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Doing the *ultimate* public good through Teacher Education

Abstract

It is argued here that the many public goods associated with education are derivatives of an ultimate good. This ultimate good is the overall purpose of life in general and is similar to a *telos* as understood in ancient Greek culture. This paper reviews the notions of 'good' and *telos*, and examines implications of Bauman's analysis of our present individualizing era, the role of personal meaning making and the nature of education. It is then argued that pre-service teachers can do the ultimate public good in a postmodern society, by articulating a developed personal, professional perspective that expresses a purpose (*telos*) of life.

This is not an idle esoteric project. Dewey (1958, p. 383) reported that "the greater part of life" will remain in darkness unless illuminated "by thoughtful inquiry". It is argued in this paper that such an illumination into the greater part of life can be made possible by the articulation of a *telos*. This perspective provides the basis for all other goods which teachers decide to do. This project accords well with a recent UNESCO report which calls for such a perspective, and its importance is clearly indicated in its claim that "It is no exaggeration on the Commission's part to say that the survival of humanity depends thereon" (Delors, 1998, p. 18).

The *ultimate* public good

Aristotle indicated that 'good' could be considered as belonging to three categories. These were the external, the body and the soul, and with reference to the latter he claimed that "those belonging to the soul we call most properly and *especially* good" (trans. Chase, 1911, p. 13, my emphasis). This soul is described by Aristotle as having both irrational and rational attributes. The irrational includes the appetites and desires, and the rational consists of intellectual and moral attributes. His notion of good then, involves our desires being tempered with intellectual *and* moral reasoning.

Aristotle's virtues were expressions of good character, which enabled people to live a life of excellence (*aretê*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle developed his notion of *special* goodness that pertained to this soul, and conceptualised it as a *Chief Good*. This represented "that which *all* things aim at" (trans. Chase, 1911, p. 1, my emphasis). This Chief Good, being the main thing aimed at, the end purpose or *telos* for humankind, was understood from the perspective of the community rather than that of the individual.

What was 'good' for Aristotle is often contrasted with other notions of good, such as found in the Christian New Testament. In contradistinction to Aristotle's virtues which included wealth, strength and courage, Christian theology promotes notions of weakness, poverty and humility. Nietzsche made great issue with this difference. He argued that the conception of 'good' was subject to the worldviews of various interest groups. Nietzsche was against any notion of a grand teleology existing for humankind and through Zarathustra claimed, "A thousand goals have there been so far... the one goal is lacking. Humanity still has no goal" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 60). Zarathustra observed that only humankind could create a meaning

for things - a human meaning. Therefore, he encouraged the individual to create a meaning in which he or she would become responsible. He declared, "He, however, has discovered himself who says, 'This is *my* good and evil'; and 'this is *my* way; where is yours?'" (Nietzsche, 1954, pp. 194 - 195).

Nietzsche goaded his readers to consider going *beyond good and evil* – which is a title he used for one of his books. He challenged his readers to consider how they understood the criteria that would determine whether something was to be considered either good or bad. Nietzsche (1989, p. 55) called this a "dangerous formula" because it allowed the individual to *create* her or his own values regardless of what the commonly accepted ones were. In short, one could apply one's own meanings to the terms *good* and *evil*.

Nietzsche's works were aimed to address the apparent nihilism of his age, a time of meaninglessness, which is understood to be postmodern in the sense that no one worldview, with its systematised values, can be legitimized. Nietzsche claimed that there are no such things as absolute values that can be appealed to once 'Truth' (in the absolute sense) is understood to be no longer attainable. Consequently Nietzsche argued that, in order to recognise meanings in a potentially nihilistic context, the individual must re-evaluate all values. One must become a creator of one's own notion of the good and the values by which one is then to be held accountable. One must determine for oneself what is of value, what is good and what is true.

