

# 1 Psychology and Education: Unquestionable Goods

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## PREFACE

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Both psychology and education are defended as if they were unquestionable goods. Psychology is associated with the notion that psychological knowledge itself is intrinsically beneficial. Educational activity is similarly associated with the notion that education itself is basically good. This chapter seeks to unsettle the presumed good of each field. It explores how psychology and education define and thereby delimit our freedom to ask whether or not they are 'good' or 'bad'.

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Educators often claim that education is under attack. As educators, they believe this is something they are compelled to defend, if only by complaining on its behalf. The collective response is so automatic that one might assume they shared a clear conception of the object under protection. They do not. Though the educational good educators are so sensitive about does achieve widespread support being repeatedly invoked as an entity worthy of protection, this educational good is also uniquely ungraspable. As defenders of a good they cannot precisely discern, educators focus on their presumed attackers by way of a distraction.

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Occasionally education is defended against the popular effects of psychology, or 'psychologisation'. This is the unwelcome (some would say excessive) attribution of psychological ideas to educational problems. But psychologisation is not in itself a problem for education. It is not an imposition, even if it is sometimes imposed. Education willingly adopts psychological understandings or practices or, at least, it does so 'unconsciously' and without hesitation.

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'Education' is a vague signifier. Nobody seems to know what it is; they can only tell you what education sometimes does. Since those activities that traditionally coalesce around this signifier have indeed done quite a bit (of damage, some would say), we might well consider the likely 'educationalisation' of psychology. This would accompany the psychologisation of education as its reflection.

## 4.

Mass schooling – the great educational achievement of the modern state – has been a major contributor to the educationalisation of psychology. This is because psychology emerged in part as a product of 19th-century developments in schooling. From the outset these institutions served as laboratories. They furnished would-be psychologists with captive populations from which to extract data, defining many of the problems psychology set out to answer as well as the purposes those investigations would serve.

## 5.

While schools served as laboratories, they also functioned like prisons; prisons in turn resembled schools. Both prisons and schools share a heritage and continue to trade techniques. In 1791 Jeremy Bentham published a design for a prison, which could also serve as a school. This circular building was organised around the superintending ‘eye’ of its central observation tower. Bentham called it ‘The Panopticon’.

Many years later, Michel Foucault explored the greater political significance of Bentham’s architectural scheme in *Discipline and Punish* (1991 [1975]). The ‘panoptic gaze’ described in that book captured the imagination of many, eventually becoming a rather tired metaphor overused in critiques of both education and psychology. As Foucault himself soon recognised, ‘the principle of visibility’ that governed the panopticon was already ‘archaic’ insofar as it attached so much importance to observation. By contrast, the ‘procedures of power resorted to in modern societies are far more numerous and diverse and rich’ than those of panoptic surveillance (Foucault, 1996 [1977], pp. 236, 227). Education resorts to far more than panoptic surveillance; it forms us in many other ways too. So if you shake your fist at the unseemly spread of CCTV cameras<sup>1</sup>, make sure you also take a critical look at the wider education of the fist that does the shaking.

Still, when approached with caution, the panopticon makes an important point about the educationalisation of psychology. Before psychology existed in any systematic form, an institution was designed whose principles could be applied to ‘work-houses, mad-houses, lazarettos, hospitals and schools’ as well as to prisons. Bentham recalls a certain ‘King of Egypt’<sup>2</sup> who ‘thinking to re-discover the lost original of language, contrived to breed up two children in a sequestered spot, secluded from the hour of their birth, from all converse with the rest of humankind’. Suitably inspired, Bentham declares that a panoptic school, run on similar lines, ‘might afford experiments enough that would be rather more interesting’. Perhaps a ‘*foundling-hospital*’, at the very least, could be run along these experimental lines, isolating individuals and examining their development under controlled conditions (Bentham, 1843 [1791], p. 64).

Insofar as Bentham’s principles were extended to early 19th-century schools, one might say that the experimental school he envisaged was, broadly speaking, in operation and generating data long before experimental psychology was founded. The so-called father of experimental psychology, Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), was not yet born.

