Lipman, Michael Pritchard and others have been arguing for many years that children are capable of philosophical thinking, that engaging children in philosophical thinking is not only valuable but potentially educationally transformative, and that stage theories of human development (now widely discredited within psychology) present a misleading image of what is “age appropriate” in education.¹ They have defended the integration of philosophy into schooling at all levels as having a proven potential to empower children to be more effective, motivated, and active learners, and they have defended philosophical inquiry into ethical matters as a legitimate and valuable approach to ethics instruction through the pre-collegiate years.² Their work implies, without often saying it, that a teacher’s philosophical humility in the face of ethical puzzles strengthens, rather than weakens, her moral authority with students – moral authority that is fundamental to good teaching. If the goal is to nurture self-determining seriousness about doing the right thing, then it is clearly far better to invite students into the enterprise of ethical inquiry and deliberation, in a way that tells them it matters what they think, than to feign a kind of ethical infallibility no one has. If the goal

is to have the authority with students foundational to good teaching, a teacher must similarly have and communicate a vision of what is good for her students, while giving them the space and tools to think through the shape of that good for themselves.

My aim in this paper is to defend the practice of engaging children in ethical inquiry as an approach to teaching ethics, focusing on the relationships between ethics instruction, the teacher's moral authority, and the legitimate exercise of educational authority. I will argue that pre-collegiate ethics instruction should largely consist of initiation into open-ended, principled examination – philosophical examination – of ethical matters, and that its efficacy *depends upon*, but also *contributes to*, the ethical quality of classroom governance and the teacher's moral authority. I will argue that the *ethics of teaching* and *teaching of ethics* are deeply intertwined. Responsible teaching, including but not limited to the teaching of ethics, must be guided by a moral vision made real and attractive to students. The focus of that vision must be the prospect of students' being self-determining in living well, and nurturing students' self-determination in living well is fundamentally a matter of initiating them in the enterprise of self-reflective ethical inquiry. The attractiveness of the vision will be manifest more or less vividly in the dignity, competence and autonomy it offers students, but also and necessarily in the norms of respectful engagement and human flourishing that the teacher must herself exemplify. In accepting the requirements of ethical inquiry in a group setting, students may enact a positive and motivating self-image as they engage in a form of cooperative learning – a form of cooperative learning that reinforces the teacher's moral authority while distributing responsibility throughout the learning community.

I will begin historically, but not with Socrates and the idea of Socratic questioning, which are widely assumed to be much friendlier to modern democratic values than Plato and the “perfected” version of Socratic ideas he attempted.³ Socrates was not a proponent of engaging children in philosophical thinking, whereas Plato was. Judging from the texts available to us, Socrates envisioned a world in which children receive a conventional Greek education and only as youths in their early twenties are induced through philosophical encounters to examine the conventional beliefs they were raised in. In the Socratic dialogues, this nearly always takes the form of interrogations by Socrates in which inconsistencies in the ethical beliefs of his interlocutors are exposed. Faced with these inconsistencies, it should be apparent to his interlocutors that they must jettison some of their ethical beliefs so as to achieve a more fully consistent set – presumably, a more consistently *true* set of ethical beliefs – but the interlocutors don’t always comply and gains in consistency are not *necessarily* gains in truth or adequacy. It depends on the character of the beliefs one begins with.

Plato offered a powerful critique of this Socratic model in Book I of the *Republic*, a critique already apparent in the dialogue’s opening lines. Playfully illustrating the fact that those who refuse to listen cannot be persuaded by reason, Plato draws attention to the implausibility of leaving children to grow up as they may and expecting to induce them to rationally examine their beliefs as adults:

Polemarchus said: It looks to me, Socrates, as if you two are starting off
for Athens.

It looks the way it is, then, I said.

Do you see how many we are? He said.

I do.

Well, you must either prove stronger than we are, or you will have to stay here.

Isn't there another alternative, namely, that we persuade you to let us go?

But could you persuade us, if we won't listen?