Nietzsche's views concerning the central importance of personal meaning making and choice when it comes to the notion of 'the good', is reflective of many postmodern writers. Lyotard is recognised as famously announcing the end to modernism's metanarratives, which makes the postmodern world fractured, ambivalent and uncertain. In this era, Bauman (2001, p. 69) identifies the individualizing effect these conditions have and argues that "ambivalence may be, as before, a social phenomenon, but each one of us faces it alone, as a *personal problem*". Bauman, like Nietzsche, throws his readers back on themselves as individuals, and encourages them to become active and critical meaning makers and participants rather than passive and docile consuming citizens.

The making of meaning however, is a derivative of purpose. Morris (1992, p. 57) states that "if my life is to have meaning (or *a* meaning), it thus must derive its meaning from some sort of purposive, intentional activity. It must be endowed with meaning". Any meaning, including the establishing of a meaning of a (public) good, must, as Nietzsche argued, be part of one's personal worldview as to what makes life worth living. For Aristotle, it was his notion of the *telos* which indicated the purpose by which excellence and happiness could be dialectically contextualised.

Aristotle's Chief Good was derived from a perspective of a *telos* - what was good for the public or society. This not only involved the intellectual development of individuals, but also the community required them to be moral. Morality itself, as argued by Ellin (1995) is more suited to enriching society as a whole rather than enriching individuals, and is therefore considered to be specifically a social good. While moral goodness is understood to be a public good, whatever particular meaning is attributed to 'good' for a specific community, must, as was mentioned before, be derived from a particular purpose or *telos*. The *telos* for the public is understood to be that which is considered to be the point aimed at, or end purpose of the community, which enables it to live well.

The ultimate public *telos*

As mentioned earlier, the Greek term *telos* denotes the point aimed at or purpose. This term forms the root for the word teleology, meaning the overall quality of being purposeful. In ethical theory teleology is often contrasted with deontology. The former generally refers to producing good, while the latter generally refers to following moral duties or principles.

Taylor (1989, p. 3) delineates between the modernistic deontological rule-following approach which focuses upon “what is right to do” with the more postmodern condition “on what it is good to be”. Therefore, the moral issue is not one of which rules to follow but rather ‘what sort of person is one to become?’. That is, what is the purpose by which one can assign meaning to one’s existence. The meaning of a public good then should be derived from such a teleological position.

There can be many meanings of ‘good’ which can be derived from various teleological views concerning the public to which we as educators belong. However, it is argued here that the notion of an *ultimate* good would refer to that which gives life purpose and makes life meaningful. In this context the response to the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ is considered to involve the ultimate *telos*. This proposal of the ultimate public good can be criticised as being a particularly Western view, where since Ancient Greece, there has been the premise that there is a *telos* - a point to life. Yalom (1980, p. 470) contrasts this with the Eastern view, where “Existence has no goal. It is pure journey”. Nevertheless, it is argued here that in order to address the topic of ‘public good’, meanings should be derived from some *telos*.

To examine this issue of life’s meaning more closely, it is helpful to differentiate between the questions ‘what is *the* purpose of life?’ and ‘what is the purpose of *my* life?’. Yalom refers to the former as the ‘cosmological’, noting that it can be addressed by a worldview as found in various religions. The latter he terms ‘terrestrial’ and includes a purpose, a reference to an intention, aim or function, and as more personal and even secular. MacIntyre (1984, p. 28) contends that this latter question, which focuses on individual choice and responsibility, is the more appropriate one to emphasise in these postmodern times, and argues that “it is by way of their intentions that individuals express bodies of moral belief in their actions. For all intentions presuppose more or less complex, more or less coherent, more or less explicit bodies of belief, sometimes moral belief”. So while both questions have great value, it is the terrestrial question that is considered to have particular significance in providing the basis by which the meaning of an ultimate public good might be derived.

