

Dirty Hands in Classrooms

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John Kenneth Galbraith is reported to have observed that in America, people are paid in inverse proportion to the perceived value of their role. If this is true, a comparison of the incomes of movie stars or professional athletes to that of public school teachers suggests that teachers are held in high regard. Despite complaints about the ability of public schools to educate children, the public image of teachers is, I believe, primarily positive. Most teachers are viewed as good people, devoted to a worthy task — the education of future citizens and workers. Moreover, recognizing the influence of such non-academic factors as a sense of community or safety on academic achievement, many public schools have undertaken some sort of character or values education, which promotes the kinds of traits and actions that are commonly found in a moral life. Why then, do I want to suggest that public school teachers are engaged in an occupation that involves what political theorists call “dirty hands”?

The problem of dirty hands usually is characterized as a situation in which a politician must do something morally abhorrent in order to prevent a greater evil from happening. Insofar as a dirty hands problem entails doing something one believes to be morally wrong, but justified under the circumstances, it can confront private citizens as well as politicians, but the subject is most often considered as a feature of political life, perhaps because it is most dramatically illustrated by large-scale actions, such as Roosevelt’s deceptions in his effort to prepare the United States to enter World War II, or Churchill’s decision in that same war not to warn his citizens about imminent attack, in order to deceive the enemy. A more important reason, however, may be that ordinary, everyday political life seems to require significant moral compromises. That is, dirty hands are an inescapable feature of gaining or holding public office — in order to get elected or to get an important piece of legislation passed, a politician may engage in (is expected to engage in) deception, for example. In this essay, I argue that the problem of dirty hands also exists, albeit in less dramatic forms, within the institution of public schools. I begin with a short review of the dirty hands dilemma, and then examine the ways in which the processes and structures of teaching in public schools can or cannot be understood in those terms.¹

Before turning to the structure of a dirty hands dilemma, however, I should note that some people argue that dirty hands, like other types of moral dilemma, are conceptually incoherent. From certain utilitarian or consequentialist standpoints, if a morally disturbing act is, all things considered, the best thing to do in the situation, then the politician’s hands are not really dirty. In this view, there is no taint or residue of wrongdoing associated with any action that results in an overall benefit: the proscription against the lesser evil is cancelled out by the greater good; the moral cost is well spent. From another point of view, there is no valid moral excuse for

politicians to get their hands dirty at all: the obligation to refrain from certain kinds of actions is absolute, if one is to lead a moral life. Others dispose of the question of dirty hands in public life by cynically assigning politicians to a separate, grubby moral sphere. I do not intend here to argue for the conceptual coherence of dirty hands, or against consequentialist or absolutist views of morality. In my view, a theory of ethics that allows for conflict or a paradox like dirty hands is not necessarily less rigorous, beautiful, or useful than such strictly coherent theories as formal logic or mathematics.

As we noted earlier, the problem of dirty hands — doing something wrong, justified under the circumstances, but still a wrong — can occur in private life, but it is more commonly found in public life, where the duties of one's public role can require "the violation of a person, principle, or value."² In such cases, the moral violation is justified by the achievement of a greater, general good, but the harm usually falls on individuals, whose "trust, integrity, and status as ends are violated, dishonored, and betrayed."³ It is the public form of dirty hands that I believe describes the moral position of public school teachers. Thomas Nagel argues that in order to grasp the concept of dirty hands, it helps to understand that there are special moral principles associated with acting in an official capacity, different from but related to the principles of private morality, but before considering his explanation of this difference and relationship, I want to look briefly at some of the features of public life pertinent to the dilemma of dirty hands.

Perhaps the most obvious is that holding a public office means that one is an agent of the state, and thus has the obligation to act on behalf of other people, to represent their interests fairly, without favor to one's own friends and family. Politicians and other public agents thus are expected to act with far greater impartiality than are private individuals, and their actions are determined in part by their institutional roles. Acting on our behalf, a public agent "has responsibility for greater and more enduring consequences and consequences that change more men's lives."⁴ With that responsibility, however, comes authority and power, the ability to make decisions that others must follow. The exercise of that power is reported to be personally rewarding, even exhilarating. Consequently, holding public office is never entirely selfless; in acting for others, a politician also acts in her own interests.