Certainly not, Glaucon said.

Well, we won't listen; you'd better make up your mind to that (*Republic I 327c, italics added*).⁴

This is not throw-away stage setting, but an announcement of one of the *Republic's* most central themes and quarrels with Socrates. It endorses Socrates' vision of a social and political order mediated by reason-giving and respect for persons as rational beings, and hints that this vision can only be achieved through systematic attention to education that prepares and enables learners to be reasonable.

In doing so, it also lays before us the question of how the educational creation of a non-coercive civic order mediated by reason-giving can itself be free of coercion. If we can't rely on people responding reasonably to reason-giving at the origins of the enterprise, what can we rely on? It will seem obvious to some that education must be fundamentally coercive in its early stages, but it needn't be if there are non-coercive ways to induce cooperation other than through reason-giving.⁵ The non-coercive methods suggested by Plato are modes of "attraction." Learning through self-directed imitation of models that communicate truths is not coercive if the evidence for the truths

communicated is unspoken only because it is presently beyond the learner's comprehension, and acquiring skills and dispositions through self-directed play is not coercive if it is made attractive through its social and competence rewards.

The *Republic* goes on to devote a great deal of attention to education, but it is in the *Laws* that Plato gives us his fully elaborated vision of a rule of law transacted through reason-giving and informed consent, grounded in public schooling designed to cultivate rationality and provide philosophical instruction in the rationales for the laws being as they are. These rationales are to be grounded in a genuinely philosophical account of truths about human flourishing.⁶ Against the backdrop of ancient Greek disciplinary practices one could fairly describe as brutally coercive, Plato makes the remarkable proposal in the *Laws* that children should be educated together in public day schools with the purpose of enabling them to become rationally self-governing citizens, through the cultivation of reason and instruction in philosophy, using, he says, the *Laws* itself – a fictional philosophical dialogue – as a textbook (*Laws* VII 811c-d).

There is, to be sure, an account of the training of the passions of desire and fear to develop the virtues of courage and moderation or self-restraint. In this respect, Plato's account of moral education prefigures Aristotle's focus on habituation with the end of enabling learners to take pleasure in, and not be pained by, what is good – the end of enabling them to rule themselves in light of what it is most reasonable to do. The foundation for rational self-governance is laid in habituation, but true virtues are mediated by one's own rational judgment, which must be well informed and strengthened by practice. The strengthening of intellectual capacities is to be provided through education in "music" – the "arts of the Muses" or what we now refer to as the liberal arts

– but this latter aspect of the educational program of the *Laws* must be understood in light of Plato’s account of proper legislation or governance.

According to Plato, governance is itself a deeply educational enterprise that should aim to enable people to live well, guided as much as possible by their own reason (I 630-631; V743c; cf. *Rep.* IX 590d-91a). This is elaborated through two models of medicine and legislating, and the idea that laws should be preceded by “preludes.” The two models of medicine are related to two grounds on which authority is claimed, the claim of the stronger to rule the weaker and the claim of those with practical wisdom to rule without force over willing subjects, aiming at the common good (III 690b, VII 804e-805a). The kind of doctor who does not follow nature does not “give or receive any account of the illness afflicting” the patient, but instead

He gives him orders on the basis of the opinions he has derived from experience. Claiming to know with precision, he gives his commands just like a headstrong tyrant and hurries off... (720c; Pangle, 1980).

The other kind of doctor

Investigates [illnesses] from their beginning and according to nature, communing with the patient himself and his friends, and he both learns something himself from them and, as much as he can, teaches the one who is sick. He does not give orders until he has in some sense persuaded;

when he has on each occasion made the sick person gentle by means of persuasion, he attempts to lead him back to health (720d-e; Pangle, 1980).