By emphasising this terrestrial question which asks ‘what is the purpose of *my* life?’ morality must become a necessary component of this exercise. This is because an individual is argued to be a social being having a presence-in-the-world. Morality in postmodernity is understood to have greater significance if considered teleologically rather than deontologically. This is not confined of course to postmodernism as Aristotle’s ethics were also teleological. His virtues were not a means to a meaningful life, but rather were expressions of the Chief Good. MacIntyre (1984, p. 118) addresses the teleological project which asks ‘what sort of person must I become?’ and answers it by how “*in practice*” one lives one’s life. Mehl (2001, p. 4) argues that “this existential issue of personal becoming” to which MacIntyre refers, is tackled by Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

Kierkegaard’s writings call the individual back out of the crowd to live an authentic existence. By living authentically, one can choose one’s own identity and possibilities rather than have these dictated by the crowd or by some framework encouraging rule-following behaviour. Kierkegaard (1987, vol.2, p. 259) stated that when becoming authentic, “the individual has known himself and has chosen himself”. For Kierkegaard, this was where one’s purpose and meaning of life was to be found. Being *authentic* allows one to determine how things are to count towards one’s situation and how one is to act in relation to them. This is similar to Nietzsche’s encouragement for individuals to become responsible by re-evaluating and choosing goods and values, and not as has occasionally been the interpretation, to become immoral. Nietzsche calls individuals to become responsible for establishing an authentic relationship to what is good, by being able to distinguish between good and evil.

This ability to choose between goods and to determine the criteria by which goods might be recognised, refers to a higher layer of decision making which lies beyond many goods themselves. This higher layer is described by Taylor (1989) as consisting of hypergoods, which are the higher-order goods by which lesser goods can be determined. He argues that these contribute to our sense of being good rather than just informing us of doing good. He claims that “We sense in the very experience of being moved by some higher good that we are moved by what is good in it rather than what it is valuable because of our reaction. We are moved by it seeing its point as something infinitely valuable” (Taylor, 1989, p. 74). This level of hypergoods, or what Taylor refers to as strong evaluation, enables persons to make meanings as to what are then to count as lesser goods.

Personal meaning making

Persons can be considered as beings who experience *meaning* where ‘meaning’ is understood to unify rationality and reason with other aspects of experience such as feeling, conscience and imagination (Phenix, 1964, p. 5, 21). For Heidegger, ‘meaning’ refers to the relations of entities to a structural whole of meanings and intentions (Palmer, 1969, p. 133) and constitutes part of his concepts of self-understanding, care and significance. This ‘subjective meaning’ is an *understanding* of self-in-the-world and therefore has a degree of ‘objectivity’ associated with it as the ‘world’ is not of the individual but of the public (Pring, 2000, p. 100). Betanzos argues that Wilhelm “Dilthey has a strong sense for existential concerns” too where an individual is considered by Dilthey to have an “overwhelming need to put together a pattern of *meaning* for his life as a whole emerges a *Weltanschauung*, or ‘worldview’” (Betanzos, 1988, p. 29). According to Dilthey this is how life can be made sense of or comprehended as a whole, where “meaning is the special relationship which the parts have to the whole in a life” (Dilthey, 1976, p. 235-6).

Meanings are generally socially constructed with others, and so an understanding of others is an important contribution in being able to appreciate critically the various facets of cultural meanings. Personal beliefs regarding one’s self and the world contribute to a personal worldview that consists of a morally responsible approach to others. Therefore, in addition to encouraging students to be creative and critical towards generally accepted cultural knowledge (Fritzman, 1990), education should also foster sensitivity to differences. The individual is not an indifferent detached ‘atom’ from the rest of humanity, but is in-the-world with others and can therefore be referred to by the more inclusive concept of “the individual-subject-and-others” (Smeyers, 1995, p. 407). Education should therefore place an emphasis upon understanding and accepting the ‘Other’, which fosters “a tolerance of uncertainty, ambiguity, and change, and a humility with respect to one’s own identity and beliefs” (Bagnall, 1995, p. 92).

Drawing upon the notion of ‘meaning’ as conceptualised by Dilthey, Heidegger and Phenix, it is argued here that persons can be understood as “meaning-making creatures” (Hill, 1992, p. 9). This meaning-making characteristic can take the form of a personal narrative, where one is able to make sense of one’s place in the whole scheme of things (Erricker *et al.*, 1997). Such a claim accords well with the views of Dewey, who maintained that education must be meaningful for individuals personally, in order for them to engage with the curriculum. Education is not just to be understood as the subject matter or even the activities, but also as meaningfulness that is considered to be valuable, worthwhile and significant for the individual learners.

