

In defence of rational moral education

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In defence of rational moral education: replies to Aldridge, de Ruyter and Tillson

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In the foregoing articles, David Aldridge, Doret de Ruyter and John Tillson offer some weighty and wide-ranging criticisms of my recent book, *A Theory of Moral Education* (Hand, 2018a). I cannot hope to do justice to the detail of their criticisms in the space available to me, but I shall attempt, in what follows, to defend my account of moral education against their principal lines of attack. I am grateful to Aldridge, de Ruyter and Tillson for their close engagement with the book and for the opportunity their objections afford me to clarify aspects of my argument.

There is not a great deal of overlap in the three critiques, so I shall respond to each in turn.

Reply to Aldridge

Aldridge develops what he takes to be ‘a specifically educational objection to the contractarian position Hand advances’. His claim is not that my contractarian justification for basic moral standards fails, but rather that it will be unpersuasive to students in the context of classroom moral inquiry. It will be unpersuasive because it relies on the unwillingness of sympathetic inquirers to raise certain kinds of objection, but objections of exactly these kinds are routinely raised by intellectually adventurous students. He writes:

... it might be hoped that a young person following the arguments as Hand presents them arrives at precisely those reasonable objections to which Hand takes time to respond. Indeed, young people frequently do. Far from being a ‘figment of the philosophical imagination’, the perspectives of the nihilist and the free rider are common contributors to the intellectually active classroom of 14-year-old moral enquirers.

The underlying problem, he thinks, is that I invoke the idea of sympathy ‘pragmatically rather than logically’, as a way of refusing objections rather than answering them. Sympathy does not feature as ‘a premise in a rational argument’ and my reliance on it does not ‘operate in the space of reasons’. I am therefore guilty of performing ‘an argumentative sleight of hand’ that will not go unnoticed by astute teenagers.

The first thing to say about Aldridge’s objection is that it is not really ‘specifically educational’ at all. Insofar as it purports to identify an argumentative sleight of hand in my justification for basic moral standards, it is an objection to the justification itself, not just to its persuasive force in the classroom. If the objection were sound, it would show that no-one should subscribe to basic moral standards on the basis of the justification I propose.

But, second, the objection is badly off-target. Contrary to what Aldridge says, the important psychological fact about human beings that they are sympathetic to one another precisely *is* a premise of my contractarian argument, and the persuasive force of the argument certainly does *not* depend on the unwillingness of sympathetic inquirers to raise certain kinds of objection.

The argument I lay out in Chapter Five of the book is that moral subscription to basic moral standards is necessary to ameliorate the problem of sociality. The problem of sociality is the standing propensity in human social groups to breakdowns in cooperation and outbreaks of conflict, which arises from what are sometimes called the 'circumstances of justice'. These circumstances are rough equality, limited sympathy and moderate scarcity of resources. In explaining the notion of 'limited sympathy', I take pains to distinguish it from 'lack of sympathy'. I endorse Hume's observation that 'though it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet it is rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not overbalance all the selfish' (Hume, 1896 [1739], pp. 487). I further agree with Hume that the selflessness of love between family members can be as inimical to the common good as pure self-interest. It is because we are sympathetic to others that morality is possible; and it is because our sympathy is unreliable and unevenly distributed that morality is necessary.

When, later in the chapter, I come to consider some standard objections to moral contractarianism, I emphasise the difference between contractarian arguments premised on 'mutual unconcern' (Gauthier, 1986) and those premised on limited sympathy. I characterise the former as 'pessimistic' and the latter as 'realistic'. I contend that, while worries about free riders and the infirm may be insurmountable problems on the assumption of mutual unconcern, they can be answered quite satisfactorily on the assumption of limited sympathy.

The point here is that sympathy is in the picture from the start, as one of the contingent but permanent features of the human condition that collectively give rise to the problem of sociality. So there is no sleight of hand involved in my reliance on it, and no sense in which it is being used to refuse objections rather than answer them. It should go without saying that I do not think any objection to moral contractarianism is off-limits to moral inquirers. Moral inquiry is the disciplined pursuit of answers to questions about the nature, content and justification of morality: all possible answers, and all objections raised against them, are up for consideration. If, as Aldridge says, 'the perspectives of the nihilist and the free rider are common contributors to the intellectually active classroom', that is surely to be welcomed; but responsible moral educators will want to ensure that the strongest counters to these perspectives are also brought to light. They will want students to understand that, while the tacit moral contracts in human social groups would soon collapse if most people were as unsympathetic as the nihilist or the free rider, the plain psychological truth is that they are not.

