

## The problem of indoctrination, with a focus on moral education

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### Abstract

Indoctrination is a large and important issue in (not only moral) education. It is considered to be one of the capital pedagogical faults. However, the question is, what does it mean to indoctrinate? Educators from the liberal camp of the educational spectrum have had the tendency to criticize the traditional approach as “indoctrinational.” On the other hand, proponents of the traditional approach object that if indoctrination were defined properly then even the liberal approach would not be immune. This raises two fundamental questions that will be the subject of this study: a) what exactly does it mean to indoctrinate? b) is education without indoctrination even possible?

**Keywords:** education, indoctrination, liberal approach, traditional approach, rationality

### Introduction

The postwar crisis of values gave birth to a new approach to moral education in Western countries in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The subsequent generation openly distanced themselves from the “morals” of their parents. In addition to freedom of expression, emancipation of human rights and an emphasis on autonomy, the prevailing sentiment of the so-called flower children was resistance towards the “stale” culture which priggishly preached, commissioned, and taught. The culture of their fathers—because of the horrors of war that were still fresh in their memories—had lost its moral legitimacy and became more of a source of shame than something to pass along pedagogically. From such a background it was not surprising, therefore, that in the 1950s and 60s there arose a method which had an emphasis on discussion, openness, engagement, no guidelines, and so on. The goal of the method was neither the formation nor transmission of any kind of specific “bag of virtues”, in the words of Lawrence Kohlberg, or any other moral material. It was said that such an approach would be a form of indoctrination, the cardinal defect of “old” or “traditional” education (Hunter, 2000, p. 219). Teachers and educators of this new type considered their pedagogical task to help students to think independently and critically, based on the psychological assumption that if individuals themselves identified their own values, the internalization of those values would be easier and more durable than if they were mediated by an adult. Students were thus guided to discover, classify and develop their own values, that is, to construct their own moral universe. The key methodological motifs of the new approach are the *value clarification* method, the *decision-making* method and the *critical thinking* method. Because all these motifs together have the common feature of a personalistic, non-directive or client-oriented approach to the individual, they are often labeled as *liberal*. There were many proponents and advocates, but some of the most notable should be named: Carl Rogers, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Sidney B. Simon, Louis Rath and Merrill Harmin.

Since the key problem which the liberal approach wanted to avoid was indoctrination, I want to give it special attention. It is indeed a large and important issue in (not only moral) education. Who would want to be accused of the capital pedagogical sin of indoctrination? However, some thinkers and educators have recently brought forward an interesting counter-criticism, objecting that if indoctrination was defined properly then even the liberal approach would not be immune. This raises two fundamental questions that will be the subject of this

study: a) what exactly does it mean to indoctrinate? b) is education without indoctrination even possible?

### **The definition of indoctrination**

There have been many attempts to define indoctrination, as we shall see. It seems to me that one of the most thorough and exhaustive analysis of the phenomenon is provided by Elmer J. Thiessen in his book *Teaching for Commitment*. Thiessen responds to the terminological chaos surrounding the word. His approach is unique in that he does not present any kind of abstract conceptual analysis of the term, but pays careful attention to everyone who has treated the concept of indoctrination in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, synthesizing the partial objections into a coherent form, so that it is clear what exactly makes indoctrination, indoctrination. He then applies those facts to specific educational approaches, both traditional and liberal.<sup>1</sup>

Thiessen identifies four or five criteria or areas in which indoctrination can occur (Thiessen, 1993, p. 59ff): i) content, ii) method(s), iii) intention, iv) effects, v) some educational theorists would also add institutional as a criterion, in the sense that some educational institutions are, or necessarily must be, *apriori*, indoctrinational because of the nature of what they are.