A second feature of public life is that it requires negotiation and compromise between conflicting values and interests. In a democratic, pluralistic society such as ours, public representatives and agents must balance the competing interests of disparate constituencies, always keeping in mind their responsibility to be impartial and fair. Political activity is carried out in and through public institutions, and in ordinary times, most morally questionable acts of dirty hands are committed not in the service of a grand end, such as saving Western civilization from destruction, but merely in order to keep options open for future negotiation or to remain in office.

A third condition of public life is its association with the legitimate use of force or violence. Decisions to engage in war, or the peace-time imprisonment of criminals are the most obvious examples of state sanctioned violence, but Martin Hollis also points to more subtle forms, such as programs of urban renewal or taking

land by eminent domain for highway or dam construction, which also are justified by their contribution to a legitimate, greater public good.

For Nagel, public and private moralities entail different balances between the two elements common to all moral theories: concern with outcomes and concern with actions. Private morality tips the scale in favor of action-centered concerns, emphasizing the obligation not to harm or violate the rights of others, but otherwise leaves us free to pursue our individual interests. In that public morality applies to the actions of institutions (through the actions of authorized representatives), the emphasis shifts to concern with outcomes, because institutions have no interests other than the purposes for which they are organized — to benefit large groups of people — and because of the division of labor within an institution. The action-centered obligations that predominantly guide private morality remain, but have a weaker claim, and thus permit some actions that would be prohibited for a private individual. That is, the defining features of public morality — an emphasis on results and the obligation of impersonal impartiality — are tied to the fact that public morality governs institutions and the actions of individuals in their official roles. Consequently, the structure and purposes of the public institutions that employ them largely determine the extent to which public officials must dirty their hands.

Williams raises two central questions: “what sort of system does one want, and what sort of disposition do you want in the person acting?”⁵ His answer to the second question is that, given that the political system can at times require morally distasteful acts, we want politicians with a “habit of reluctance” and a sensitive awareness of the moral costs of necessary injustices (rather than a utilitarian acceptance of moral costs well spent), as insurance against the performance of such acts when it is not in fact necessary. He does not give as specific an answer to the first question, but points to dimensions of our political system that are pertinent to the problem of dirty hands: the assumption that public scrutiny fosters honesty in public affairs; the assumption that politicians should not all share a common set of values (which is related to the assumption that an adversarial system produces justice); and how methods of recruitment and avenues of advancement within the system select for certain moral characteristics.

In sum, for a person to have dirty hands means she has been faced with a moral choice between a greater and a lesser evil, and was justified in choosing the lesser, but her life has been changed by that choice, and she has lost her moral innocence. Although it might be possible to avoid such moral choices in private life, they seem to be inevitable in public life, which imposes moral obligations that are different from, and thus can conflict with private morality. Public morality requires a greater concern with overall consequences and impartiality; private morality emphasizes certain kinds of actions, such as refraining from harming others. Nevertheless, public morality’s special obligations do not automatically trump private morality. Consequently, we want those who are in public life to be reluctant to choose the lesser evil, to be sensitive to the moral costs of harming others, even when necessary for the greater good. Finally, the structure and organization of public institutions influence who will choose to enter and remain in public life, as well as how dirty their hands will be.

Do public school teachers have dirty hands? Or, in other words, in what ways are public school teachers like politicians? Teaching is one of the ways by which human society ensures its continuity.⁶ It does not, however, depend on the existence of schools. When parents teach children, or when craftsmen teach apprentices, the teaching is direct and unmediated — this is the way we do things, this is what we believe (in this family, in this trade). When teaching takes place in public schools, however, it also serves a mediating function between the family and the larger society. In the United States, public schools are publicly funded (and regulated) institutions that have been organized primarily for two purposes: to prepare students for democratic citizenship and for the world of work. To a lesser (and decreasing) degree schools also are expected to educate students to understand and appreciate the life of the mind as expressed in disciplinary knowledge.