Such meaning making needs to involve the deepest aspects of our being in order to address an ultimate public good. While *information* can be gained via an engagement with various sources, this does not make it personally significant. As Bruner (1990, p. 4) reminds us *information*, being a term which lends itself to a computer-processing metaphor “comprises an already pre-coded message within a system”. *Meaning* however, is something which an

individual encodes upon experiences. Such a difference is reflective of what James and Dewey refer to as second-hand thinking (information) and first-hand thinking (making personal sense and meaning from experiences). It is this latter aspect which is pertinent for constructing meanings which give personal significance in an overall purpose for a public good.

Education and the ultimate good

The relation between education and the good life is an ancient one and yet it appears not to be obvious with a superficial glance which may view education simply as a means to developing cultural capital. There is usually an assumed innate goodness associated with the enterprise of education. That is, through education individuals and the public at large are understood to receive some benefit. Both the individual and society are made 'better' through this enterprise. Having a similar correspondence to Aristotle's notion of good character, there is the current ideal of an educated person. Similarly to Aristotle's position, this ideal of the educated person is understood to be good from the perspective of the public, even from a liberal perspective because it has moral character as a central component to its view.

The term 'education' is derived from the Latin *educere* meaning 'out' and *ducere* meaning 'to lead'. Hence this notion has traditionally implied that education is the process of nourishing or rearing a person, to 'lead out' of his or her potential for development. It could be implied that the learner is coming *out* of his or her 'natural' state of ignorance and impulse based upon appetite and caprice. However the learner is also part of the social world and therefore education can be seen as offering an initiation *in* to public understandings, purposes and practices.

'Education' does not necessarily *aim* to achieve anything beyond itself, being understood as providing the values and criteria by which manners of proceeding (rather than specific content) should comply (Atkinson, 1965, p. 180; Peters, 1965, p. 92). The notion that education should be necessarily contributing to something *extrinsic* to itself is objected to (Peters, 1967, p. 5), because education stands for something that in itself is *intrinsically worthwhile*, the search for extrinsic ends is like seeking the purpose of morality or the good life (Peters, 1964, p. 17; 1970, p. 29). If the discipline of education is taught in a scientific approach, somewhat akin to the psychometrics discourse often frequently found in programs teaching pedagogy, it is likely, as Dewey (1958, p. 383) argued, that "by far the greater part of life goes on in a darkness unilluminated by thoughtful inquiry".

Dewey argued that all persons act and behave according to their beliefs, and it is therefore the task of education to enable persons to believe intelligently. The intellectual thoroughness that Dewey recommended in order to enable persons to believe intelligently, was basically philosophical. In his writings which promoted social morality, he described this thoroughness variously but often as value judgements and critical reflection. He always stressed that such thinking was not to be separated by too great a distance from direct experience, and argued that

For these forms of moral theory while releasing morals from the obligation of telling man what goods are, leaving that office to life itself, have failed to note that the office of moral philosophy is criticism; and that the performance of this office by discovery of existential conditions and consequences involves a qualitative transformation, a re-making in subsequent action which experimentally tests the conclusions of theory. (Dewey, 1958, p. 433)

According to Dewey, a certain depth of critique appears necessary to uncover this relation. Such a discussion needs to be 'serious' in order to unconceal the relation that exists between a notion of the good life and the educational enterprise that is *aimed* towards its attainment.

In his book *'Ethics and Education'*, Peters outlines his Transcendental Argument in relation to his notion of a more specific concept of 'education'. This argument is grounded in the asking of his 'serious question' that asks 'how ought I to live?' or 'what ought I to do?'. His whole argument thus becomes tenuous, according to Blake *et al.*, (2000, p. 46) if people fail to ask themselves this question. However, Frankl (2000) argues that we should not wait for individuals to ask themselves such serious questions but rather we should be actively asking them of each other. Such serious questions are not specific to the work of Peters because they reflect age-old concerns that have been central to education. According to Lawton and Gordon (2002, p. 17), "defining how to live wisely in the world (and not how to live well off [in] it) has been the oldest educational question".

