

Mistaking the Text: A Missed Opportunity for Dialogue

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I have to admit that I found this essay difficult to work with. My motivation for doing so was largely extrinsic: responding to an essay is the kind of thing one should do if she is working toward tenure and feeling her way into PES. In volunteering, however, there was also potential that intrinsic motivation might develop, motivation that would be generated in me by the object itself—the essay to which I would respond. Its topic and quality might draw me in, challenging and teaching me in ways that I appreciate and respect.

When I received the assignment, I was cautiously optimistic. The title indicated the essay was on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, concepts that I had worked with in one of my qualifying exams and that contribute much to my quest both to understand and practice education. This made me feel optimistic about the task soon to be at hand. The caution I felt was caused by my unfamiliarity with Anita Woolfolk, the author whose work the essay would critique. I promptly looked her up and found that the only book she authored was a textbook on educational psychology. This raised my caution further, since I am not a fan of the textbook approach to teaching, but I dutifully went off to the library to get it, immediately so because I was somewhat intrigued to see what Woolfolk had to say on motivation. As any good textbook does, her two chapters explicitly devoted to this concept synthesize the existing theoretical material in down-to-earth ways with practical applications relevant to the practitioners for whom the text was written. While there certainly are points that may deserve greater development, even a six hundred-page textbook can only go so far. Overall hers struck me as a balanced and useful introductory account. My assessment was later corroborated by the professor who teaches the Ed Psych course at ISU, who told me she is returning to Woolfolk's text next semester after trying one by Ormrod this year.¹

I suspect this news that yet another group of students will study Woolfolk's account of motivation does not please nor surprise David Ericson and Frederick Ellett. But my difficulty with their essay is that, in my humble estimation, it does not achieve its stated objective: that is, to make and defend a coherent case against Woolfolk's account of motivation and to replace it with a "more plausible" account. Thus, rather than generating in me the intrinsic motivation I had hoped it might for writing this response, my work with their essay generated cognitive and emotional dissonance. How could I, in my first presentation at PES, claim—not to mention support the claim—that my senior colleagues' work is at best poorly developed and at worst incoherent? Talk about burning one's bridges before they're even built! What perplexed me as much as anything was their decision to take a textbook to task. Textbooks, as I have said, are attempts to synthesize vast amounts of theoretical and empirical literature, much if not all of it authored by scholars other than the textbook writers. Often, as in this case, the purpose of a textbook is to initiate newcomers into

the existing standards of excellence, rules, warranted beliefs, and internal goods of the particular field or practice that those newcomers intend to enter. Even if it may not be the only or best way to achieve this purpose, the textbook approach is at least an efficient vehicle for anyone who is intrinsically motivated to pursue excellently the goods inherent to the field the book addresses. If and when these newcomers master these existing tools of that trade, they too become responsible for not only sustaining but also critically examining and, as warranted, transforming these tools, at least if they and their practice are to survive and flourish by virtue of the value they thereby create for others.

In other words, a textbook can be one of the internal goods of any of the “social practices” that MacIntyre theorizes.² As such, MacIntyre argues, its goodness can only be judged by people who have mastered it and the field it addresses.³ While I know that, according to this standard, I am not qualified to judge Woolfolk’s text, I feel slightly more qualified to say that Ericson and Ellett demonstrate in their essay that they are not yet qualified judges of her text either.⁴ Furthermore, I question whether the type of critique they wage is appropriately addressed to the author of a textbook, especially an introductory textbook. Rather, if they are serious about their arguments, I think their theoretical disputes should be taken up with the theorists whose theories it has become Woolfolk’s life-long task to synthesize. This line of analysis led me to wonder what was Ericson and Ellett’s motive in writing this essay. I came up with a variety of possible answers to this question, but the one I find most worth developing is that they believe philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, has much to contribute to our understanding of human motivation. I agree. Although I think they are on a misguided path if they intend by their efforts to put “educational psychology *en tout*... on trial,” I do see intersections between their and Woolfolk’s accounts of motivation that are worth pursuing. I will conclude my comments by delineating two of these.

First, drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre and Kekes as their authorities, the authors argue (and I assume they intended no pun!) that “most of the time most people act out of character” and that Woolfolk would do well “to take seriously the role of character in motivating people to act.” In my view, the space for doing this already exists in Woolfolk’s account, in what she refers to as “personal traits or individual characteristics,” which along with “a state or temporary situation” constitute the two sources of human motivation. The fact and the ways that she refers to these traits in at least two other places in addition to the one which the authors themselves note suggest to me that this element is more important to her than the authors gave her credit for.⁵ Thus, it is an intersection point between their and her ideas that invites dialogue and development. And one of the most vital philosophical contributions to bring to bear on this exchange is the extensive modern and so-called postmodern effort to come to terms with the subject-object dialectic.⁶ But, while I wholeheartedly agree with the authors that humans act as individual persons whose characters are social constructions that have been years if not lifetimes in the making, I stand with Woolfolk in holding that this is in no way incompatible with the belief that, if we act, we act by choice, however unreflective or deliberated, constrained or self-determined our actions may be.⁷

Finally, I concur with the authors' sentiment that conceptualizing value is an enormous task. Indeed, though my dissertation began with this intent, it ended over three hundred pages later with that axiological task barely begun.⁸ While I do not feel as uncomfortable as Ericson and Ellett seem to with the ways Woolfolk uses the term "value," I think she and we have left much of value unexamined. In my estimation, all of us who purport to be philosophers of the twenty-first century have barely embarked upon the axiological tasks that our times and our humanity demand of us. I would argue that at the heart of these tasks are our relations of production and exchange. At the core of modern trade is a questionable bias that has systematically distorted trade's course ever since. Is it not time that we examine this bias, which over the past five hundred years we have rationalized as reasonable, defensible, and even justifiable, and explore whether in fact such rationalizations might no longer be necessary?⁹ In my view, the possibility of public education depends on it.

1. Jeanne E. Ormrod, *Educational Psychology: Developing Learners* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2000). The ISU professor, whom I spoke with by phone 4/16/02, is Marla Reese-Weber.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187-96, particularly 187, 189-90. One inexplicable and troubling aspect of the authors' account of MacIntyre's "social practices" is their silence on the necessary place of critique therein.

3. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188-89.

4. My limited qualification to judge this essay is based on my reading of it, Woolfolk, MacIntyre, and on my previous work on motivation, which drew on texts by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, R.S. Peters, James Gouinlock, and David Nyberg.

5. Anita E. Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 373, 384, 412.

6. In my view, Adorno's efforts here remain the best we have. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983).

7. On the distinction between human action and human behavior, see D.C. Phillips and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Postpositivism and Educational Research* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 68-72.

8. Lucille L.T. Eckrich, "Value in Economics, Ethics, and Education" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1998).

9. On the rationalization of usury, see Albert O. Hirshman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977/1999).