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The typical case of an exchange between education and psychology is located in the early history of mental testing. Mental testing, we discover, was the byproduct of our proudest modern educational commitment, which goes like this:

*Education for all it says.*

The schools that were established to fulfil this beguilingly simple (if not deludedly cheerful) ideal offered much more than instruction. They generated norms of conduct and performance, organising behavioural space in ways that established the implicit standards against which variations between children could be measured. Within these normative confines a new category of child arrived. Though appearing fully functional at first sight, this child did not seem able to benefit from instruction. This was the so-called ‘feeble-minded’ child who was to be located at the outer limits of the normal.

Alfred Binet was appointed to a commission in 1904 that sought to perfect the distribution of such borderline cases. Many children were now located on these artificial borders of normality. Without an accurate test, it was hard to decide whether or not they would be better off in the so-called ‘special’ schools that had been established to mop up the problematic remainder of the school population. Following the arrival of universal schooling and the new problem of borderline children, the separation of this school-age population became an urgent necessity. The response was to use criteria of separation that were directly educational and behavioural (see Rose, 1999, pp. 141–142). In effect, here we have a landmark case in the educationalisation of psychology.

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We could not object to schools as scientific laboratories if they were not at the same time institutions designed to domesticate their populations through the knowledge they accumulate. Today’s schools continue to experiment with the formation and distribution of subjects and subjectivities. In this respect they inform psychology and set its agenda. They also connect psychology to instruments of government.

During the huge expansion of 19th-century schooling, two distinct regimes of power were devised: roughly speaking, these can be divided into the disciplinary supervision of bodies in the early 19th-century monitorial school and the pastoral care of souls in the mid-19th-century moral training school. Initially the techniques these schools developed were aimed at the working poor, the dispossessed and the colonised. These potentially dangerous populations were to be aligned with the newly defined needs of 19th-century industrial societies and their protectorates. Each regime of power borrowed from established religious practices, drawing respectively from medieval monasticism and the Christian pastorate. Developed in partial isolation, these regimes were combined towards the end of the 19th century in the modern classroom. This institutional space was to become a uniquely domesticating site for the formation of individual subjects (see Allen, 2013, 2014).

It should be clear, then, that the manipulation of bodies and the inspection of souls (including self-inspection) was a banal fact of institutional life long before psychology, as a scientific specialism, was established.

## 8.

This is not a matter of precedence, however. A genealogy of psychology and education reveals that they interpenetrate to such an extent that you cannot be for one, and against the other. The psychologisation of education and the educationalisation of psychology must be set within a broader context.

## 9.

This context is that of modernity. To take the long view, and at the risk of being overly schematic, one might define this period as one in which religious practices were secularised. These practices set the limits for what it meant to live a good life. When religious practices were borrowed from and extended, they were adapted to the needs of the modern context. Roughly, the good life was redefined as living well within a modern state, which itself was to become acclimatised to the demands of an emergent capitalism.

The so-called masses were to be formed so that they would act appropriately in two domains. They were to be disciplined at the level of production, so that they worked well, diligently and without demur; and they were to be trained at the level of consumption, so that they could consume well (where the formation of good workers preceded the formation of good consumers). In other words, when workers are not at work they cannot be allowed to escape capital. In their spare time they must pay back into the system that has exploited them by buying its products and accepting the needs it defines as their own.<sup>3</sup>

In late modernity, commodification has been taken one step further as individuals are encouraged to turn themselves into articles of commerce. Individuals are expected to modify themselves and market themselves as flexible and adaptable workers in response to the uncertain demands of the marketplace. Psychological discourses and educational practices perform an important role here, conditioning everyday life so that it accords with these demands, educating individuals to live within these confines. Everyday life has been proletarianised in the sense that we are induced to commodify our relations with one another by turning them into strategic opportunities.