#### *i) Content*

In the first place, indoctrination is associated with a certain kind of content. Certain doctrines or systems of doctrine form a specific worldview or ideology. Terms like doctrine and ideology have their own pejorative connotations, but in the twilight of modernity (the second half of the twentieth century) they were mainly connected with politics and religion. The only discourse considered to be free of any doctrine was scientific discourse, because it was supposedly based only on pure facts, rationality, rigorous logic and objective experience (Kazepides, 1987; Barrow & Woods, 1988; Hirst, 1974). When the word *doctrine* was used it was always understood to mean “unscientific”, (and thus) “erroneous”, “irrational”, “ideological”, “dogmatic”, etc. This exclusive status of science has today, of course, been lost. The current scientific community, for the most part, no longer holds the romantic ideal of “scientific quality”, because it is aware that the distance between the knower and the object known is not as unproblematic as modernity thought. Every scientist has a certain pre-understanding, a set of doctrines, theories and principles, which are non-negotiable yet which determine the human understanding of reality. Nevertheless, the discussion about indoctrination has its roots in the height of the period of modernity, and its spirit lives on. If you ask a modern romantic (liberal scientific educator) which doctrines (content) trigger indoctrination, here is a summary:

*Faulty doctrines.* Simply wrong, not based on the facts. Wilson calls these doctrines “irrational” (Wilson, 1972, p. 103).

*Unsupported or insufficiently substantiated doctrines.* What underpins doctrines, is evidence. An unsupported doctrine is questionable, dubious, uncertain, vague, or—as Wilson says—lacking “publicly accepted evidence” (Wilson, 1964, p. 28).

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<sup>1</sup> The practicality and functionality of Thiessen’s methodological approach is evident in the kind of language he uses in the Introduction to illustrate his goal: If a town decree says that no “means of transport” are allowed in the park and someone asks whether a skateboard is a means of transport, it isn’t necessary to formulate a deep and complex definition of what is and is not a “means of transport”, but just to deal with the question directly, that is, to ask whether we want to allow skateboarding in the park or not (cf. Thiessen, 1993, p. 31).

*Doctrines which cannot be confirmed or refuted.* The anti-indoctrinational ideal of twentieth century liberal educational theorists has a direct connection with the positivist principle, verification-falsification. It says that any statement or doctrine that cannot be confirmed by the scientific method is, de facto, insignificant, because there is no existing criterion by which it is possible to judge its truthfulness or falsity. Moral, aesthetic and religious statements thus fall into this category, because they are not scientifically evaluable. Anyone who would teach them would inevitably indoctrinate. There is a consensus among the liberals on this subject (Kazepides, 1987; Flew, 1972a; Snook, 1972; White, 1972; Gregory & Woods, 1972).

*Ideological doctrines.* Flew, in one of his arguments, recognizes that not every belief that people hold must necessarily represent a doctrine which eventually becomes the subject of indoctrination. If human conviction is to “degenerate” into doctrine, it must be “tied to something broad and ideological”, says Flew (Flew, 1972a, p. 71). He doesn’t give any concrete examples, but I think that he has in mind that doctrines, as opposed to partial statements or convictions, are elements of some universally-explanatory meta-narrative or overall philosophy of life.

*Engaging doctrines.* It bothers the resisters of doctrine that their acceptance “is no mere academic matter – there is commitment to act in particular ways, to profess and act out a particular value and way of life” (Gregory & Woods, 1972, p. 166). Wilson cautions that political and moral doctrines have tendency to be “closer to the heart of an individual than other beliefs” (Wilson, 1964, p. 27). It’s no wonder that “doctrines have a primarily prescriptive function”, states Kazepides, i.e., they are engaging, and cause people to live according to them (Kazepides, 1987, p. 35).

*Doctrines propagated with enthusiasm.* Resisters of doctrine are further bothered that those on whom some doctrine “falls”, have a tendency to hold onto that doctrine and propagate it with all their might and enthusiasm (Scruton et al., 1985, p. 24). Gregory and Woods clarify that this is because holders of doctrines consider them to be of momentous concern for mankind, and that is why it further leads them to “a strong urge to convince others, the waverers, the unbelievers, of their essential truth” (Gregory & Woods, 1972, p. 168). If all the preceding characteristics of doctrine describe the status of doctrines, or sometimes what the doctrines cause (see the previous paragraph), this one tries to express how they are handled by those who hold them.