In the second half of his article, Aldridge suggests there is a fundamental difference between his 'educational vision' and mine: for him, education is about 'becoming human'; for me, it is about the 'transmission of knowledge'. This is just rhetorical mischief-making. I take the transmission of knowledge to be *one* central aim of education, but by no means the only one; and my account of moral education gives a

large and important role to moral formation, which is far more conative, affective and behavioural than it is cognitive. I do not much like the locution 'becoming human', because it seems to me odd to describe uneducated people as less human than educated ones, but I assume this is shorthand for the idea that education is of the whole person, not just the intellect – and that is an idea I wholeheartedly endorse.

Setting the rhetoric to one side, what Aldridge apparently wants to advocate is a move away from 'cultivating subscription to moral standards' and towards 'nurturing children's capacity for altruism'. In this he explicitly follows John White (1990, 2016). As I have discussed White's proposal at some length elsewhere (Hand, 2014, 2018b), I shall not do so again here – except to say that it is a serious mistake to see these two educational undertakings as somehow opposed. I am all in favour of taking steps to increase children's altruism or sympathy, but we should do that *as well as*, not instead of, educating them in morality.

Reply to de Ruyter

The question raised by de Ruyter is 'whether or not Hand's theory of moral education would have been better if he had used results of empirical research'. Her answer to that question is in one sense reassuring: 'I doubt that it would have led to a different theory'. But she nevertheless believes that 'substantiating the many empirical claims would have made a stronger case'.

My principal response to de Ruyter is simply that my book is a work of philosophy, not a work of anthropology, psychology or sociology. I develop an account of moral education and seek to vindicate it by means of conceptual and normative arguments. Along the way I do indeed help myself to some common-sense empirical claims – and of course I recognise that common sense is not infallible. Insofar as common-sense empirical claims are susceptible to social scientific investigation, the possibility that social scientists will some day show them to be false must be admitted. But admitting this possibility does not make it incumbent on those adducing such claims to supply research evidence for them. Nor, in its reliance on such claims, does my book differ from a great many other works of philosophy.

De Ruyter concedes that it would be 'ludicrous' to require the provision of research evidence for every empirical claim made in a philosophical theory. Whether or not that requirement is appropriate, she contends, 'depends on the centrality of the empirical claims in one's theory'; and, in her estimation, the empirical claims in my theory satisfy this centrality criterion. But whether empirical claims require evidential support does not turn on their centrality to the theory in which they feature: it turns on the nature of the claims themselves. Where empirical claims rest on the authority of common sense, it is both unnecessary and misleading to present them as if they rested on research evidence.

This too seems to be conceded by de Ruyter. Philosophers, she says, can avoid demands for research evidence if they 'implicitly or explicitly refer to common sense – that is, to what they take to be self-evident and endorsed by all well-thinking human beings'. She rightly judges me to be presenting the circumstances of justice as 'common sense or

generally accepted empirical beliefs'. But she is still reluctant to let me off the evidential hook: 'the circumstances of justice are indeed difficult to deny, yet they are also rather general and basic, which could lead to the criticism that they are underdeveloped or at least not sufficiently substantiated'. It is hard to see what this criticism amounts to. The circumstances of justice are *intended* to be claims about the human condition of a very general and basic kind. And they purport to be claims on which there is no room for reasonable disagreement, about which doubt is more or less impossible. I am not sure what kind of 'development' de Ruyter thinks they might need, or why the substantiation of common sense might be deemed insufficient in this case when it is sufficient in others. Later in her article, she suggests I should have sought out psychological research on 'the level of sympathy... human beings have'. Her suggestion would carry some weight if my argument depended on a precise quantification of human sympathy; but it plainly does not. For the justificatory argument to go through, I need only claim, and *do* only claim, that human sympathy is limited: we are sympathetic, but not unfailingly, consistently or even-handedly sympathetic. At that level of imprecision, the claim is surely, in de Ruyter's words, 'difficult to deny'.

There is one implied empirical claim in the book that particularly troubles de Ruyter. At a couple of points I offer the prohibition on smacking children as an example of a controversial moral standard. This standard is controversial, I suggest, because there are sensible things to be said both for and against it. A thing to be said in its favour is that smacking is a form of violence and 'we readily count the vast majority of violent acts, and acts intended to cause pain, among the forms of harm against which morality is designed to protect us'; a thing to be said against it is that smacking is intended to be educative and 'while it is not self-evident that smacking is an effective educational tool, nor is it self-evident that it is not' (Hand, 2018a, p.81). Although I only commit myself explicitly to the claim that smacking is not *self-evidently* ineffective, de Ruyter rightly takes my classification of the standard as controversial to imply a commitment to the further claim that the ineffectiveness of smacking has not been *empirically established*. And this, she thinks, is just wrong.