This superior “double method” of the doctor who acts from knowledge and with the informed consent of the patient is then illustrated in the domain of legislation by contrasting a law set down as a simple command and threat of punishment, the threat being the only reason given for obeying, with a law preceded by a “prelude” which explains the rationale for it (721a-d). There are many examples of such preludes in the *Laws* and the rationales they offer generally explain why conformity to the law in question is in the interest of those expected to obey them. These explanations are grounded in a general preamble to the laws as a whole, which begins with an account of human nature and human flourishing. The prelude to the laws as a whole provides a general understanding of what is good for human beings, and it explains how specific moral and legal directives are thereby justified (V 726e ff). This is strongly analogous to what the good doctor does in using “arguments that come close to philosophizing, grasping the disease from its source and going back up to the whole nature of bodies” (IX 857c-d), but the legislator’s philosophical explanations come to rest in the nature of the *psyche*.

It is through these preludes and the education of the capacities of reason already mentioned that a good legislator will endeavor to obtain citizens’ cooperation and endorsement of the laws. The laws and their preludes will not be merely announced and written down, moreover, for Plato holds that the instructional aspects of legislating should be assigned first and foremost to public schools that all citizen children are to

attend. The heart of the teacher's job in these schools is to make the case for a youth's becoming a member or citizen of his or her community, bound by the norms of that community, and to do this by "communing" – by creating the personal bonds of friendship and trust that must inevitably precede an acceptance of those norms. The laws must "appear in the light of a loving and prudent father and mother" (IX 859a), and evidently must do so at least in part through school teachers. Education is to be "a process of attraction" beginning in models worthy of emulation (II 659d-60a) and culminating in the study of the *Laws* itself with its account of a rule of law grounded in the requirements and possibilities of human nature.

We may well think that Plato expected rational closure on much that is debatable, and we should therefore favor a more open-ended philosophical exploration of these and related matters in classrooms. Granting this, there is much that remains compelling – and rarely appreciated – in Plato's account of the relationships between education and legitimate authority.

Plato seems to have followed Socrates in grounding his conception of governance in an ethic of respect for reason and for persons as rational beings. It is an ethic which seems to have implications for several distinguishable aspects of governance, most obviously its *aim*, *substance*, and *manner*. It is an ethic that requires respect not simply for the reason in human beings – or for human beings as rational agents – but respect for what is required by reason (or *reasonableness*, if that is understood to be distinct from rationality). It is in this sense a call, embodied in the person of Socrates, to seriousness in thinking through what to do for oneself. To do the right thing *is* to do what it is most reasonable to do, and no disposition of character qualifies as a true virtue, or is good

without qualification, unless it is guided by the agent's own good judgment. But it is also an ethic which asserts, as a truth about the facts of human flourishing, that human beings live better and happier lives guided by their own reason and able to enjoy the flourishing of their own rational powers. The elements of Plato's account of governance make sense as applications of this ethic. The natural *aim* of a political community is the highest good of its citizens, which requires an integrated cultivation of their virtues of intellect and character. In their *substance*, the instruments of governance – laws and education – should communicate truths of human well-being and invite reflection on those truths and their ramifications for action (cf. *Apology* 30d; *Crito* 54c). Governance should be transacted in a *manner* that puts truthful instruction and persuasion that is reasoned and impartial before force as much as possible (cf. *Apology* 26a).

I should emphasize that although Plato lumps together under the idea of “natural” governance the idea of non-coercive rule over willing subjects and claiming authority to rule on the basis of one's practical wisdom, there are two ideas here. To rule *through* citizens' rational and informed consent or endorsement of laws and government acts is not, as it would be in a modern authorization or social contract theory, to rule on the basis of authority transferred through popular consent. *Practical wisdom* is important in political leaders for obvious reasons. It would be foolish to deny that, and the ability to rule well on the basis of that wisdom is a natural basis on which to *persuade* others to accept one's leadership. But no one has a right to coerce, either citizen to citizen or in a position of leadership. The *Laws* describes in remarkable detail a system of offices and mechanisms of selection, oversight and popular accountability, and legitimate governance is predicated on enabling every citizen to be self-directed in rationally

evaluating the merits of cooperation and acting accordingly. In order to comply with the underlying ethic on which the account is erected, education will necessarily be calculated to nurture independent judgment and systematic provision of such education will constitute a condition of just rule.