*Institutionally supported doctrines.* This final characteristic is related to the previous one. Because doctrines are perceived as fundamentally important, they have a tendency to become institutionalized. Some communities, organizations, or institutions can grab hold of them, protect them, care for them, and proclaim them. Kazepides says that doctrines necessarily “presuppose the existence of authorities or institutions which have the power to uphold them when they are challenged by critics, heretics, or the faithless, and punish the enemies” (Kazepides, 1987, p. 235). In this sense, Flew and Gregory and Woods often cite the Roman Catholic Church or the Communist Party as examples of contexts from which this undesirable doctrinality could come (Flew, 1972a, pp. 75–76; Flew, 1972b, pp. 106, 109; Gregory & Woods, p. 1972).

Criticism of the content criteria is massive. Thiessen first points to the fact that there is no definition for the concept of doctrine. The critics of doctrines evidently regard the whole question of doctrinality as dubious and suspicious, but never offer any definition of what exactly a doctrine is

All the other critical responses point to one common denominator—the problem of self-referencing. It is a simple, but not trivial criterion for judging the meaningfulness of thought systems—any statement, system of statements, or methodological principle that claims to be true must withstand the self-referential test; that is, it must apply even when it refers to itself. When someone makes a statement like “I can’t speak a word of English”, it is obviously false because the content denies the message. It’s the same with the central doctrine of the positivist concept to which the liberal thinkers refer. It claims that *only what is empirically verifiable, is true*. The problem with the statement is that it is not empirically verifiable. It suffers from the self-referential inconsistency. The same can be seen in all the above-mentioned criteria of content—liberals have forgotten to apply them to themselves. What version of therapeutic education does not hold its own (content) doctrines about people, the world, truth, the meaning of being, morality, etc.? Do not liberal thinkers regard their liberal values as meaningful, or morally important? Don’t they espouse them with unflagging enthusiasm? Aren’t they committed to (engaged in) their cause? Don’t they even have institutions behind them which make sure the liberal model is spread, promoted and taught? Isn’t the liberal concept of morality part of a broader worldview as well as political regime? Could we not, after all, speak of liberal ideology—and not only in the educational sense?

One example for everyone. Liberals believe that indoctrination occurs when doctrines are taught which do not have the attribute of general consensus or public agreement. The question arises—do liberal doctrines have that consensus? What do “general” and “public” mean in this context? One hundred percent agreement by the public? Or only by the experts? Either way liberals evidently don’t have it and thus they indoctrinate. The thief is shouting “Catch the thief!” This is the point of the whole argument on the criteria of content. Liberal therapeutic education maintains its specific (provincial and period) doctrines (of content) just as every other philosophy of education does, but would like to be protected by science, universality or the public so it can claim that it is the only one that is right, the only one that educates while all the others indoctrinate.

To avoid any misunderstanding, that conclusion does not imply that in the end everyone indoctrinates, nor vice versa, that indoctrination doesn’t exist. I am merely stating that the liberal definition of the criteria of content is so vague that it also applies to the liberals themselves. Everyone who teaches, conveys doctrines. And those doctrines can be true or false. The black-and-white vision of the liberal theorists of education—true content from us, false from them, *ergo* proper education with us, indoctrination with them—is untenable. And to make it even more difficult for liberal educators, we will see in the following chapter that it is possible to impart completely truthful content while indoctrinating, because pedagogical intent, aims, strategies, and other factors also come into play. In other words, it is possible to indoctrinate to the truth, but also to the opposite: it is possible, with very good and honest didactics, to lead someone into error.

