

On Wittgenstein, the Practice of Ethics, and Moral Education

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In *Wittgenstein's Poker*,¹ David Edmonds and John Eidinow recount the famous, or infamous, events of the Friday, October 25, 1946 meeting of the Cambridge Moral Science Club. In brief, the story is about the exchange between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper after Popper's invited presentation on the topic, "Are There Philosophical Problems?" In Popper's published account, there was a heated exchange between him and Wittgenstein about the paper, during which Wittgenstein used a fireplace poker "like a conductor's baton to emphasize his assertions." When Wittgenstein asked Popper for an example of a moral rule, Popper writes, "I replied: Not to threaten visiting lecturers with pokers," after which Wittgenstein stormed out of the room in rage. Edmonds and Eidinow devote almost three hundred pages to a reconstruction of this event through a narrative which ranges over the intellectual and social biographies of these two philosophers and others in attendance, the political and social climate of the time, the nature of philosophical argument in analytic philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, and most importantly, descriptions of what happened from others at the meeting in which the sequence and interpretation of events is substantively different from Popper's. They frame their purpose in moral terms: Did Popper later publish an untrue version of what happened? Did he lie? Thus, the narrative draws us into a case study of ethics from either direction. Did Wittgenstein threaten Popper with a fireplace poker? Did Popper lie in writing that Wittgenstein did so? How are we to make an ethical judgment in this case? Would Wittgenstein's or Popper's ethical philosophy help us?

Nicholas Burbules and Paul Smeyers seek to draw from Wittgenstein to conceptualize ethics as a form of shared practice and from this a perspective on moral education. There is, however, a problem doing this because of Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics. For Wittgenstein, ethics was a matter of which we could not sensibly speak. And Wittgenstein seems to hold this basic claim through the *Tractatus*, *Lecture on Ethics*, and *Philosophical Investigations*. For Wittgenstein, ethics belong to a realm where things cannot be said but only shown, where "ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts."

This leaves Burbules and Smeyers with a problem. How does one talk about a Wittgensteinian view of ethics and moral education when Wittgenstein says ethics is something about which we cannot sensibly speak? For Burbules and Smeyers, the alternative is to refer to Wittgenstein's remarks on language, family resemblances, and performance, among other topics, and draw implications from these about ethics and moral education. They do so by drawing implications from Wittgenstein to construct a view of ethics as a shared practice which can be taught through participation in linguistic communities and the normative structures and forms of life that regulate conduct within them.

I would like to raise three kinds of related questions.

WITTGENSTEIN AND ETHICS

I am unclear about Burbules and Smeyers's position on Wittgenstein and ethics. Is their argument that Wittgenstein was wrong about the inexpressibility and non-rationality of ethics and that his own remarks on other topics can be drawn together in a coherent account of an ethical theory and approach to moral education? Are they arguing that Wittgenstein was not aware of, was uninterested in, or just plain left undeveloped the implications of his own views? They write that Wittgenstein was intensely interested in his own ethical conduct and believed ethics was among the most important things in life, so it seems unlikely he would leave his own ethical views undeveloped. Are they arguing that they are now offering a way to speak sensibly about ethics from a Wittgensteinian perspective, contra Wittgenstein's own view that one could not? Burbules and Smeyers offer an apt illustration of a case study of moral conduct in the story about the broken cup. I believe a strong case could be made for the moral quality and praiseworthiness of the mother's response on rational, publicly communicable, and justifiable grounds. I think Burbules and Smeyers do just that in their careful reflections on this event. And they do so within a narrative in which they are implicated and embedded through ties of affection, history, love, probably their own memories and experiences of childhood and parenthood, imagination, economic and political beliefs, and so on. If this is the case, how is ethics inexpressible and non-rational? Is it the case that Wittgenstein believed that *philosophy* made it so and that we had to learn how to stop doing philosophy when we wanted to talk about the important matters of life? Or is it possible to take the more radical step and claim that this kind of talk, the kind of embedded, imaginative, contextualized narrative used in the treatment of the cup episode, *is* philosophy, *is* ethics? Does Wittgenstein's aphorism on the ineffability of ethics open the gate for the narrative to follow? Or is the aphorism a gate itself, perhaps not to the performance or showing in themselves, but to the idea that doing is the subject matter or rigorous thought and expression?

