

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

---

Editor's Note: It is with a certain reserve that *Educational Change* initiates a new and, hopefully, permanent feature of the journal. Unfortunately, as with all beginnings, they are far more difficult and problematic than is often anticipated.

Through no fault of their own, timely constraints made it impossible for the authors of the articles criticized in this section to provide a response which could have been included in the present issue; and, for this the editor *apologizes*.

In view of this unfortunate state of affairs an adequate opportunity will be provided for all authors to respond in the forthcoming issue; and further, readers are encouraged to contribute letters, notes and comments on any and all articles and criticisms as well as any and all aspects of this publication.

The Editor

### REPLY TO RODA'S COMMENTS ON "THE ENDS OF EDUCATION"

Jane Fowler Morse

Professor Roda of SUNY Oneonta raises several important issues<sup>1</sup> in his response to my article, "The Ends of Education,"<sup>2</sup> which I would like to address. The first problem is how to apply a transcendental ideal to specific cases. Such ideals often seem vague, as does mine: "Education should actualize the potential of all people in the practical, theoretical, and technological spheres, including recognition of the autonomy of citizens in a global society." The "lingering question" which Roda rightly asks is, "How does the transcendental ideal function in education?"

Autonomy is the second issue Professor Roda raises. How can Kant accord autonomy to all rational beings while insisting that they obey the categorical imperative, which compels them to assent? In connection with autonomy, Professor Roda raises the problem of evil. If we allow autonomy to be the end of education, how can we discipline students whose behavior is unacceptable? Doesn't autonomy allow human beings to pursue their own intentions, even if these are, as Professor Roda says they may be, "evil?" Roda suggests that Kant must either, like Leibnitz, assume a preestablished harmony; or, like Aristotle, discipline children by habituation first; or, impose a post-established harmony (as teachers who discipline by punishment do). If I am right, in Roda's view, preestablished harmony doesn't exist, post-established harmony is undesirable, and the Kantian categorical imperative is contradictory.

Roda also formulates the problem as tension between individual rights and human rights, which he doesn't think Kant resolves. He finds a solution in Dewey's explanation of human nature as a combination of "habits, impulses, and intelligence," which leaves it "open-ended" whether intelligence (Kant's rationality) will lead people to act constructively. I hope I can address these important issues in such a way as to foster continued conversation on the final cause of education.

First: how does a transcendental ideal apply to cases? Like the categorical imperative itself, it functions as a rule to guide action, rather than prescribing particular responses. Action may well differ in specific instances due to a variety of causes. Hence, a transcendental ideal gives us a rule to check proposed or actual educational practice. Does it foster autonomy? Does it help children to reach their potential? Does it recognize a world community of all rational beings?<sup>3</sup> The answers to these questions are not necessarily easy or obvious, but they are what we should think about as reflective educators.

Let me illustrate how to apply the transcendental ideal to practice with a lesson I observed recently. A group of eleventh grade stu-

dents were preparing for the Regents Competency Test. They were presented with a series of notes on the fascinating topic of foot ailments – corns, calluses, and arthritis. They were supposed to practice organizing the notes and writing a report for the test. Unfortunately, it was hard for them to work up any enthusiasm for this task, given the nature of the material. They squirmed, complained, and delayed starting, rather than working on improving their writing skills, which was the goal of the activity. Furthermore, the lack of autonomy offended them. Why could they not write on a topic of their choosing? Or at least one that might interest them? Why foot ailments? Finally, they were required to work on this task alone, since they would be tested alone. This effectively removed the last thing that might have motivated them – the social experience of working with each other. A teacher reflecting on the transcendental ideal of education might change this lesson. But the ideal does not specify any particular change among many possibilities. That is for the teacher to decide.

Professor Roda's next question concerns autonomy. How can we be compelled to assent to a principle that commands us to be autonomous? Is this contradictory? This is harder, because the answer requires tracing out the argument of Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.<sup>4</sup> In brief, Kant distinguishes between empirical freedom and the freedom that the categorical imperative requires we infer that we have: free will. People are, after all, objects in nature, and as such are subject to the laws of nature. Hence they have no empirical freedom. It is only as rational beings that humans can assert they have free will. As Kant says, "freedom ascribed to the will seems to stand in contradiction to natural necessity." His resolution: this is true of nature, but not conduct. "...in its practical purpose [that is, in the arena of conduct] the footpath of freedom is the only one on which it is possible to make use of reason in our conduct." So Kant concludes that "philosophy must therefore assume that no true contradiction will be found between freedom and natural necessity in human actions, for it cannot give up the concept of nature any more than that of freedom."<sup>5</sup> For Kant we can infer the existence of non-empirical freedom because it makes ethical conduct possible.

