

THE BEAT

OF A

DIFFERENT DRUMMER

Essays on Educational
Renewal in Honor of

JOHN I. GOODLAD

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Chapter 19

Yo sé quien soy

James G. March

- 9 John Murawski, "A Banner Year for Giving," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 30 May 1996, 1, 27-30.
- 10 Francine Jones, ed., *The Foundation 1000: In-Depth Profiles of the 1000 Largest United States Foundations, 1997/1998* (New York: The Foundation Center, 1997), 887.
- 11 Debra E. Blum and Paul Demko, "Will 1997 Be a Boom Year for Grants?" *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 20 February 1997, 1, 9-20.
- 12 Carey Goldberg, "With Fortune Built, Packard Heirs Look to Build a Legacy," *New York Times*, 6 May 1996, A1, B9.
- 13 "America's Most Generous," *Fortune*, 13 January 1997, 96-98.
- 14 Walter Russell Mead, "Outrageous Fortune," *American Benefactor* (Spring 1997): 68-71.
- 15 Nicholas Lemann, "Citizen 501(c)(3)," *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1997): 18-20.

Not so long ago, I had the pleasure of listening to an educational administrator holding forth in praise of education and schooling. It was not a novel talk. Indeed, it was mostly a collection of familiar proclamations, distinguished not by its originality but by its spirit and its commitment to a classic litany proclaiming the value of education to American well-being. In any reasonable evaluation, it told an upbeat story, as one would expect from an upbeat leader.

The talk was filled with challenges to education and hope for educators, who made up most of the audience. It was not hard to imagine that this particular administrator would continue to struggle to make education better and would do so in a way that sustained important values. He recited a comforting list of positive contributions that education had made and continues to make to our societies and to our personal lives. It was a compelling recitation, and I felt energized by it. In short, the talk was a good one, and I was happy to find myself as a member of an enthusiastic audience.

Nevertheless, I could not help wishing for something slightly different, perhaps that the speaker had absorbed more of the writings of John Goodlad. His voice was strong and his dreams were sweet, but his justifications for education did not do justice to the claims of education on our souls. In company with many educators, as well as do-ents of public policy, he saw education simply as an institution serving a democratic society and a market economy, molding democratic citizens and producing valuable economic actors, as indeed it is and

does.

In speaking in this way, he adopted implicitly a particular catechism of justification, a catechism in which actions and institutions are justi-

fied in terms of their good consequences, their benefits relative to their costs. This consequentialist ethic dominates modern western thinking. Jeremy Bentham is its patron saint, and economic theory is its holy scripture. The ethic is embedded in rationalism and encapsulated in the canon of decision theory and rational action. We ask: What are our alternatives? What are the possible consequences that can be anticipated for each alternative? How likely are each of those consequences? How do we value them? We act to maximize expected return, choosing the alternative with the highest return when returns are weighted by their likelihoods.

Such a theory underlies both the predictions of economics and its prescriptions for action, and it extends far beyond the narrow boundaries of the discipline of economics. It underlies much of the teaching of students of public policy and personal self-management. It is the framework for virtually all modern research on individual and collective decision making. Much of that research notes the many ways in which the human beings that we observe fail to achieve the ideal of consequential rationality. These failures are seen as deficiencies, and training in decision making is designed primarily to reduce the frequency and magnitude of human failures to achieve that ideal.

The consequentialist catechism is also a feature of ordinary discourse of justification. We expect that action will be justified by its expected consequences. Why did I do that? Because I anticipated that it would lead to consequences that I value. How do you persuade me to do what you want me to do? By persuading me that it will lead me to consequences that I will value. How can I change you? By providing incentives that change the consequences you anticipate.

Consequentialism is an elegant and noble ethic, reflecting one of the more admirable features of human character. Although the concept of human rationality was originally somewhat vaguer in tenor and broader in scope, consequentialism captures an important aspect of what it means to be rational; and rationalism captures an important aspect of what it means to be human. We respect ourselves and others when we and they find consequential reasons for our actions.