#### *ii) Methodology*

Every educator intuitively knows that in education, the method by which content is conveyed is just as important as the content itself. Thus, it’s not only *what* is taught, but *how* it is taught. Methods can be good or bad. It is therefore necessary to pose the question: What makes a method bad, or in our case, indoctrinating? Here are some characteristics:

*Lack of evidence.* This problem can have at least four different nuances. 1) Methods which simply do not provide enough reason, proof or arguments for the material being taught. Hull says, “reasons are concealed and reason is bypassed” (Hull, 1984, p. 178). 2) Methods which place the question *what* over the question *how*. To this Green adds that “when, in teaching, we are concerned simply to lead another person to a correct answer, but are not correspondingly concerned that they arrive at the answer on the basis of good reasons, then

we are indoctrinating” (Green, 1972, p. 37). 3) Methods based on “mindless drill, recitation and rote memorization” (Passmore, 1967, p. 193). 4) Methods which force to persuade individuals “by force of the indoctrinator’s personality, by emotional appeal, or by use of a variety of rhetorical devices”, rather than by reasons, evidence, and proof (Benson, 1977, p. 336).

*Misuse of evidence.* Misuse can occur in several ways: 1) Direct falsification, fraud. 2) Rationalization of the evidence in the sense that what is inconclusive is presented as if it were conclusive (Wilson, 1972, pp. 19, 21). 3) Manipulation of reasons in order to confirm the given conclusion. Rationality here does not serve truth, but self-confirms or defends one’s own position (Thiessen, 1993, p. 89). 4) “A one-sided or biased presentation of a debatable issue”, and sometimes “suppression of counter-evidence” (Moore, 1972, p. 93) 5) Evidence can be misused in controversial issues, but also in common ones. Crittenden cautions that indoctrination occurs whenever “the criteria of inquiry” are violated (Crittenden, 1972, p. 146). 6) Flew states that indoctrination also occurs when the “logical status” of the doctrines being taught is violated, that is, when beliefs which are not true, or at least are not known to be true, are taught as if they are true (Flew, 1972a, pp. 75–76).

*Abuse of the teacher-student relationship.* A) The authoritarian approach. Teachers and instructors are, on principle, in the position of authority, but if they misuse that authority it is authoritarianism, which is unacceptable and inevitably implies indoctrination (Flew, 1972a, pp. 47–48). B) Threat to student autonomy. This directly relates to the previous problem. The authoritarian teacher suppresses the students’ freedom. Autonomy is, like authority, a matter of degree. To what degree should autonomy be allowed without the teacher falling into indoctrination? This is difficult to define on a general level, but there is a consensus that a limit does exist, beyond which it’s possible to say that a teacher fails to respect the individual’s freedom, and thus indoctrinates (Peters, 1973, p. 155). C) Dogmatic approach. If a teacher promotes “the misleading impression that  $p$  is true because [he] says it is”, he indoctrinates, notes Benson (Benson, 1977, pp. 336–337). And Crittenden adds that a dogmatic approach does not allow the learner “to examine voluntarily, to raise questions and objections and so on” (Crittenden, 1972, p. 139). D) Rewards and punishments. Green believes that the use of rewards and punishments may cause students “to learn to respond correctly or without hesitation”, but not on the basis of evidence but in expectation of reward or punishment (Green, 1972, p. 35).

*Neglect of intellectual virtues.* This is Aristotle’s term to express the kind of qualities needed in the search for truth. Such intellectual qualities include the desire for evidence, objectivity, consistency of thought and integrity, courage to rethink one’s view, argumentational rigor, etc. Spiecker (1987) and Passmore (1967), as well as many others, consider the development of these virtues in children to be a necessary prerequisite to critical thinking. On the other hand, methods which don’t favor these are considered to be indoctrinational (Moore, 1972, p. 98).

*Non-rationality.* All the methods mentioned above have one feature in common: “inculcating beliefs by the use of non-rational methods” (Spiecker, 1987, p. 262). The methods are non-rational in that they (summarizing everything preceding): either manipulate the material by not securing proper evidence, or manipulate the students so they don’t acquire knowledge independently, freely, and rationally, but on the basis of authority, emotions or rewards and punishments.

