

'INDOCTRINATION'*

The word 'indoctrination' has strong pejorative force, and its use belongs most naturally to the realm of polemics. In a reasoned treatment of religious education one would like for that reason to avoid it. Nevertheless, it does draw attention to a genuine problem, which needs to be faced. The charge is often made that religious education involves 'indoctrination', and that this is enough to condemn it. In reply it is often argued that religious education need not and should not involve 'indoctrination'. Can we do anything to clarify this controversy?

It is, as we have remarked, the critic of religious education who tends to introduce the word into the discussion. For him it means the inculcation of (especially religious) doctrines in a manner that is objectionable. The problem for him is to specify more precisely *what* it is that he feels to be objectionable. In the literature attempts have been made to locate this in (1) a certain *method* of teaching; (2) a certain *content* of teaching; (3) a certain *aim* in teaching.

Method

In this sense A indoctrinates B in respect of *p* (a belief) if A brings it about that B believes *p* otherwise than by enabling B to understand the reasons for *p*. Indoctrination in this sense is unavoidable. Every teacher, at every stage in the educational

* From *The Fourth R, the Durham Report on Religious Education* (London: SPCK, 1970), pp. 353-8.

process, with every subject, has to some extent to 'indoctrinate' his pupils. No one can always produce sufficient reasons for every statement he gets others to believe - (1) because they cannot always understand the reasons; (2) because he does not always know the reasons; he himself accepts a good deal on authority; (3) because life is too short. As Willis Moore writes,

What I propose . . . is that we frankly admit that learning necessarily begins with an authoritative and indoctrinative situation, and that for lack of time, native capacity or the requisite training to think everything out for oneself, learning even for the rationally mature individual must continue to include an ingredient of the unreasoned, the merely accepted. The extent to which every one of us must depend, and wisely so, on the authoritative pronouncements of those who are more expert than are we in most of the problems we face is evidence enough of the truth of this contention. It would seem to be more in accord with reality to consider the 'indoctrination' and the 'education' of the earlier liberal educators to be the polar extremes of a continuum of teaching method along which actual teaching may move in keeping with the requirements of the situation. With infants in nearly everything and with mature, reasoning adults in very little, the teacher will use indoctrinating procedures. Between the two extremes the proper mixture of the one method with the other is appropriately determined by the degree of rational capability of the learner with regard to the subject matter before him and the degree of urgency of the situation.¹

Since it is impossible to dispense with indoctrination conceived merely as a method, the critic of indoctrination (who wishes the word, so far as possible, to have pejorative force in all contexts) proceeds to introduce some limitation as to *content*.

Content

In this sense A indoctrinates B in respect of *p* if A brings it about that B believes *p* otherwise than by enabling B to understand the reasons for *p*; *where p is a debatable or controversial statement*. The objection now is to 'teaching of reasonably disputatious doctrines as if they were known facts'.² Flew argues that the right way to meet Moore's point is by introducing into the concept of indoctrination some appropriate essential references to content;

or, as the case may be, by recognizing that these are already there . . . The notion must be limited first to the presentation of debatable issues; and then further perhaps to the would-be factual, as opposed to the purely normative. Once some such limitation, or limitations, have been made it ceases to be necessary to allow that any indoctrination at all is 'inevitable'.

Flew's inclination to exclude 'the purely normative' is presumably due to his recognising the force of the argument that some 'norms' at least must be accepted by the child before he is capable of understanding the reasons for them. Flew's argument assumes (1) that it is possible to delimit the class of 'controversial' or 'debatable' would-be actual beliefs and (2) that it is never necessary to use 'indoctrinatory procedures' (as set out in 'Method' above) in respect of them. With respect to (1) how is this requirement to be satisfied? We might say (a) that a belief *p* is 'controversial' if it is possible for a reasonable man to believe not-*p*. This would seem to be much too wide. There must be very few serious opinions which have not, at some time or other, somewhere or other, been held by reasonable men. We might amend this to (b) '... if there are today reasonable and reasonably well-informed men who believe not-*p*'. This might do and should not be too difficult to apply. Flew might think it still too wide, and there are indications that he is looking for a different sort of distinction. 'For surely, we cannot out of hand dismiss basic differences of *logical status* [my italics] in the content of what

is taught as irrelevant to the question of how, if at all, these different sorts of thing ought to be taught.' This suggests that, perhaps, for example, historical questions are not, in his sense, 'debatable', although they do provoke a great deal of debate, while religious or 'metaphysical' questions are. So perhaps we might try, instead of (b), (c) '... if it belongs to a class of beliefs whose logical status renders them (in some way to be elucidated) essentially controversial'. It is not at all clear that one can, in the way proposed, draw a clear line between, for example, history and metaphysics, and Flew has not done it for us, but I propose to try out both definitions (b) and (c) in relation to (2) – whether one can altogether avoid 'indoctrinatory procedures' in respect of them.