It is worth pointing out that nothing much turns on the correctness of my classification of this standard. Perhaps, after all, there are no sensible things to be said against the prohibition on smacking children, in which case the standard is uncontroversial and should be taught directly. Such a reclassification would pose no threat to the coherence or credibility of my account of moral education.

But I am not quite ready to allow that the ineffectiveness of smacking has been empirically established. In support of her contention that it has, de Ruyter cites a meta-analysis by Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff, which she takes to show that smacking is 'only associated with immediate compliance – not with internalising the (moral) rule the parents aim to convey'. The picture that emerges from Gershoff's study is, however, rather less cut and dried than de Ruyter would have us believe. Gershoff herself makes no bones about the fact that the effectiveness of smacking is a matter of reasonable disagreement among relevantly qualified people:

Psychologists and other professionals are divided on the question of whether the benefits of corporal punishment might outweigh any potential hazards; some have concluded that corporal punishment is both effective and desirable, whereas others

have concluded that corporal punishment is ineffective at best and harmful at worst. (Gershoff, 2002, p.539)

It is true that Gershoff's meta-analysis does not show a positive association between smacking and 'moral internalisation', because the studies she surveys present a mixed picture of positive and negative associations. But by far the largest effect size reported in any of the studies surveyed is the positive association found by Larzelere and colleagues (Larzelere and Merenda, 1994; Larzelere et al, 1996). And Gershoff goes on to give two reasons for giving particular weight to this study. First, she observes that the method of data collection used by Larzelere and colleagues ('detailed daily discipline diaries') has 'high validity' by comparison with the method used in most studies of smacking ('parents' or adolescent and adult children's recollections of frequency of corporal punishment') (Gershoff, 2002, p.540). Second, this study, unlike most, takes into account the other forms of discipline typically used by parents in conjunction with smacking:

Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of research on corporal punishment to date is the failure to recognise that it rarely occurs in isolation; rather, corporal punishment typically is combined with reasoning, threats, time-out, withdrawal of privileges, or other techniques. Whether compliance or other child constructs can be attributed to corporal punishment per se or to the other techniques used, or even to a combination of both, has rarely been studied. A notable exception is the work by Larzelere and his colleagues, who have found that reasoning 'backed up' by a form of punishment, such as corporal punishment, is highly effective at preventing future misbehaviour. (ibid., p.553)

In his own review of the empirical literature on smacking, published a few years before Gershoff's, Larzelere concludes that 'there are not enough quality studies that document detrimental outcomes of nonabusive physical punishment to support advice or policies against this age-old parental practice' (Larzelere, 1996, p.827).

Contra de Ruyter, I do not claim 'that smacking is a kind of violence against which the protection of morality is not required'. I claim only that this is a view it is not unreasonable to hold. It is neither self-evident nor empirically established that smacking children is educationally ineffective, so there is no knockdown objection to arguments for the permissibility of smacking. For the time being, the matter remains unsettled.

Reply to Tillson

Tillson launches a veritable barrage of objections against my account of moral education. Some of them, it seems to me, miss their mark entirely. It is not true that I offer 'a kind of utilitarian defence of harm', or that the problem-of-sociality justification for basic moral standards somehow makes it hard to prefer non-lethal punishments to lethal ones. Questions about the sort of justification a national government would need for declaring war on another country, or for enacting laws on road safety, are simply beyond the remit of the book. And there is no need for Tillson to speculate about my reasons for worrying about indoctrination, or about subscription to unjustified moral

standards, because I explicitly articulate them. Three of his objections, however, go to the heart of my argument, so require a fuller response.

First, Tillson doubts that the problem-of-sociality justification succeeds in justifying the basic moral standards it purports to justify. In particular, he doubts that universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to a standard prohibiting harm to others is needed to avert conflict and sustain cooperation in human social groups. He suggests that both keeping slaves and abusing 'outsiders' may be quite compatible with peace and productivity. 'If we can effectively avert outsider harm (either by indoctrination or by force) and we lack sympathy, or even feel disgust at outsiders', he wonders, then why should we endorse a prohibition on abusing them?