## 10.

Academics are not immune to this. The effects of institutional ranking by research output, impact and environment, and of an increased pressure to secure funds from an ever-diminishing 'pot', separate researchers from an intellectual engagement with their work. Research time is instrumentalised according to its methods, outputs, or what it may lead to in the future, and work commitments are increasingly measured against their likely returns in terms of

esteem factors and future prospects (or, at the very worst, in a campaign for retention). One's relationships and links are commodified as potentially lucrative network-building opportunities, to be sold in one's own research bids, or sold to other bidders. High-flying academics are co-opted as key stakeholders in bids they have not written, for no other reason than that they are well established and connected to other stakeholders.

Slavoj Žižek (2009) divides today's proletariat into three mutually antagonistic groupings: (1) intellectual labourers, (2) representatives of the old manual working class, and (3) outcasts. This last category includes the unemployed, those living in slums and those occupying other interstices of public space. In this rough schema, one might expect that intellectual workers in general, and academics in particular, would be best placed to resist. Academics are able to draw from the security their comparative wealth affords as well as a long memory of other forms of life, which have been documented, categorised and preserved with scholarly diligence. Despite their apparent advantage, however, academics are also being proletarianised in a more restricted but nevertheless dangerous sense. Indeed, academics are perhaps most closely, most personally and most willingly invested in their own subjection, in their own alienation from the values that caused them to take up their work in the first place. As an academic discipline located in such an educational environment, psychology has a lot to be fearful of. In this sense alone, the educationalisation of psychology remains a very real, very current danger.

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These are just some of the techniques by which a society organised according to a divine purpose was succeeded by a social order with more immediate, secular objectives. These secular objectives may appear comparatively utilitarian. Arguably they diminish human relations, in some cases to a commodity form. They are nevertheless, still orientated towards an abstract good. This orientation is missed when critics bemoan the dangerous instrumentalism that seems everywhere entrenched. High-minded religious objectives are not simply replaced in modernity by lower earthly commitments; they are infused and invested with new higher meaning and purpose.

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Early psychologists recognised the continued importance of religion in a secular context. Raymond Cattell (1905–1998) was foremost among them. He appreciated religion not only for its unremitting devotion to some kind of abstract good, but for its ability to combine this orientation with techniques of subjective and intersubjective government. Cattell appreciated how religious practices were able to orient psychologies and thereby coordinate the minutiae of day-to-day life. His work is worthy of close consideration as it demonstrates in microcosm how religious techniques could be transformed for secular purposes. We find clues here for how a connection was maintained between personal and interpersonal techniques, and the pursuit of an unquestionable abstract good.

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Raymond Cattell was a celebrated psychologist. In 1992 he received the American Psychological Association's Gold Medal Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Science of Psychology. He was also a committed eugenic thinker.

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## 14.

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As a young man Cattell made some rather prescient remarks about the future of psychology. He was also speaking about the future of eugenics.

In his rather oddly titled *Psychology and the Religious Quest*, Cattell considered the eugenic potentiality of religion. Christianity, he argued, 'is impossible without eugenics, or, rather, eugenics is a growth of Christianity' (Cattell, 1938, p. 99). Cattell wished to demonstrate that Christianity and eugenics could become mutually dependent. In his view, eugenics must attach itself to 'positive' religious force because of the necessary limits of conventional 'negative' eugenics. Since 'we can only cut off the tail of stragglers by direct eugenic methods', he argued, 'we must leave to culture the breeding of vanguard qualities' (Cattell, 1937, p. 94). The best hope for eugenics is to embed the eugenic sensibility in the free action of individuals, and rely on compulsory action only in the most extreme cases where extermination or sterilisation was an unavoidable necessity. Eugenic activity, he claimed, must become an intrinsic part of the day-to-day self-regulation of individuals.

What Cattell offers us here is a way of understanding the broader social significance of psychology in an increasingly secular order. Here we see an envisaged handover from religious techniques to secular ones.

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## 15.