Although the criteria found in Peters's Transcendental Argument can be used to determine whether an activity is 'educational' or not, for others the argument is not persuasive that the educational enterprise is in anyway opposed to achieving extrinsic and utilitarian goals. Both Plato (trans. Lee, 1955, p. 144) and Aristotle (trans. Chase, 1911, p. 1) argued that education can be a means for particular ends, which thereby contextualise education beyond itself. Bagnall (1990, p. 46) therefore argues that it is more appropriate that educational goals "should be justified by sound arguments for their place in and contribution to the furthering of the values and value frameworks of modern society" than by only appealing "to their self-evident intrinsic good".

Appealing to the public good, consisting in 'others', involves recognising one's presence-in-the-world-with-others. This existential characteristic is recognised by Noddings who represents this through her notion of care. She argues that -

Finally, we must consider Heidegger's deepest sense of care. As human beings, we care what happens to us. We wonder whether there is life after death, whether there is a deity who cares about us, whether we are loved by those we love, whether we belong anywhere; we wonder what we will become, who we are, how much control we have over our own fate. For adolescents these are among the most pressing questions: Who am I? What kind of person will I be? Who will love me? How do others see me? Yet schools spend more time on the quadratic formula than on any of these existential questions. (Noddings, 1992, p. 20)

Noddings's view is based on Heidegger's idea that persons are immersed in-the-world, and therefore have a disposition to caring about their place in it. Care is also an aspect of citizenship, which is able to transcend both the private and the public spheres (Dam & Volman, 1998, p. 232), enabling a greater effectiveness in social interactions, which in turn lead to "better" selves (Schultz, 1998, p. 381). This approach reflects Heidegger's (1959, p. 53) assertion that schools should have a *spiritual atmosphere*, not a scientific one. It is an appeal that can be heard from many who claim that there is a need to focus more on the value of such things as the mind and spirit rather than material and economic gains (Young, 1992).

The pressing questions listed above by Noddings are described as being existential and include the questions 'Who am I?' and 'What is my purpose?'. Nye and Hay (1996, p. 151) report that these questions are raised by children when examining issues of personal identity. Education alludes to facilitating the development of a sense of self-identity and to encouraging meaning-making in the sense of what one's place in-the-world means. This aspect of education is argued here to be essential if individuals are to see significance in, and commit to, an ultimate public good, which, as was referred earlier to the report by Delors, is essential if global peace is to be attained by humanity.

Promoting the *telos* through Teacher Education

Bauman reports that postmodernity presents ambiguity and uncertainty as *personal problems*, and it is argued here that programs of teacher education should do likewise. He proposes that

education should cultivate “the ability to live daily and at peace with uncertainty and ambivalence, with a variety of standpoints... tolerance of difference... fortifying critical and self-critical faculties... [and] assume responsibility for one’s choices..” (Bauman, 2001, p. 138). One project that is here argued as being able to facilitate with the development of these attributes, is the development of a personal, professional perspective.

In order to serve the ultimate public good, teacher education programs should require students to develop a clear sense of a *telos* for education. Personal perspectives of education which include such a *telos* enable teachers to critically give meanings to experiences and evaluate existing practices and also be able to create possibilities of their own as they endeavour to attain educational ideals for which they are passionately committed. In order to derive such meanings, it is first necessary to identify, articulate and develop one’s *telos* for public life in general. This suggestion is not considered to be radical, as it has been claimed by others that the meanings and purposes of education are inextricably linked to the meaning and purpose of life (Freire, 1972; Higginbotham, 1976; O’Hear, 1981; J White, 1990).