Teachers are the public officials who are on the front lines in accomplishing this social mandate. As such, teachers act on behalf of other people: on behalf of the state, the families of the students, the potential employers of the students, and students themselves. Holding the public office of teacher also means that one has qualifications in an academic discipline. Thus, teachers also act on behalf of the community of people who are committed to those disciplines.

Like other public officials, teachers have a special obligation to be impartial in their professional actions. Ideally, they are expected to teach all the students in their classrooms equally: “to teach the truths they understand, and the same truths to all the students in front of them, and respond to questions as best they can, without regard to the students’ social origins.”⁷ In that they teach many students, and are charged with teaching for the continuity of society and culture, teachers share with politicians the “responsibility for greater and more enduring consequences and consequences that change more men’s lives.”⁸

Although it is possible to make too much of the fact, it is nevertheless true that schools share with prisons the distinction of involuntary attendance, that “education is a coercive business.”⁹ Even though teachers may no longer use corporal punishment, teachers’ directives are backed by the legitimate threat of force: if a student becomes too unruly, she can be removed from the classroom. In classrooms, teachers exercise power as a representative of institutional authority, with the ability to make decisions that students must follow. A teacher determines what counts as work, when it is time to get out the books or put them away, and when a student may speak or must be silent.

Public school teachers are agents of the state, whose authority is supported, however subtly, by the state’s coercive power, and whose professional duties require negotiation and compromise among competing interests. Moreover, as public agents, teachers have a particular obligation to be impartial and fair, but also enjoy certain privileges of power. An emphasis on impartiality is one of the two distinguishing features of public morality; the other is the increased importance of results or consequences in the moral judgment of actions. In fact, public schools and teachers are judged to be good or bad (although such judgments are rarely couched as moral ones) primarily on the basis of results: how well their students achieve,

whether achievement is measured by the number of students who graduate or go on to college, or by scores on standardized tests, which apparently meet the public moral criteria of impartiality and results simultaneously.

Even if public school teachers are public agents working in a public institution that is judged by standards of public morality — which can in the world of politics require politicians to dirty their hands — it does not necessarily mean that teachers have dirty hands. Perhaps schools are different from other public institutions. Perhaps the division of labor within institutions implies a division of labor among institutions. Perhaps the dirty work of public life falls to politicians and military leaders and not to teachers. Where is the moral conflict in schools? What moral choices must teachers make? Where is the justified betrayal?

An instance of dirty hands requires both evident harm to an individual or group of individuals and the justification of that harm by a greater good achieved. There is evidence that many public schools harm large numbers of students, but the gap in academic achievement between white students and minority students, for example, is not evidence of dirty hands. Nor is the fact that too many high school seniors in the United States lack a basic understanding of how government works or know enough to make informed choices at the polls, that girls take fewer science and math classes in the upper grades, or that some students leave public school unable to read and compute. Rather, those facts are evidence of the moral failure of schools to achieve the results for which they have been created and are funded. I don't intend to justify such failings, nor to address theories that schools, as agencies of social control and cultural reproduction for our system of consumer-based capitalism, are in fact intended to differentiate students along lines of class, race, and gender. Instead, I am interested in the moral choices faced by well-intentioned teachers as they negotiate between legitimate public moral requirements for impartiality, fairness, and results, and private moral obligations that require us not to violate the trust, integrity, or autonomy of others, particularly others in our care.

Teachers work within institutional structures that have remained relatively constant for a century or so, but before we get these structures and how they may affect the morality of teaching, it might help to have a clearer idea of the range of meanings attributed to teaching. A common conceptual distinction is made between “teaching that” and “teaching to” — that is, between teaching to shape beliefs and teaching to shape behavior. In practice, most teaching involves both of these intentions to varying degrees, and can take a variety of forms. Educational philosophers have constructed a number of typologies or models of teaching: as didactics, heuristics, and philetics; as impression, insight, or rule-based; as instructing, training, conditioning or indoctrinating; as educating and as socializing. This last distinction is particularly relevant to our investigation, because socialization, which prepares students for citizenship and work, is more easily predicted and measured than is education, which develops individual capacities and dispositions and cannot be achieved by “the efficient production of specified ends.”¹⁰

Teaching is influenced by assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the process of learning, and the anticipated role of the student in society. The dominant

assumptions that historically have shaped American schooling are that knowledge is objective, existing outside the minds of individuals; that learning is a process of accumulating facts; and that students need to be prepared for participation in bureaucratic, industrial, and corporate organizations, which calls for obedience, conformity, and productivity.