Willis Moore in his article seeks to distinguish between 'education' and 'indoctrination'. He makes the illuminating point that:

The supporting philosophies of man whence flow these two methods of teaching provide the basic distinction we seek. The liberal believes in a latent rationality in every normal infant, a capacity for reasoned decision-making that, under careful cultivation and through practice, can be enhanced and developed. The authoritarian holds that the vast majority of mankind remain indefinitely juvenile in their responses, hence indefinitely in need of restrictive guidance and management in all important areas of behaviour. *Most liberals feel, however, that man is innately either biased in favour of the good and the right or, at worst, neutral with respect to them* [my italics]. The authoritarian suspects man of a bias in favour of the evil and wrong or that he is possessed of an original sin from which only a miracle can save him. The difference between the two philosophies and consequent methods of teaching should be seen not as the absolute white versus black of the older liberalism but as one of degree only, yet a very significant degree.

There can be no doubt, I think, that this liberal 'philosophy' (as Moore significantly terms it) is 'controversial' according to

both definitions (b) and (c). There are reasonable men who do not accept it and it has a 'metaphysical' character. It is, or is part of, a 'philosophy of life'.

The first thing to notice, then, is that the entire *liberal approach to education* (let alone the particular methods its protagonists choose to employ) depends on a 'controversial' or 'debatable' position. So equally does the authoritarian approach. But the relevant question for our present purpose is 'Can or should the liberal refrain altogether from using "indoctrinatory procedures" in conveying this liberal attitude to his pupils?' Must he refrain from doing anything, whether by word or example, to bring it about that a child believes that other children in the school are 'innately biased in favour of the good', without at the same time providing the child with evidence sufficient to convince a reasonable man of the truth of this controversial proposition? If Johnny is being consistently beastly to Tommy and Tommy is tempted to condemn Johnny out of hand, must the teacher avoid saying anything like 'Johnny is really good at heart' because he cannot there and then convince Tommy by rational means of the truth of this apparently implausible and certainly disputable assertion? It seems to me perfectly clear that the liberal teacher in a liberal school will do everything in his power to communicate by persuasion, by his own personal example and by choice of other exemplars, indeed by the whole ethos of the school, this liberal attitude. He will, of course, endeavour, as soon as it is possible and so far as it is possible, to enable the child to see for himself how and why men are basically good, *etc.*, but unless he has devised an environment in which 'actions speak louder than words' he is going to find this difficult or impossible. The liberal is likely also to be a believer in democracy, and he will presumably presuppose in his ordering of the school, and teach by word and example, *etc.*, those fundamental beliefs about human beings (their rationality, their need to participate in decisions affecting themselves) upon which democratic institutions rest, beliefs which are certainly 'controversial' and which he can only adequately justify at a comparatively late stage in the educational process.

Flew resists this conclusion:

Even if it were the case – and I do not myself admit that even this is proved – that democratic institutions somehow presuppose the general acceptance of some similarly disputatious would-be factual beliefs, it still would not follow that it is in the interests of such deservedly cherished institutions either necessary or prudent to indoctrinate our children with these congenial beliefs.

We might consistently and properly insist, with Dewey and his followers, that 'The means is constitutive with respect to the end: authoritarian methods tend to create authoritarian products . . .'

It seems to me that Flew is here confronted by a dilemma. He can *either* refuse to adopt *any* 'indoctrinatory procedures', like the more extreme liberals who, as Moore puts it, 'took the bull by the horns by advocating a nearly total permissiveness in the earliest learning situations, thus eliminating indoctrination in teaching by doing away with teaching'; *or* deliberately attempt by manipulating the child's environment in different ways to induce in him attitudes and beliefs favourable to democracy. If he adopts the former policy, it is highly improbable that he will succeed in producing the sort of democratic personality he wishes; if the latter, he is engaged in indoctrination as he has defined it.

It is at this point that I might usefully turn to the definition of indoctrination in terms of *aims*, as well as *method* and *content*.

Aims

The suggestion now is that 'A indoctrinates B in respect of *p*, if he brings it about or seeks to bring it about that B believes *p* in such a way that he is unable subsequently to believe not-*p*.' In order not to convict of indoctrination the teacher who produces in his pupils an unalterable conviction that $2 + 2 = 4$, we should perhaps add 'even if presented with sufficient

reasons for believing not-*p*'. In other words, to indoctrinate with respect to *p* is to produce an entirely closed mind with respect to *p*. Something of this sort is probably what many people have in mind when they object to 'indoctrination'. 'Indoctrination' of this extreme kind is, alas, not unknown in religious education, but the most conspicuous contemporary examples are to be found among fanatical nationalists or communists. We could, of course, regard as 'indoctrination' an educational process whose aims are less extreme than this, not to make it impossible, but merely more or less difficult for the individual to change his mind if given good reason; which aims to give him a permanent *bias* in a particular direction.