Nowhere is that ethic more honored than in the justification of education. We document the good consequences of education, in particular the demonstrable political and economic consequences. In the spirit of the talk of my educational administrator, we justify education as a whole, specific educational programs, and individual participation in them as instruments of our individual and collective desires.

And when we wish to complain about education, we complain primarily about its failure to deliver good consequences, particularly economic returns.

There is a kind of graceful elegance and seductive charm about treating education as an instrument for satisfying our practical concerns. It fits conventional expectations about justification. There is also a certain tactical advantage. Educators use a utilitarian justification for education, in part because education does rather well by most consequential calculations. Although there are occasional contrary conclusions, the vast majority of studies support a belief that informed individuals and wise societies will invest in education and educational institutions if they wish to maximize the net benefits of individual and social investments. With some important, but relatively infrequent, exceptions, investments in education have been shown to have positive individual and collective returns.

The proposition that returns to educational investment are strongly positive can be put another way: Education fails (by far) to extract from its individual and social patrons anything like the full economic value of its services. It offers substantially more in benefits from its services than it charges for them. This underpricing of education makes education a good investment, both for societies and for individuals. In standard, if somewhat inflammatory, contemporary terms, at present prices, education is a massive expropriation of intellectual property. Since it is mostly "stolen property" (neither Newton nor Tolstoy realizes anything from his contribution to it, for example), the statement is a descriptive, not a moral, one.

Claims that the economic benefits of education substantially exceed its costs are not always believed, of course. Academic studies of returns do not persuade everyone. And the studies themselves provide grounds for questioning some aspects of a too easy assumption of positive returns. There are suggestions that the studies of return obscure substantial differences in the return realized by different groups. Education appears to provide greater benefits for individuals in some groups than it does for those in other groups, thus public investment in education has distributional effects. Nor is it obvious that different components of the educational enterprise contribute equally to the benefits measured. Some education is worth more than others. Both the knowledge gained and the credentialing value of an education from some institutions is greater than that from others, and the differences are not captured entirely by differences in price.

Debates over the finer points of returns to education, like the basic observation that, in general, those returns are positive, have another—perhaps less obvious—consequence. Because such studies often portray education as offering positive individual and social returns and because such reasons seem particularly persuasive to contemporary societies, and even to ourselves, educators grow accustomed to justifying their institutions and themselves in utilitarian terms, particularly utilitarian terms linked to monetary returns and gains to economic productivity. Without always being conscious of the profundity of the acquiescence, they collaborate in making the primary terms of reference for thinking about education overwhelmingly consequentialist and economic.

It is only a short step from such an inclination to a pervasive utilitarian metaphor for education. Schools are justified by their successes in creating citizens, building community spirit, and providing childcare. But preeminently in contemporary society, education is seen as a production process with workers (teachers), managers (administrators), consumers (students or their parents), and end users (employers of students). Schools produce economic capabilities and knowledge that convert to income for the products of schooling and productivity for the employers of those products.

The problem with all of this is not that it is unequivocally wrong. Surely, schools can be seen fruitfully in consequentialist terms. Nor is the primary problem that the consequentialist terms involved have, in recent years, become largely associated with economic consequences, rather than, for example, personal, social, or political consequences. The problem (or at least the problem that is relevant here) is that utilitarian metaphors fundamentally misrepresent education, subordinating its essences to its consequences.

John Stuart Mill once described Jeremy Bentham as having the completeness of a limited man.¹ Bentham, like his modern-day disciples, saw life as choice and choice as determined by the anticipation of consequences. For Bentham, as for most modern decision analysts, choice is a matter of finding the alternative that can be expected to lead to the best outcome as evaluated from the point of view of the decision maker's preferences or social utility. Such a conception has completeness. It can accommodate a wide variety of situations and values. But it is also limited.

It is limited particularly by equating the human essence with consequential justification, by the assumption that action only achieves humanness when choices are evaluated by the outcomes they produce.