In the push for comprehensive universal education early in the twentieth century, the organizational structure of schools borrowed scientific management paradigms from industry. In this tradition, teaching is concerned with the efficiency with which children master specified content and relies on strategies of whole-group instruction, question-and-answer formats that reward rapid factual recall, fill-in-the-blank worksheets, textbooks as the primary source of knowledge, and standardized testing to verify achievement, symbolized by a hierarchy of grades (numbers or letters). Curriculum is shaped by a technocratic, means-end view of rationality. A persistent alternative conception of teaching assumes that knowledge is a social construction, learning involves an interplay of meaning and intentions, and students need to be prepared to think critically and creatively. This paradigm, however, has done little to change our overall reliance on the teaching practices described above.

Nor has the physical and social organization of classrooms — self-contained, age-graded rooms, with chalkboard and desks, one teacher and multiple students — changed much over the years. Ordered by rules and regulations that govern both conduct and belief, school environments are highly standardized. Such familiar classroom routines as hand-raising, turn-taking, and whole-group instruction affirm the values of orderliness and to make efficient use of a teacher's time. One explanation for the endurance of these techniques is that is that they are the most effective way for teachers to maintain control of a large number of students who are (perhaps unwillingly) compelled to attend school, to teach prescribed content within a limited amount of time to students of variable levels of interest and ability, and to provide written, measurable evidence of what students have learned.

Public school teachers thus mediate between institutional requirements for order and measurable outcomes and the unpredictable demands of teaching a large, diverse population of students. Where is the harm in this? One sacrifice apparently entailed by our customarily instrumental and pragmatic approach to teaching is the possibility of fostering students' capacities for certain kinds of critical and creative thinking and for deliberative dialogue, which requires individual attention, open-ended conversation, and time.

In the sixties, Philip Jackson vividly described life in elementary classrooms in terms of a hidden curriculum structured by the experience of crowds, praise, and power, in ways that remain all too familiar today. The crowded conditions in many classrooms, with twenty to thirty students under the control of one teacher, mean that students inevitably experience delay, the denial of desire, interruptions, and distraction. These unavoidable experiences instruct students in the virtue of patience, characterized as much by inaction as by action, or even resignation. Teachers administer rewards in the form of grades and other kinds of praise and reproof, largely based on a framework of rules that, as all rules do, emphasize conformity.

Students are evaluated not only on academic achievement, but also on their adjustment to institutional expectations and their social performance; most quickly realize that rewards go to those who obey. Most students also learn to present the image of compliance: consenting to teacher authority over conduct, if not belief; they “learn to accept the plans and policies of higher authorities, even when their rationale is unexplained and their meaning unclear.”¹¹ Some students respond to the pressures of constant evaluation by withdrawing from active participation; there is some empirical evidence that “good” students, those who have mastered the lessons of the hidden curriculum, exhibit lower than average creativity and mental flexibility.¹²

Twenty years later, Linda McNeil described how the administrative context of a school affects curriculum content and teaching practices. She found that high school social studies teachers had far more complex knowledge and understanding of the content than they demonstrated in the classroom, and that the more a school administration emphasized order and discipline, the more likely teachers were to teach “defensively,” in order to minimize student resistance and the potential for classroom disorder. In her study of four high schools (all of which were considered to be “good” schools), she found that teachers with diverse backgrounds and world views all described themselves as having two goals: conveying information about United States history and limiting discussion in the interest of efficient presentation of content. Teachers presented information in lectures structured to restrict discussion and maintain classroom order, using four strategies: fragmentation, mystification, omission, and defensive simplification. Fragmentation reduces the curriculum content to a list of facts, with no attempt to identify the relationships between facts, or to acknowledge that the facts might be contested. Teaching a list is efficient, limits the unpredictability of a discussion about relationships and meaning, facilitates quantifiable testing, and creates the appearance of fairness. Mystification minimizes discussion by describing a topic as important, but too complicated to really understand; defensive simplification wins student compliance by promising that a topic will be easy. Of the four, only omission regularly elicited overt resistance, but an unintended result of all the strategies was that students and teachers alike took school and school knowledge less seriously.