We can thus distinguish a fourth normative dimension of governance, the *authority* (within a legitimate system of government) on the basis of which someone governs, as something distinct from the *manner* of governance, which is to be as much as possible through enabling citizens to voluntarily comply with the *reasonable* demands of law. Implicitly, there is a fifth normative dimension pertaining to the scope of citizen rights. The ethic in question is a universal one with respect to human beings of normal capacity, and it would generate a presumption of similarly universal citizen rights to equal consideration of their well-being. Plato arguably recognizes beyond this a burden of responsibility falling on societies and their governments to make the constitutive investments in individual citizens required as a foundation for voluntary compliance with the reasonable demands of law. In sum, we can distinguish five normative dimensions of governance – its aims, substance, manner, basis of authority, and *responsibilities* – and find guidance for all of them in the Socratic ethic on which Plato relies.

What I want to suggest now is that the ethic elaborated through these normative dimensions of governance provides a useful framework for addressing such matters as the ethics of classroom management and its relationship to ethical instruction and moral development in schools. We can regard education itself as in part a form of governance and distinguish five normatively basic aspects of education, or *five basic questions* about the conduct of education: What are its aims? What authority does it rest on? What

responsibilities does it entail? How, or in what manner, should it be carried out? What should its substance or content be? Comprehensive ethical guidance for education must address all five of these questions, and should do so without conflating them.

A great deal of this extended Platonic framework can be salvaged and put to clarifying use in the domain of education ethics. What cannot be salvaged is, most obviously, the specificity of Plato's intellectualistic conception of human well-being and his vision of a rather static system of law. Promotion of human well-being must be consistent with the individual liberty implied by an ethic of respect for persons as self-determining rational agents – a liberty individuals may use in defining disparate viable conceptions of good lives (a plurality of reasonable conceptions of the good, as Rawls says). The dynamic of an evolving system of law calls for initiation into the norms of public reason that should govern public deliberation, consultation, and consent. These adaptations of the Platonic view call for instruction in ethics that is not simply philosophical and dialogical, as Plato expressly intends, but also critical and open-ended in the conclusions it permits.

What I'd like to do now is add a bit more contemporary detail to this picture and close by illustrating its value in addressing the ethics of classroom authority.

I'll begin with a philosophical thought experiment.⁷ Let us suppose it is our job to specify the nature and purpose of society's basic institutions, and to do this in a fair and impartial way. To try to ensure impartiality, let us suppose that we know only general truths about human existence, not our own individual attributes and circumstances. From behind this "veil of ignorance," what kind of society would we choose to live in? What would its institutions *exist for*? The answer I think we would converge on is that the

institutions of society would exist to enable us all to live well. Surely, whatever we might disagree about, we would agree – and it would be rational for us to agree – that the basic point of having institutions would be to enable us all to live well.

Knowing some general facts about human existence, we would agree upon the need for at least a few basic institutions, including *educational* ones. We would agree on this knowing that people must be enabled to develop in certain ways in order to live well, and with the understanding that *educational institutions are inherently ones that promote forms of development conducive to living well*. Having agreed that the point of having institutions is to enable us all to live well, we would agree that a principle on which these educational institutions would operate is that they would, as much as possible, provide *everyone* who is educable with an education sufficient to provide them with substantial opportunities to live well.

To say that educational institutions are inherently ones that promote forms of development conducive to living well is not yet to distinguish them from other such institutions, however. *Educational* institutions are distinguished by the fact that they promote such development by initiating learners into practices that *express human flourishing* – practices through which they can fulfill diverse human potentials and satisfy basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and positive relationships with others. Diverse practices, from reading and writing to the creative and productive arts and discipline-based forms of inquiry, provide opportunities to find satisfaction in the development and expression of capabilities. This is conventionally referred to as developing one's potential, and is associated with ideas of growth, human flourishing,

well-being and satisfaction. Many such practices contribute to economic and social opportunity, civic competence and opportunities for positive relationships.