Such an assumption seems almost a truism to modern modes of thought, but it contradicts long traditions that see consequentialism as secondary to higher aspirations for human existence, and for education. The human spirit is sustained not only by a logic of consequences but also by a logic of appropriateness, the association of action with the arbitrary demands of a conception of self.

A proper human does what is appropriate to a self-conception without regard to consequences. To be human is to act in the name of one's identity. A person who embraces the identity of teacher does what teachers do, not primarily because of expectations of consequences from those actions but because that is what teachers do. Seeing action as fulfilling an identity is a vision of human dignity and character that is fundamentally different from a vision that links humanity exclusively to instrumental action.

It is, however, equally demanding of thought. Appropriate action is arbitrary with respect to consequences, but adopting and understanding an identity require deeply thoughtful engagement, as does fulfilling an identity in a particular situation. Knowing what is appropriate to one's identity is a complicated and ultimately social knowing, based on extended assessments and inferences. The pursuit of such knowledge invites conversations and contemplations directed to a set of issues somewhat different from those induced by living according to a consequential vision. We seek understanding of the nature of being a teacher or father or carpenter rather than knowledge about the uncertain future outcomes produced by current actions. We evoke meanings of situations and identities and the relations among them.

The effort is demanding, but it is not unique to educators on the verge of the twenty-first century. It is central to some of our more notable traditions. Early in his wanderings around Spain, Don Quixote de la Mancha encounters a peasant from his own village who is distressed by Quixote's behavior. The peasant is a good fellow, concerned to help a man who seems to him bereft of sense, and he tries to persuade Quixote that he is confused. Quixote does not try to defend himself in terms of the good consequences he expects from his actions. Rather, he says simply: "I know who I am" ("Yo sé quien soy"). It is perhaps the most important line in the entire book, for it summarizes an idea of justification based on a code of behavior associated with an identity.

Quixote follows the dictates of his sense of himself. "I know who I am," he says. In answer to an ecclesiastic who challenges him to give up his pretenses and go home, he says, "Knight I am and Knight I will

die, if it pleases almighty God."² It is not that Quixote is simply a bizarre, unpredictable person, unreachable by intelligent intervention. He is open to debates about what it means to be a knight. He finds it exquisitely relevant to compare his own perception of proper behavior with models of great knights of history or fiction found in books or in the encounters of others. He spends a great deal of time arguing that his actions are proper and trying to understand how they can be made more consistent with his self-conception, but he is not interested at all in discussions of what the likely outcomes of his actions will be.

He is not confused about the consequences of his actions. He is quite aware that he often appears ridiculous to others, that his exploits rarely lead to great practical achievements, and that his efforts to help others frequently hurt the objects of his aid rather than give them succor. He is not confused about the consequences of his actions, nor is he indifferent to them. However, he does not consider those consequences to be relevant to his behavior.

In one of the grander scenes of *Don Quixote*, after Quixote has—against all reason—faced a large male lion and survived, apparently miraculously, Don Diego de Miranda comments, "what could be greater rashness and folly than to strive to fight lions tooth and nail." To which Quixote replies, "No doubt, Señor Don Diego de Miranda, in your opinion you take me for a fool and a madman. It would be no wonder if you did, for my deeds bear witness to nothing else. But for all this, I would have you note that I am neither so mad nor so foolish as I must have appeared to you. . . . All knights have their special parts to play. . . . As it is my fate to be one of the knights-errant, I cannot help undertaking all that appears to me to fall within the sphere of my duties."³

The Quixote claim of sanity is a profound one. It is not a sanity of reality (being bound by consequences) but a sanity of identity (being bound by the obligations of self). A sanity of identity involves two things: The first is a conception of self that one embraces as essential. The second is a conception of action as a matching of one's conception of self to a situation. The identity, the situation, and the proper matching are all potentially arguable. It is important to Quixote that he correctly understands what it means to be a knight-errant, that he correctly recognizes the situation in which he finds himself from the point of view of that identity and that his action correctly matches his identity to the situation. However, neither the conception of the self,

the assessment of the situation, nor the matching of the two is derivative of calculations of consequences.

