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Review of Michael Hand *A Theory of Moral Education*

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This bold and invigorating work presents a rigorous argument for a version of moral education which aims to bring it about *both* that children subscribe to moral standards in their conative, affective and behavioural dispositions *and* believe them to be justified. It also sets out with refreshing clarity the main obstacle to this aim, namely that there is reasonable disagreement about both the content and justification of morality, yet teaching propositions as true, or standards as justified, when there is reasonable disagreement about them is indoctrinatory (indoctrination being defined here as imparting beliefs by non-rational means). Three common attempts to deal with this problem – moral education is unnecessary; a bit of indoctrination is not so bad; simply teach *about* morality rather than *in* it – are crisply dismissed. Hand also effectively rules out second-order arguments for subscribing to a moral code based on consensus and convergence: only non-indoctrinatory directive moral enquiry will do the job and that is possible only if there is a robust first-order justification for subscription that children can grasp.

Fortunately, Hand argues, moral disagreement does not go all the way down: some moral standards are indeed robustly justified by a contractarian theory based on what Copp has called 'the problem of sociality'. Left unchecked, the combination of three features of the human condition – rough equality, limited sympathy and moderately scarce resources – lead to conflict and a breakdown in trust and cooperation. If we are to live in peaceful and productive groups, we need the kind of motivation that only full commitment to universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing moral standards can provide. These standards are, therefore, rationally justified and parents and teachers can engage in moral formation and directive moral enquiry without being charged with indoctrination.

It is an argument which is for the main firmly located within a Kantian and neo-Kantian framework (plus a strong reliance on Humean sympathy). It views morality in terms of prohibited, permitted and required actions based on rational rules (Hand thinks we are 'rule-following creatures' p.19), and views reason as both universal and universally understood as such. Within this framework, Hand constructs his theory with precision and care and his position has many strengths, particularly in its admirable refusal to duck tough questions. Teachers should engage in directive moral enquiry (though perhaps by tactful, nondidactic means) to steer children away from unsound standards and unjustified arguments, even if that means going against what is being taught at home: 'it is more important to make children aware

that they are not obliged to accept any proposition or standard without reason than it is to spare them the discomfort of disagreement between their parents and teachers' (p.81). He is also honest about the need to 'own the unloveliness' of moral formation and directive enquiry: yes, it sometimes involves fear, guilt, shame and condemnation, but these emotions and acts do necessary work. Furthermore, their role should not be exaggerated: Hand claims that the community-sustaining rules he advocates are not unduly onerous and that his theory still allows plenty of time for fun.

Nevertheless, even on its own terms, there are concerns that need to be raised. Hand addresses three of the standard objections to contractarian moral theories – how to deal with the nihilist, the free-riders and the infirm – but his responses are not fully convincing. Some of us may feel that current and recent events suggest that there are more moral arsonists than just the 'few benighted souls' that Hand acknowledges (p.66), and still less that nihilists and free-riders are just 'figments of the philosophical imagination'. Not everyone wants to survive, or even for their children to survive. As for the free-riders, a particularly dangerous subset of these is not addressed by Hand, namely those who believe themselves to be a superior elite who do not need to abide by the mundane rules that apply to lesser mortals. Issues arising from infirmity are regularly a problem for contractarian theories based on reason: if the mentally infirm cannot metaphorically sign up to the contract, how are they to be included in the moral sphere? Hand says that the boundaries between firm and infirm are often blurred, and although that is true, there are still many cases which are clear and troubling. Hand's faith in human – and Humean – sympathy – is required to do a lot here.

Two fundamental questions, moreover, are not discussed by Hand. Firstly, he takes it for granted that community-sustaining behaviours and the rules that underpin them are good, but this is not always the case: some communities are toxic and their structures should not be prolonged. Sometimes cooperation works to promote evil ends and conflict may be necessary to combat those ends. Secondly, Hand talks (p.63) of 'the basic moral standards to which almost everyone does, in fact, subscribe.' These include 'prohibitions on killing, causing harm, stealing and extorting, lying and cheating, requirements to treat others fairly, keep one's promises and help those in need.' Yet it is not clear to me that *all* these standards *are* in fact required to sustain a community, at least in a minimal sense of survival (I do not talk of flourishing). And, even if they were, they would not prevent members of that community from behaving very badly to those they perceived to be outside it (even if the excluded occupied the same geographical space). This problem is exacerbated by the burgeoning of virtual communities. Hand talks often of 'we', but just who comprises this 'we'? What are the size and location of the community/communities in question?

Hand says he wants to concentrate on the content and justification of morality rather than the applicability of standards to particular cases (such as issues to do with moral dilemmas and borderline cases) because he thinks such issues are often overplayed in moral theories and give a false impression that morality is always very difficult. However, a greater sensitivity to issues of context can in some cases help us *decide on* the standards. Such a move, of course, would take Hand further away from Kantian deontology and towards an Aristotelian ethics and politics of flourishing, which may not be where he wants to go – although it would allow him

to include arguments for moral behaviour based on the fulfilment of our emotional, imaginative and intellectual potential, and to talk more of pleasurable carrots as well as sticks.

Nevertheless, despite these questions and concerns, *A Theory of Moral Education* is lucid, incisive and greatly repays careful study. It often made me reappraise – sometimes uncomfortably – my own parenting and teaching, even though my child and my students are of university-age. The world is hardly suffering from an excess of reasoned morality at present, and the need for moral education is as urgent as it has ever been. Hand has provided a bracing and necessary shot across the bows.