If we do relax the definition in this way, can we still condemn 'indoctrination' unreservedly? This may well depend on where we find ourselves along the liberal-authoritarian axis. The liberal aims at enabling the individual to realise his potentialities as a rational, autonomous adult. He will use indoctrinatory procedures as little as he can and he will regard his teaching as successful to the extent that his pupil comes to think entirely for himself. He is confident that, when this happens, his pupil will be as well equipped as anyone else to make wise decisions.

An educator will tend to move away from the liberal towards the authoritarian pole of the axis to the extent that he doubts the possibility or the desirability of the liberal's aim. 'The authoritarian,' says Moore, 'holds that the vast majority of mankind remain indefinitely juvenile in their responses, hence indefinitely in need of restrictive guidance and management in all important areas of behaviour.' In other words, the authoritarian doubts whether people who think for themselves will necessarily think for the best. The classical exponent of the extreme form of this position is Plato, whose philosopher-kings would select those capable of 'education' and 'indoctrinate' the rest. It can safely be said that none of our own contemporary educators would take such an extreme position seriously. A more powerful challenge to the extreme liberal view is that of Burke, when he recommends adherence

to 'prejudice with the reason involved', rather than relying simply on 'the naked reason', because

prejudice with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection that will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.³

Burke's argument may be developed as follows.

1. The liberal ideal of the wholly autonomous rational individual subjecting all his beliefs to criticism and retaining only those that survive the test cannot be realised. Every individual grows to maturity in a cultural tradition and cannot produce a rational 'philosophy' of his own from scratch.

2. It is not only false but dangerous for the individual to *think* he is capable of doing this. Society depends for its proper functioning upon a multiplicity of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes, and will suffer to an indefinite extent if the individual feels that these have no claim upon him except in so far as he can independently validate them.

3. To the extent that these shared beliefs, *etc.*, are eroded by 'rational' criticism, their place in the life of the individual and society will be taken not by beliefs, values, and attitudes that are (for the first time) based on good reasons, but by ideas that are largely the product of current fashions. Educators who scrupulously refrain from introducing any bias into the educational process will not thereby ensure that their pupils escape bias, only that the bias is imparted by other agencies.

In the light of this discussion it would appear that neither the extreme liberal nor the extreme authoritarian thesis is at all plausible and that the sensible educator will take up some sort of intermediate position. He will not use 'indoctrinatory procedures' more than is necessary (and he will always

respect the personality of the pupil), but he will not feel guilty about using them when they *are* necessary. He will not expect or intend to produce an educated adult who has no beliefs, values or attitudes which he cannot rationally defend against all comers and who is incapable of settled convictions, deep-seated virtues or profound loyalties. But neither will he treat his pupils in such a way as to leave them with closed minds and restricted sympathies. The process of being educated is like learning to build a house by actually building one and then having to live in the house one has built. It is a process in which the individual inevitably requires help. The extreme authoritarian helps by building the house himself, according to what he believes to be the best plan, and making the novice live in it. He designs it in such a way as to make it as difficult as possible for the novice to alter it. The extreme liberal leaves the novice to find his own materials and devise his own plan, for fear of exercising improper influence. The most he will do is provide strictly technical information if asked. The sensible educator helps the novice to build the best house he can (in the light of accumulated experience). He strikes a balance between the need to produce a good house and the desirability of letting the novice make his own choices; but he is careful that the house is designed in such a way that it can subsequently be altered and improved as the owner, no longer a novice, sees fit.

This analogy is simply an elaboration of Aristotle's remark that 'men become lyre-players by playing the lyre, house-builders by building houses and just men by performing just actions'.⁴ Aristotle saw the need for the individual to grow into a desirable pattern of intellectual and moral dispositions whose rational basis he learns as he develops, but could not learn unless the underlying dispositions were already there. Aristotle, no doubt, makes too little provision for originality. This defect is made good by Gilbert Murray's comment on Euripides: 'Every man who possesses real vitality can be seen as the resultant of two forces. He is first the child of a particular . . . tradition. He is secondly, in one degree or another, a rebel against that tradition. And the best traditions

make the best rebels.'⁵ The liberal wants to make sure that we produce rebels; the authoritarian that we do not produce rebels. The sensible educator is concerned to produce good rebels.