Many public schools are required to place special education students in the least restrictive environment, preferably in a regular classroom. This presents teachers with seemingly irresolvable conflicts in terms of assigning tasks, covering topics, the pace and language of lessons, and determining standards for measuring achievement for large groups of students with widely varied levels of ability. No matter how a teacher tries to structure the class, it seems, some students, or groups of students, will not get the attention or help that they need.

These are only a few examples of how teachers must make choices between the best interests of individual students and their obligation to teach all the students in their classroom a common curriculum in a specified period of time, in a way that provides measurable outcomes. Sometimes these choices violate children’s integrity and autonomy, dampening their capacity for creative and critical thought and

deliberative dialogue. The current emphasis on measurable outcomes derives in part from the industrial assembly-line metaphor that informed the organization of public schools a century ago, but it also derives from the assumption that public institutions are kept honest by public scrutiny — if results are to be publicly reported, they must be measurable in some manageable fashion, a process that reduces the lived process of learning to a numerical representation. Consequently, public schools seem to be pushed inevitably towards being institutions of socialization, rather than education. Insofar as socialization is a necessary good of schooling, and the ideal of education provides for the fullest development of individual potential, it seems that a teacher, like a politician, “can only plead that the best is the enemy of the good. If he tries for the best, as defined by one criterion, he will fail to deliver the good.”¹³

The point of my argument is not to paint a undeniably bleak picture of public schooling, but to remind us that we want public school teachers to be acutely sensitive to the moral costs of abandoning efforts to educate students, even when necessary. Further, I want to suggest that the current structure and organization of public schools should not be accepted as inevitable; having been created by human decisions and actions, they also can be changed so that teachers can spend more time educating students. It is important to recognize the ways in which public school teachers have dirty hands, because if we do not, the morality of our choices in public education can remain hidden, and we may dirty our hands unnecessarily.

1. This discussion draws on ideas from the following works, only some of which are quoted directly: Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Stuart Hampshire, “Morality and Pessimism,” Public and Private Morality,” in *Public and Private Morality*, ed. Stuart Hampshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Thomas E. Hill, “Moral Purity and the Lesser Evil,” *The Monist* 66, no. 2 (1983): 213-32; Martin Hollis, “Dirty Hands,” *British Journal of Political Science* 12 (1982): 385-98; Steven Lukes, “Marxism and Dirty Hands,” in *Marxism and Liberalism*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Social Philosophy and Policy Center, 1986); Thomas Nagel, “Ruthlessness in Public Life,” in Hampshire, *Public and Private Morality*; Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Michael Walzer, “Political Action: the Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1973): 160-80; and Bernard Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” in Hampshire, *Public and Private Morality*.

2. Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, 19.

3. *Ibid.*, 17.

4. Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” 49.

5. *Ibid.*, 66.

6. This discussion of teaching and schools draws on ideas from the following works, only some of which are quoted directly: Harry S. Broudy, “Didactics, Heuristics, and Philetics,” *Educational Theory* 22, no. 3 (1972): 251-61; Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890-1980* (New York: Longman, 1984); Henry Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (Granby, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1988); Thomas Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); Aimee Howley, Edwina D. Pendarvis, and Craig B. Howley, “Anti-Intellectualism in U.S. Schools,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 1, no. 6 (1993) <<http://epaa.asu.edu/>>; Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968); Linda McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, Kegan, and Paul, 1988); David Nyberg and Kieran Egan, *The Erosion of Education: Socialization and the Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1981); Israel Scheffler, “Philosophical Models of Teaching,” in *Reason and Teaching* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); and Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books,

1983).

7. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 199.

8. Williams, "Politics and Moral Character," 49.

9. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 214.

10. Nyberg and Egan, *The Erosion of Education*, 1.

11. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*, 36.

12. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals*, 33.

13. Hollis, "Dirty Hands," 397.