It appears that the liberal theoreticians of education have succeeded, with the help of methodological criteria, in defining the border between indoctrinating and non-indoctrinating approaches. But there are some serious and interconnected problems which call for closer scrutiny. First, let's look at the basic requirement of all methodological approaches; rationality. Almost still in the spirit of Enlightenment reductionism, children should be led only by rational methods so themselves become rational, critically thinking, independent persons who are capable of evaluating evidence, distinguishing fact from opinion, etc. I don't want to get bogged down in the complexities of epistemological issues regarding the possibilities of human reason, but I must raise one question. How are children to acquire these rational skills and qualities? The problem—for liberal theoreticians—is that this kind of acquisition doesn't necessarily happen on a rational level, especially in the initial stages of human life. When children are born they find themselves in a completely non-autonomous and authoritative situation. Parents, teachers, and society have determined the cultural, moral, and intellectual heritage into which children are placed. Children are simply in no position to vote. Values, patterns, models, etc. are taken on primarily by habit, imitation, and identification, which are all non-rational processes. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we must first distinguish between the *subject* of habits (imitation and identification), and the *mechanism* of these processes. The subject, that which is imitated, can be completely understandable and rational, but the mechanism of imitation is a process that does not necessarily include a rational element. Children learn to be rational by imitating rational examples, even though the process of imitation is not a rational one. The foundation of rationality is thus, paradoxically, not formed in a rational way. A girl seeing her mother cooking and wanting her own kitchen has nothing to do with reason. The way parents help their children to clean their teeth is not with evidence and rational arguments (they come later, when the child is able to understand them), but with a cute little toothbrush. We don't allow a discussion—to liberal theoreticians these smacks of authoritarianism—but simply, teeth must be cleaned, toys must not be broken, and fingers must not be sucked. They will understand why, later.

It is only after a child's initiation into a specific tradition that the didactic stage of questioning or critical evaluation of that tradition can come. From the educational standpoint, however, the crucial thing is what happens in the critical period when the child is subordinate to authority. Critics might argue here that this is well-known, and that the above discussion on indoctrination does not concern the early stage of education. But that is a mistake—if indoctrination happens in situations of confrontation with authority, then it is precisely in the early phase that it is essential to distinguish acceptable (educational) methods from unacceptable (indoctrinational) methods. And it is here that we can see the problem with the liberal definition—if “acceptable” for a method means purely rational, then every initiation is necessarily indoctrination. Once again, the liberal definition fails the self-reference test. The point of the argument, though, is that it is a mistake to call educational initiation, indoctrination. This is implied by the liberal definition, but that only shows that the definition is wrong.

### *iii) Intention or goals*

It has already been said that the primary intent, or final goal, of therapeutic education is *autonomy*. The teacher or instructor who “deliberately intends to hinder the growth of a student towards autonomy, indoctrinates”, says Hare (Hare, 1964, p. 78). McLaughlin similarly finds that indoctrination “constitutes an attempt to restrict in a substantial way the child's eventual ability to function autonomously” (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 78). For the sake of order, I will remind the reader of the pillars of the liberal therapeutic ideal of autonomy:

1. *Freedom*. An autonomous individual is free, and free (in this context) usually means “the absence of constraints or restraints relevant to what we do or might want to do” (Dearden, 1975, p. 450).
2. *Independence*. Autonomous individuals have their own opinion and behave according to it. “They accept or make rules for themselves. They are capable of forming their own independent judgements. Their thoughts and actions are not governed by other people, by tradition, by authority, or by psychological problems” (Thiessen, 1993, p. 118).
3. *Self-control*. Autonomous individuals are not “swamped” by their own passions or needs. They are able to arrange and adjust their desires, ideals and goals corresponding to “a hierarchical structure of some life plan” (Thiessen, 1993, p. 118).
4. *Rational reflection*. Autonomous individuals contemplate and consciously think about what they do and who they believe. They subjugate their actions and convictions to reflection and criticisms. They are endowed with the sufficient and necessary knowledge to make intelligent decisions.
5. *Competence*. Autonomous individuals are able to implement the plans and projects they have made. They possess volition, determination, and every other “executive virtue” necessary for autonomous behavior (Thiessen, 1993, p. 119).
6. *Final note*: There is a consensus among educators that a person is not born autonomous. However, children have both the right and the natural tendency to develop their capacity for autonomy. If parents or educators don’t create adequate space for the development of autonomy, it is an educational failure which often qualifies as neglect or indoctrination (Haworth, 1986, p. 127).