This does not conflict with empirical determinism, in Kant's view.

Next Dr. Roda raises the question of evil purposes. Would including autonomy in the transcendental ideal, allow students to pursue evil purposes as well as good? Kant thinks that people can either act according to their inclinations or as people who possess free will. The former are objects in nature; the latter act according to reason. Only rational action can be moral, according to Kant. Furthermore, if people are acting from desires, they may act well, or badly, but they will do so only accidentally, or amorally. How do we judge their action? Says Kant, by the categorical imperative. Does their action treat other people as ends in themselves and not merely as a means to their end? If so, the action is not evil (even if it turns out badly, according to Kant.) In other words, the categorical imperative itself gives us a means to distinguish evil actions from moral actions. Nature is "red in tooth and claw"<sup>6</sup> because natural creatures don't act morally. They are amoral. Rational creatures can act morally or immorally precisely because they understand the categorical imperative. Being moral entails acting intentionally, according to Kant. It seems to me that Kant's view of morality as rational lies at the root of objections to a conception of education as mere training, as well as other common sense ideas.

Finally, how does Kant resolve the tension between individual rights and social responsibility? The third formulation of the categorical imperative addresses this issue. If we recognize the value of autonomy for ourselves we will recognize it for others. The third formulation commands, "Every rational being must act as if he [sic], by his maxims, were at all times a legislative member in the universal realm of ends."<sup>7</sup> This results from a recognition that every rational being who regards him or herself as an end in him or herself, must also regard all other rational beings as ends in themselves. This is the whole point of the categorical imperative. Kant was a staunch advocate of republicanism despite the collapse of the French Revolution because republicanism, rightly enacted, recognizes individual autonomy within the context of a state. The categorical imperative does

not guarantee that everyone will always act according to it, but Kant thinks they could, at least some of the time. When people fail to act according to the categorical imperative, they are acting as natural creatures subject to inclinations (desires).<sup>8</sup> But they can act according to the categorical imperative. Education should promote that potential.

I hope I have sufficiently addressed the notion that Kant's categorical imperative is contradictory. It seems to me that Kant resolves the tension between individual rights and state control. In a republic<sup>9</sup> we obey the rules because we make them up. We recognize that they are necessary. That is the upshot of autonomy, which, after all, means "giving the law to oneself." Kant's idea of autonomy grants freedom, not license. I also hope the sense in which his categorical imperative is open-ended is clear from my example of how we use a principle to judge actions. The difference between Dewey and Kant is that Dewey is a naturalist and Kant is a deontologist, in respect to ethics. Dewey's open-endedness comes from his naturalist's perception of the world as infinitely various. In Kant's deontological view the variety of the world makes sense when it is ordered by principles that humans formulate. This goes for ethics as well as science. The particular actions that people take vary according to the circumstances in which humans find themselves, but the principle remains the same. My hope is that a transcendental ideal for education will provide a similar principle by which to judge educational practice.

*State University of New York, Geneseo*

## ENDNOTES

1. Anthony Roda, "Preface," *Educational Change* (Spring, 1996), pp. iv-vii.
2. Jane Fowler Morse, "The Ends of Education," *Educational Change* (Spring, 1996), pp. 1-26.
3. I think Kant uses the term "rational beings" to broaden, rather than to

*Reply to Roda's Comments on "The Ends of Education"*

restrict, the class of beings who would recognize the categorical imperative. For Kant, as for Aristotle, human beings are primarily rational, but Kant specifically includes other beings who are also rational. If there are any, they will also understand the categorical imperative.

4. For a fuller treatment I refer the reader to my article "Fostering Autonomy," forthcoming in *Educational Theory*.
5. Immanuel Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Translated by Louis White Beck, (Indianapolis and New York: The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1959), 75.
6. Robert W. Hill, Jr., *Tennyson's Poetry*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), p. 618.
7. Kant, op. cit., p. 56.
8. Unless, of course, the action does not concern morality; in that case they may be acting according to hypothetical imperatives. See Kant, op. cit., pp. 31ff.
9. Kant hesitated to use the word "democracy", perhaps because it had the connotation of mob rule, the meaning assigned to it by Aristotle in the *Politics*.