Indeed, consequential justification undermines confidence that the fulfillment of identity is truly willful, rather than merely instrumental. In Book I, Chapter 25 of *Don Quixote*, Sancho Panza, frustrated by his inability to persuade Quixote to be somewhat sensible in normal consequentialist terms, tries to suggest that being a knight may be somewhat less useful than it once was. Sancho observes that knights of old had reasons for their commitment to the dictates of knightly honor and asks what justification Quixote has. Quixote replies: "For a knight errant to make himself crazy for a reason warrants neither credit nor thanks; the point is to be foolish without justification."⁴ Our actions are of no particular human importance as moral actions if they have utilitarian justification.

Thus, ultimately, Quixote not only claims the right to choose a different path but also claims the path he has chosen is indispensable for a human actor. His argument is antithetical to a consequentialist ethic. It sees consequential justification as compromising moral action, rather than contributing to it. Extending trust to the trustworthy can be justified easily, but such trust is simply an exchange of goods, hardly a significant human act. Only when trust is extended to the untrustworthy does it become significant. Similarly, loving the lovable, whatever consequential (exchange) value it may have, is hardly particularly human. The truly human act is to love the unlovable.

The perspective is reminiscent of Søren Kierkegaard's suggestion that if we justify religion by its consequences, we deprive religious faith of its fundamental character as an arbitrary act of human will. Religion may have positive benefits, but our commitment is not based on them, indeed is compromised by them. Education may have positive consequences, but our commitment is not based on them, indeed is compromised by them.

Being of our age and culture, it is difficult for us to avoid the hope that education and our own activities as educators will be blessed with good consequences. We live much of our lives with careful attention to learning from our experiences and allowing those experiences and our expectations about future experiences to shape the details of what we do. It is inconceivable that we would do otherwise. However, in Quixote's terms, we become true educators only to the extent to which our deeper commitment is a commitment to fulfilling our identities rather than to accomplishments. The fundamentals of being a

teacher lie in a set of actions and a view of one's self that are not conditional on their consequences but on their consistency with the essential nature of being a teacher as exemplified by generations of predecessors and a thoughtful contemplation of the meaning of teaching.

To invoke the words of Quixote to describe teachers and other educators is a quixotic act, but one that I think is in the best traditions of education and educators. Perhaps Quixote overdid it, but we are in little danger of that. In the present context, it may be particularly appropriate for us to reassert the importance of having and fulfilling a meaningful identity. John Goodlad knows who he is and has for many years been trying to induce the rest of us to discover what it might mean for us to embrace education not as an instrument of individual or social well-being but as a testament, temple, and calling. And as much as anyone, he has taught us to ask whether we know who we are.

Notes

- 1 John Stuart Mill, *On Bentham and Coleridge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 95.
- 2 "Caballero soy, y caballero he de morir, si place al Altísimo." Miguel de Cervantes, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1940), Book II, Chapter 32, 601.
- 3 "¿Quien duda, señor don Diego de Miranda que vuesa merced no me tenga en su opinión por un hombre disparatado y loco? Y no sería mucho que así fuese, porque mis obras no pueden dar testimonio de otra cosa. Pues, con todo esto, quiero que vuesa merced advierta que no soy tan loco ni tan menguado como debo de haberle parecido. . . . Todos los caballeros tienen sus particulares ejercicios. . . . Como me cupo en suerte ser uno del número de la andante caballería, no puedo dejar de acometer todo aquello que á mí me paraciere que cae debajo de la jurisdicción de mis ejercicios." Cervantes, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Book II, Chapter 17, 411-12.
- 4 "Que volverse loco un caballero andante con causa, ni grado ni gracias: el toque está en desatinar sin ocasión." Cervantes, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Book I, Chapter 25, 143.