The problem with the autonomy criteria is the absence of a measure of degree or extent. To what extent should individuals be free, independent, rational, and competent, to be identified as autonomous? Liberal theoreticians of education usually quietly assume an idealized concept of full autonomy, completely or perfectly (as in the previous cases, where they presupposed the ideal ability of the individual to recognize and work with evidence). Only rarely do we find authors who are willing to deal with this problem. They admit that absolute autonomy is unthinkable, and suggest terms like “autonomy to a relative extent”, or “autonomy in an important respect”, or “weak autonomy” (Dearden, 1975, p. 458; Haydon, 1983, p. 220). None of these formulations solve the problem, they only beg the question—exactly to what extent, in what respect, how “weak” should the desired autonomy be?

In contrast, Thiessen offers the concept of “normal autonomy”, which recognizes that every component of autonomy (freedom, independence, rationality, and competence) is fundamentally limited. Children a) are not born independent, b) are always formed (conditioned) by a specific culture, c) never have an exhaustive amount of information for making completely autonomous decisions, d) never have the ideal rationality necessary for evaluating the information. In addition, says Thiessen, it seems that “human nature desires both dependency and autonomy, both community and individuality”, “we want both to be loved, to belong, to be dependent on a group and to be autonomous, independent” (Thiessen, 1993, pp. 135, 141). In other words—the freedom of an individual is never free from the freedom of the whole. The true meaning of the concept of socialization lies in the search for balance between the ideal of autonomy and the community, between dependence and independence.

#### *iv) Consequences or effects of indoctrination*

Education is indoctrinational if it results in closed-mindedness on the part of the student, the liberally-oriented theoreticians of education agree (Hare 1964, p. 8; Scruton et al. 1985, p. 25). Further—indoctrination occurs as the result of an educator’s failure to cultivate a “critical

openness” (Hare, 1979, p. 41). If the desired result of education is “critical openness of the mind”, what does that term mean? Thiessen, with reference to O’Leary, distinguishes several conditions which must be met in order to fulfill this ideal:

*Neutrality.* If a person with a closed mind is defined as one who “holds their beliefs as settled” and at the same time “committing” (O’Leary, 1979, p. 295), then critical openness, on the contrary, represents a neutral position towards any subject or doctrine. Gardner explains the concept by saying that being open-minded about alternatives means “not thinking these alternatives to be true or false” (Gardner, 1988, p. 92).

*Epistemic.* It has been said that indoctrinated individuals are those who hold their beliefs without regard to the evidence (Green, 1972). Critical openness, on the other hand, takes evidence into account. Green and Snook distinguish four epistemic aspects of working with evidence. A) Critically open individuals can give evidence for their beliefs. B) They can take into account opposing evidence. C) They are prepared to actively search out opposing evidence and weaknesses in their own system of beliefs. D) Individuals with open minds are willing to revise and reassess their beliefs in light of new evidence and arguments (Green, 1972, p. 56).

*Truthfulness.* Critical openness is explicitly excluded from the concept of any kind of exclusivity, definitive or absolute truth (Peschkin, 1986; Hare, 1979). It is just this claim to absolute truth which, according to the liberal thinkers, is a sign of narrow-mindedness or closed-mindedness.

*Methodological.* Critically open individuals methodically reflect on and doubt their beliefs. In this context, Hare cites Bertrand Russell, who said, “When you come to a point of view, maintain it with doubt. This doubt is precious because it suggests an open mind” (Hare, 1979, p. 41). Critical openness is also associated with strict objectivity, impartiality and tolerance towards the ideas of others (Rokeach, 1960, pp. 4–5).