Many practices provide some basis for autonomy or self-determination in our participation in the practices themselves, but initiation into the practices of self-critical rationality or critical thinking are especially salient for responsible and efficacious self-determination. There are three basic aspects of agency, or being an actor in the world – the goals and values we act from, our abilities, and the beliefs we rely on – and there are three corresponding forms of self-reflection through which we can examine and take responsibility for ourselves. Engaging in these forms of self-examination allows us to selectively overcome the limitations and self-defeating aspects of our thought patterns, understanding, abilities, motivation and preferences. It makes us freer by degrees and more effective in our efforts to live well.⁸ Providing education in the practices of critical thinking can thus be defended as an important aspect of the social and educational enterprise of providing children with substantial opportunities to live well. It will be focused in part, and importantly, on critical, philosophical engagement with ethical matters. If Plato and I are right about the foundations of a legitimate rule of law, education of this kind is also required as a most fundamental matter of justice.

The teachers who can succeed in this enterprise will be ones who are themselves practiced in norms and patterns of ethical reflection and have earned moral authority, in part through exemplifying the requisite virtues, both reflective and interpersonal. Engagement in ethical reflection must be made *attractive* to students in the way it is modeled, through the benefits it promises, and through the immediate rewards it brings in satisfying basic psychological needs for competence, positive relationships with others,

and self-determination.⁹ These benefits are possible only if teachers communicate the value of moral seriousness and lead students in moral reflection of their own. In seeking to create a classroom community of ethical inquiry, teachers will necessarily aim toward a cooperative social enterprise governed by norms of reasonableness and rational exchange. The participation to which students are invited is predicated on acceptance of the responsibility to respect others through attentive openness to learning and being persuaded by them, and a corresponding right to establish moral authority of their own through the ethical perceptiveness of their remarks. The foundations of a teacher's moral authority are undoubtedly wider than the terms of her engagement in ethical instruction, but the quality of this engagement will surely matter.

What shall we say, then, of the broader foundations of a teacher's moral authority and its role in the legitimate exercise of classroom authority? To address this, we must cut through the rather sterile polarization exhibited by the recent philosophical literature on classroom authority, and it will help to invoke the distinct normative dimensions of governance and education previously enumerated.

The polarization in question is between "masculinist" and feminist, forceful and nurturing, hierarchical and relational "grounds" of classroom authority. These are portrayed as mutually exclusive, but the polarization along these axes arises very largely from a failure to distinguish three questions: What gives a teacher a *right* to govern – the authority to govern – her classroom? What ethical constraints apply to the *manner* in which teachers exercise their authority? What *enables* successful teachers to govern their classrooms or enlist the cooperation of their students? Feminist accounts of classroom authority offer plausible answers to the second and third questions – questions about what

is ethical and efficacious in the manner of teaching – but have failed to acknowledge that answers to the first question and not answers to their own questions. The difficulty lies at least in part in the vagueness of the phrase, “ground of a teacher’s authority,” which might refer to what *enables* the teacher to enlist her students’ cooperation – what accounts for her “having authority” with them – or might refer to the foundation of her *right* to govern her classroom. These may have little to do with each other. Similarly, the basis of her *right* may have little to do with the ethical constraints on the *manner* in which she governs her classroom, and it is her *manner*, not the recognition of her *right*, that matters more to how well she is *able* to govern it. Unfortunately, it is often assumed that the justification for a non-authoritarian *manner* of classroom governance is inseparable from the theory that only the consent of the governed can give rise to the *right* to govern. More unfortunate still is the theory that teachers have a right to expect of students only what the students specifically agree or consent to. I think anyone familiar with young children will recognize this as a non-starter, but it is nevertheless a notion that has had wide currency in educational theory.¹⁰