While Dewey acknowledged that the notion of natural teleology was even out of fashion in his time, he did identify the importance of individual tendency. As such, perceptual understandings were recognised as having an existential origin. Therefore the development of a particular perspective of education, if it is to be significant, must include the presence of the personal. When addressing aims or purposes of education in general, it is necessary to acknowledge that ‘education’, being an abstract concept, does not have purposes or aims of itself. This is recognised by Dewey (1985, p. 114) who stated, “it is well to remind ourselves that education as such has no aims. Only persons, parents, and teachers, etc., have aims, not an abstract idea like education”. Purposes then, belong to persons and not to concepts. This might appear to be a rather mute point to make, but it is argued to be a significant issue when pre-service teachers are ‘taught’ about education. Rather than *learning* the purposes, goals or aims of education in a passive or docile sense, pre-service teachers should rather be encouraged to *give meaning* to the enterprise of education and what they understand to be the good life.

It is argued that there is great value in having pre-service teachers articulate their perspective on ‘serious’ issues. These articulations should be a culmination of regular journal entries which allow students to respond to the many and various theories, theorists, perspectives, experiences and research findings to which they encounter. Such a perspective, in addition to clarifying understandings of these elements which make up the discourse of education, should engage with such existential questions as:

- Who are you?
- What is the purpose of your life?
- What is the purpose of life in general?
- What does it mean to be good?
- How ought you to live?
- How ought you to teach?
- What ought you to teach?

Initially the responses to these are often assumed to be quite self-evident for students, but as Britzman (2003, p. 37) observes, these meanings become elusive when an articulated explanation is attempted. Such an explanation is often made possible when a personal perspective is articulated through a narrative. Taylor (1989, p. 92) claims that our lives are often grasped in narrative and argues that “we aren’t full beings in this perspective until we can say what moves us, what our lives are built around” but that “articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power”. Such is the potential for personal narrative that Bruner (1990, p. 56) even reports that whatever is not constructed within narrative is actually lost from memory.

Articulating a personal, professional perspective, not only elucidates a *telos* on which important meanings can be derived, but it also serves to clarify personal identity, that is, the unity of one's being. As MacIntyre argues,

I have suggested so far that unless there is a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will *both* be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life *and* that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately. These two considerations are reinforced by a third: that there is at least one virtue recognized but the tradition which cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of a human life – the virtue of integrity or constancy. 'Purity of heart,' said Kierkegaard, 'is to will one thing.' This notion of singleness of purpose in a whole life can have no application unless that of a whole life does. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 203)

Student-teachers will in effect be able to articulate their personal identity through the unity that such a perspective would explain. Being personal rather than an 'objective' report summarising the theories of others, objective 'real' goods will not be the issue, but rather what are *deemed* to be the goods (Bauman, 2001, p. 202). This potentially may be accused of promoting a form of solipsism rather than any agreed public good, let alone ultimate public good. However, if these personal, professional perspectives begin to be developed and articulated at the beginning of a degree program, then there are several years where these perspectives can be negotiated with the social 'others', both in the form of fellow students, as well as tertiary staff, authors of various readings and possibly mentoring teachers too. The social environment which engages in such a forum is argued here to be opportunity to which Dewey refers as being necessary in order to illuminate the greater part of life itself.

Conclusion

If teachers are to do the public good then teacher education programs have an important role to play in helping to identify what might be considered as 'good'. It has been argued that the criteria required to determine whether something is to be regarded as a public good must be derived from a *telos*. This *telos*, by its nature, identifies the ultimate public good because it consists of the purpose of the life of the public itself. This is something that can only be engaged with in a personally significant manner. Therefore it has been suggested here that the development of a personal, professional perspective might be one avenue by which individuals can come to develop a notion of the ultimate public good. This has great importance because it is from this perspective that student-teachers will base all their decisions. By its social character, the *telos* developed (with its values) in such perspectives will transcend the subjectivity of the individual students. Such a project accords well with the recent United Nations report which identifies that it is education's task to enable "individuals to transcend themselves to consider universal 'moral' values", and claims that such a task is considered so important "that the survival of humanity depends thereon" (Delors, 1998, p. 18).

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