Criticism of the consequential criteria is, in principle, the same as for all the preceding criteria. It is an idealized concept which doesn’t take into account the limits of human nature or the limits of the educational situation as such. In other words, none of the above-mentioned conditions is actually feasible. Let’s take the four given conditions, out of order. 1) There is no such thing as absolute neutrality. Everyone—including liberally-oriented educators—holds onto some beliefs that they consider to be “certain”, “complete” or “closed”, and they base their actions on them. Human thought necessarily springs from certain principles, premises, or assumptions which we consider to be “fundamental”, that is, without need for any further evidence (for example, that cowardice is low, or that a triangle has three sides). 2) No one has complete epistemic certainty in all their beliefs. Not all the evidence is available to us, we cannot think through all the opposing evidence, and often don’t even know how to evaluate the evidence. Nevertheless, we can make everyday moral judgments (stealing is bad). No matter how much liberal thinkers don’t allow the idea of any kind of absolute truth, that very claim of truthfulness is implicitly assumed in their arguments. If, in their opinion, indoctrinated individuals believe things which are “dubious” or “controversial”, then individuals with open minds must be those who believe only what is *undoubtedly* and *undeniably* true. So are the liberal thinkers absolutely certain that no absolute truth exists? Is their claim that there is no truth, true? If yes, then once again we have run into self-referential inconsistency. 4) Is it possible to methodologically doubt everything about everything? Do the liberal teachers really doubt everything, or only everything except their liberal doctrines?



In opposition to the idealized concept of critical openness, its opponents again construct the concept of “normally critical openness.” That—as the above-mentioned criticism indicates—envisions limitation(s), as much on the possibilities of human nature as on the nature of each educational situation. Criticality makes no sense by itself or for itself, but always supposes there is *something* to criticize. The “what” represents the rich cultural material the child acquires through education. There is no discussion about language, values, traditions, or habits, because the as-yet undeveloped potential of the child doesn’t allow it. Children are born uncritical, dependent, conditioned, and if they are to acquire a healthy, that is, a normal degree, of criticality, they must first gain the fundamentals which are not subject to criticism. Each kind of education mediates this to its children. And that is the final argument regarding the criteria of consequences—the critical openness of the learner’s mind is possible and desirable, but a) never to the idealized extent, i.e., absolutely, b) every education which strives for the cultivation of criticality—even a liberal one—necessarily has “uncritical” fundamental doctrines which are transmitted through education.

### **Concluding observations**

What follows from this discussion? That every education is indoctrinational? As has already been said, it depends on how the concept is defined. According to the liberal definition, indoctrination is inevitable, but in my opinion, that is not the best definition. I believe there is a definition which is better defensible both philosophically and pedagogically. It is based on the core idea of “the curtailment of a person’s growth towards normal rational autonomy” (Thiessen, 1993, p. 233). The concept of *normal rational autonomy* is essential here, therefore it needs a brief summarization:

- i. The proposal to define indoctrination as a limitation on development is aimed more at people than at doctrines or doctrinal propositions. This redirection of attention onto people is given with the recognition that indoctrination shows manipulation not only of the mind or understanding, but manipulation of the whole person. Rationality is closely and inseparably linked to all the other elements of human personality—our past, social ties, emotions, physical state, etc. Indoctrination, then, is not only “brainwashing”, as the liberals say, but also a “washing” of the emotions, relationships, habits, traditions, etc. Every totalitarian regime knows this very well.
- ii. Only when the principle of holistic integrity is firmly anchored, can we proceed to the question of limiting rational development, i.e., the cognitive capacity of humanity. Knowing that this is not the only area in which indoctrination can happen, it is good to consider some developmental-cognitive regularities. Any kind of cognitive development assumes that children in their early stages go through the processes of socialization, initiation, and the so-called acquisition of the primary culture, which are non-rational processes, as we saw above. To attach the pejorative term “indoctrination” to this stage for its non-rationality is a fundamental error. Children need to acquire their primary culture if they are to (not only cognitively) thrive. They also need that culture to be stable, safe and coherent.
- iii. The developmental approach to the concept of indoctrination further recognizes that the meaning of the concept will change as the child matures. The development of a child begins with an initial phase that is necessarily non-rational, culturally specific and in big quotes “coercive”, meaning that children simply cannot choose which culture, language, values, etc. they will be devoted to. When children are born into a certain culture we don’t speak of coercion, therefore, when the children subsequently accept that culture we cannot speak of indoctrination. It is generally known that as children grow they ask questions, and this curiosity is supported by every normal parent and teacher. But what children in this stage need are answers, not doubts. It would be absurd and irresponsible