A teacher needs to be not merely *in authority* – in a position of authority in her classroom, in the sense of having an institutionally conferred *right* to teach and manage her class – but *have authority* with students, in the sense of being able to procure their cooperation through their belief that she knows what’s best – in John Kleinig’s terms, their belief that she “is in a position to know [what] is to be done.”¹¹ Such authority will be perceived by students as non-coercive to the extent that they perceive her as having *moral authority*. And they are likely to perceive her as having such authority – as knowing what is for the best all things considered – if their experience of her is that she

respects them, cares about them, and manages her classroom in a way that aims effectively at the good of them all.¹² The efficacy of teaching and exercises of classroom authority depend upon the teacher's success in establishing moral authority, and this applies as much to teaching ethics as teaching anything else. Engaging students in open-ended ethical reflection can also enhance a teacher's moral authority, through the respect it shows students and through its potential to enable students to better understand *what their good is and how it guides their teacher's actions*. Pre-collegiate ethical instruction through philosophical inquiry may thus function much as it would in the city of Plato's *Laws*: as both a form of instruction fundamental to promoting a person's good, a good to which guiding oneself by one's own reason is intrinsic, and a form of instruction that contributes to the legitimacy and rational acceptance of reasonable authority by enabling a person to better see what is and isn't conducive to his own well-being.

It has been shown by others in compelling detail that what teachers can do is limited and shaped by the character and mission of the encompassing school (Goodman, 2010). This being so, we must – even as we promote the classroom as a community of ethical inquiry – look beyond this to the mission and moral tenor of schools as a whole. What is needed in schools is compatible with the picture I have sketched of what is required of individual teachers and conducive to establishing non-coercive authority relations. As Joan Goodman writes:

the mission of academic excellence can take on a more moral and collective texture when excellence is extended from self-serving attainments to *valuing deep exploration and articulation of issues*, high

standards in a range of endeavors, and personal attainments oriented to improvements outside the school doors. These grander more moral objectives, I suggest, are platforms that better legitimate authority and its distribution (Goodman 2010; italics added).

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¹ See Matthews 1980, 1984; Lipman 1980, 2003; Pritchard 1985, 1996.

² See Nosich 2008 for comparable claims about active learning in the college years.

³ The historical material that follows relies on the detailed interpretive arguments in chapters 1 and 2 of Curren, 2000.

⁴ Except where indicated, translations of Plato's works are from Cooper, 1997.

⁵ Simpson 1990 finds no alternative to relying fundamentally on force. It's interesting to note that Rousseau recognizes the problem and finds a very Greek solution in the idea of emulating the "Great Legislator" who embodies civic virtues in a most attractive way.

⁶ For an extended analysis of this theme in the *Laws*, see Bobonich 2004.

⁷ The thought experiment that follows is a refinement of one first presented in Curren 2009.

⁸ For further details of this conception of agency and self-reflection, see Curren, 2006.

⁹ Joan Goodman writes in Goodman 2010 that:

A wellbeing approach to school reform cultivates a context of strong, trusting, caring, secure relationships and respect for diversity, (Lightfoot, 1983; Louis and Miles, 1990; Newmann and Associates, 1996). In describing an ideal, the National Research Council Institute of Medicine (2004) affirms:

High schools, like other programs for youth, promote positive development in adolescents by addressing their needs for safety, love and belonging, respect, power, and accomplishment. They do this by establishing caring relationships with adults, maintaining positive and high expectations, and providing students with opportunities to participate and contribute (pp. 17-18)

Recognition of, and attention to, students fosters engagement as does broad participation, genuinely open dialogue, and serious attention to their views. Authority is described in part as individual control over one's learning, with control understood as mastery and personal competence that produces self-confidence; in part as insuring students' choice and designating space for their ideas, that is "authorizing student perspectives" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3).

¹⁰ For further details and critique of recent philosophical work on classroom authority, see Curren, 2005.

¹¹ John Kleinig identifies authority as a form of influence resting in the perception that someone knows what is to be done (in some sense), in Kleinig 1982, p. 213.

¹² For evidence bearing on this claim, see Ryan and Stiller 1991.