My reply is that Tillson's suppositions are counterfactual. Recall the circumstances of justice that give rise to the problem of sociality. The implication of rough equality is that we *cannot* 'effectively avert outsider harm': 'no-one can safely ignore the aggression or discontent of others, nor hope to keep it indefinitely at bay with a show of superior strength' (Hand, 2018a, p.60). And the implication of limited sympathy is that we are *not*, or not consistently, unsympathetic to or disgusted by others: it is not true 'that people act only in their own interests, or that they are generally unmoved by the needs of others' (ibid., p.61). The problem-of-sociality justification purports to show that morality is needed by human beings as they actually are – not by hypothetical creatures who are lacking in sympathy and impervious to attack. Perhaps Tillson means to deny that human beings find themselves in the circumstances of justice, but if so we need to know more about why he rejects this familiar account of the human predicament.

Second, Tillson thinks there are important moral standards we should teach directly in schools *besides* the ones needed to solve the problem of sociality. The example he gives is the moral prohibition on eating meat: 'The harm done to animals by slaying them for food, and the good robbed of them, in the absence of any overriding factors (and taste is not at all an overriding factor) constitute decisive moral reason not to kill them for food'. This is clearly not a moral standard needed to avert conflict and sustain cooperation.

Now, I take pains to emphasise in the book that my account of moral education leaves room for the directive teaching of moral standards robustly justified by other kinds of argument:

The class of justified moral standards includes, at a minimum, the conflict-averting and cooperation-sustaining standards whose currency in society is necessary to ameliorate the problem of sociality... I do not wish to rule out the possibility of there being more justified moral standards than these... [P]erhaps there are standards that play no role in ameliorating the problem of sociality but are vindicated by some other sound justificatory argument. If so, these standards too should be taught with a view to securing full moral commitment. (Hand, 2018a, p.78)

This point is important. If Tillson is right about there being a robust justification for the moral prohibition on eating meat, I should be entirely happy to see this standard directly taught in schools. It is no part of my view that the content of directive moral education is limited in principle to the standards vindicated by the problem-of-sociality justification.

I am, however, tempted by the thought that the content of directive moral education is limited *in practice* to these standards, because the other arguments by which people have sought to justify moral standards are at best controversial and at worst demonstrably unsound. Certainly we should need to hear a lot more about Tillson's reasons for believing the prohibition on meat-eating to be justified before we could accept it as grounds for the directive teaching of moral vegetarianism. His bare assertion that animals have 'moral standing', insofar as that entails a right not to be harmed, merely begs the question.

Third, and finally, Tillson objects that 'enlisting non-moral reasons for endorsing moral reasons misses the point of moral reasons'. Unfortunately, he says little about why he thinks this. My best guess is that he sees me as attempting a *reduction* of moral reasons to non-moral ones – in particular to what he calls 'desire-based reasons'. That, at least, is one interpretation of the following passage:

The problem of sociality offers desire-based reasons to obey moral reasons. But why appeal to desire-based reasons? We sometimes have moral reasons to subordinate our own desires to those of others, reasons that need not and sometimes cannot (ultimately) be grounded in desires.

But if Tillson fears that I am trying to erode the distinction between acting from duty and acting from desire, he is quite mistaken. Morality often requires us to do things we would prefer not to, and to refrain from acting in ways we find appealing. It is, as J.L. Mackie puts it, 'a system of particular constraints on conduct – ones whose central task is to protect the interests of persons other than the agent and which present themselves to an agent as checks on his natural inclinations and spontaneous tendencies to act' (Mackie, 1977, p.106). It is in the nature of moral reasons that they ordinarily trump desire-based reasons: to deny this would certainly be to miss the point of them. Happily, my view involves no such denial.

The project of trying to show that human beings have good reason to subscribe to moral standards is not at all the same as the project of reducing moral reasons to non-moral ones. It is generally the case that, in advance of committing oneself to something – a person, project, cause or standard – it is pertinent to ask what reasons there are to make the commitment, and whether they are good ones. The reasons will obviously *not* be good ones if they presuppose the commitment in question. But, once the commitment is made, one acquires a new set of reasons that are rooted in the commitment itself. To commit oneself to a monogamous relationship, for example, is to acquire reasons for sexual fidelity that one did not have before, reasons that are intended to trump the vicissitudes of sexual desire. So it is with commitment to moral standards. The moral reasons one acquires when one subscribes to moral standards are neither equivalent nor reducible to the non-moral reasons that underpin one's subscription.

It would be remiss of me to conclude without thanking Tillson for his generous praise of the book in his opening and closing paragraphs, and without reiterating my gratitude to him, Aldridge and de Ruyter for their challenging critiques of my theory.

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