to present them with a lecture on “methodical skepticism” at this stage. A preschooler is not a college student. When the initial phase is finished, children can gradually (an important word) come to know the reality that there also exist other traditions and cultures than their own—if they haven’t already noticed it themselves. If teachers do not inform the children of this reality, or even conceals it from them, they are indoctrinating in the true sense of the word, says Thiessen (Thiessen, 1993, p. 236). Not until the next (adolescent) stage of cognitive development, which Piaget would probably call the stage of *formal operations*, can individuals be led to critical reflection of their own traditions, as well as alternative traditions—whether current or past. The gradualness and gentleness of the whole process is given on the one hand by the fact that individual stages are not strictly separated, and on the other hand that each individual develops individually. We have different predispositions—intelligently, emotionally, socially, and otherwise—so what might truly be indoctrination for one person is not necessarily indoctrination for another. In other words, educators lead each student in an individualized way from a state of complete dependency to a state of relative, or normal, independence when they no longer need a teacher because they have successfully internalized the moral principles. The meaning of the term indoctrination changes according to the stage or according to the individual on whom it is being done.

- iv. Real indoctrination thwarts the development of rationality, but when qualified as “normal”, rationality is not idealized. Normal rationality involves and welcomes many traditional principles, such as concern for evidence, knowledge of different forms of knowing, cultivation of intellectual virtues like critical openness, etc., but at the same time, this concept is aware of the limits of human knowledge. It not only perceives the limited possibilities for objectivity in knowing, but also recognizes that empirical knowledge does not exhaust everything that can be known. Further, the concept of normal rationality understands that the justification of all specific doctrines or beliefs is always situated—socially, psychologically, culturally, historically, or otherwise. Reflective and open criticality in this context means that I am aware that the development of my criticality has taken place within the framework of a specific doctrinal community which has influenced my beliefs.
- v. Indoctrination means a failure in the development of normal autonomy. Absolute autonomy is an empty ideal. It has already been said that normal autonomy strives for balance between the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the whole. It recognizes that no one is born autonomous, but is predisposed to autonomy. Normally autonomous individuals are aware of their dependence on their given community, that is, the need to belong, to share values, etc., while preserving a socially acceptable distance.<sup>2</sup> The concept of normal autonomy further allows that individuals can freely give it up—freely choose to submit themselves to an idea, a (loved) person, life mission, etc.
- vi. Indoctrination is not a phenomenon that concerns only educational institutions; moreover, it is liberal theoreticians of education (Communist education, political education, religious education, etc.) who selectively choose what is to be considered indoctrination. It is necessary to take into account the wider social area that influences the development of children, youths and also adults—the media, advertising, goal-directed propaganda, and so on.

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<sup>2</sup> Václav Bělohradský notes in relation to this problem that when a mainstream culture goes wrong—like for example under a totalitarian regime—every mature and responsible person has to deal with the question to what extent am I to participate in the culture so that I can be its constructive critic and not an enemy (Bělohradský, 2007).

- vii. Indoctrination is a question of extent. In the liberal conception it was indicted as being a matter of “either/or.” Specific people, institutions and methods were swept under the table as a whole. But the developmental understanding of the phenomenon of indoctrination shows that it is always a question of degree. In one or another stage it is possible to indoctrinate to a certain extent or with a certain magnitude, depending on the cause, intent or results of the indoctrination.

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