ETHICS AS SHARED PRACTICE

Burbules and Smeyers argue that one can derive from Wittgenstein an idea of ethics as a form of shared practice learned through participation in norm-regulated forms of life. They acknowledge that there are others who might help us flesh out this view and mention Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Lev Vygotsky in passing. We might also easily add Nietzsche and Dewey to this list. In my view, the most developed account of this conception of ethics and moral education is offered by Alasdair MacIntyre. A few brief references are suggestive of this. Burbules and Smeyers argue that Wittgenstein's ethics can be understood in the idea of a shared practice, yet there are no references to Wittgenstein on this idea. After a long critique of the Enlightenment project of a foundationalist ethics, MacIntyre offers a fully developed account of ethics as a form of historically situated social practice. As he writes.

By a "practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which good internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and good involved, are systematically extended.²

In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, MacIntyre goes on to develop the sense in which moral inquiry must be understood through educational narratives, narratives of participation in linguistic and historical communities whose norms are specific to the forms of life and conceptions of excellence particular to each. Instead of arguing that philosophy makes ethics inexpressible, MacIntyre argues for philosophy as a craft grounded in questions about how to go on, how to conduct ourselves, our education. In this view, the rationality and justifiability of moral speech, teaching, and the enterprise of moral education are developed within the internal dynamics of the community, its normative practices, and their relationship to the forms of life in which they participate. MacIntyre develops his views on moral education in reference to the dynamic interchange between novice and authority in learning the norms of one's community as a precondition for re-creating them. For MacIntyre, given that there are no ahistorical moral justifications or context-free goods, moral education, indeed all education, is systematically constructed controversy about the virtues that sustain and vices that diminish our pursuit of excellence through shared practices.

My claim here is not that MacIntyre is unproblematic, but only to point to one resource, among others, that directly treats questions about ethics and moral education in terms very similar to Burbules and Smeyers and to the obvious advantage that by using such sources to support and develop such a view, one would not have to face the problem of providing an account of a sensible and expressible ethics based on the work of a philosopher who consistently and explicitly asserted that one cannot do so.

ETHICS AND MORAL EDUCATION

Burbules and Smeyers seem to believe that an approach to moral education must or can be derived from a theory of philosophical ethics. Is this the case? Must a theory of moral education be grounded in an ethical philosophy? Or are questions arising from educational theory, questions about how and we, as individuals and in our multiple communities, got to be the way we are, prior to and constitutive of questions about the good? Thomas Green argues that there may be no relation at all between moral philosophy and moral education; they are distinct projects. Moral philosophy may be concerned with the architecture of the moral life, moral education with how we enter it; moral philosophy with the shape and content of mature conscience, moral education with how we come to possess that conscience; moral philosophy with the nature of virtue, moral education with how virtue is spread about and the worldly institutions that spread it. I believe this is actually the case Burbules and Smeyers are making; that Wittgenstein's remarks or the implications of his remarks on *learning* to be moral constitute a coherent account of moral education, but not perhaps a coherent, sensible moral philosophy. If this distinction is maintained, it would, once again, help Burbules and Smeyers avoid the problem of arguing sensibly for something Wittgenstein claimed was incapable of sensible argument.

I do not think Wittgenstein's or Popper's formal ethical philosophy would help us very much making judgments about what happened in Cambridge in 1946. But Edmonds and Eidinow's engaging and rigorous narrative of how they got to be the

kinds of people who could have such an exchange, their education as philosophers, provides material for the consideration of the systematically constructed controversies that constitute moral inquiry. I believe this concern is at the core of Burbules and Smeyers's project as well and I look forward to their thoughts on the questions that have been raised.

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1. David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).
 2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 175.