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Christian love is radicalised and reworked by Cattell for eugenic purposes. It becomes a violent commitment to the future happiness of those yet to be born; a commitment that is driven by the eugenic condition that they 'shall be fit for the world' in which they will live; for happiness and fitness, Cattell (1938, p. 131) claims, are intimately linked. While this reconditioned and upgraded love for the unborn would result in 'the greatest turning-point in the history of the human race' at least since the advent of Christianity, a eugenic religion of this kind would also constitute 'a continuation of Christianity, an extension of its values to the field of the unborn' (Cattell, 1938, p. 130). This bold redeployment of Christian sentiment 'as love of the best in man' (rather than love and propagation to all, feeble and strong alike) would substitute for the 'reckless, cruel and wasteful methods of Nature the humane control of kindness and reason'. Once further propagation was prevented, a 'thoroughly Christian treatment' of any remaining 'defectives' could be pursued, committing to them the best available care and support (Cattell, 1938, p. 69).

Cattell's overall point is this: once the 'admitted ideal of civilization' is recognised as being that project which aims to 'shift regulation entirely to the individual', the eugenic visionary will understand just how crucial the 'maintenance of morality by conscience' will become (Cattell, 1933, pp. 158, 156). Guided by such a conscience, individuals would live ethical eugenic lives. Newly concerned with the quality of their children, they would learn to regulate themselves independently.

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It is tempting to react with disgust; we might reject Cattell entirely, or at the very least seek to marginalise his thought. But we should take these proposals seriously, and perhaps bring them back from the periphery. Moral indignation is dangerous to the extent that it denies a line of continuity extending from Cattell to our present.

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Eugenics 'should not', he argued, 'throw away the great, slow-built, emotional attitudes, with all their poetry and wealth of human associations, which have grown up through the centuries around the concept of God' (Cattell, 1938, p. 186). Rather, eugenics must adopt from religion an adjusted, pastoral mode of power whereby individuals willingly submit themselves and the details of their lives to a higher authority. Cattell believed that these individual acts of submission could orientate themselves towards an adjusted religious creed. As the 'greatest turning-point in the history of the human race' since the advent of Christianity, this new religion would be accompanied by a new conception of God (Cattell, 1937, p. 130). God would cease to be a divine transcendental being. His symbolic form would find itself relocated in the material realities of our universe. This new entity that we would then come to identify as 'God' would be linked to an age-old accumulation of human effort. It would constitute a 'collective mind' or 'Theopsyche' to which we are all unwittingly linked. As a psychic entity in the most general sense, it would represent the legacy and continuing project of all good human action; where 'Goodness is the human tendency towards progress' (Cattell, 1933, p. 219).

This [secular] God, which is all that is altruistic, intelligent, wise, powerful, courageous, and unselfish in the group mind of man, is a reality in the fullest sense. We meet it in every kind action, every effort to discover further secrets of the universe, every creation of beauty, and every sacrifice for a super-personal object. It lives in the idealistic organisation of all minds, and each one of us is part of it in proportion to his idealism. (Cattell, 1933, pp. 200–201)

Cattell's Theopsyche is a God that has grown out of our collective labours. It is the accumulated deposit of individual efforts towards progress, and has purportedly developed into a reality that anticipates and outlives all of us. While it may have been formed of human interaction, it is based in nature. 'It perishes in part if mankind perishes, but it is inherent in matter and will emerge again' (Cattell, 1933, p. 200). It 'has its roots in the material cosmos



from which it is an emergent', and so we must conclude that the 'worship of nature is one with the worship of God' (Cattell, 1933, p. 183). It is to this deification of the human project that individual conscience is to be wedded. Religious overtures will now prepare individual lives for acts of devotion that are to be coordinated with the overall progress of humanity. With an updated conception of religion, eugenics can draw upon forces far more pervasive than mere techniques of disciplinary compulsion. Individuals will adopt procedures of self-examination and a willingness to confess, all of which is ruled by absolute submission to the eugenic creed.

## 18.

Cattell claimed that evil deeds are those that are 'opposed to group welfare' and sin is a 'failure to make the best out of the whole race' (Cattell, 1938, pp. 75, 104). All calculations of welfare are to be framed in evolutionary terms. Karl Pearson, another influential psychologist and eugenic thinker, made a similar point years earlier. That which is good is that which promotes overall social welfare, he said. Nevertheless, while Pearson believed only very few are 'capable of being really moral' – for only they would be 'in possession of all that is known of the laws of human development' (Pearson, 1901, p. 107) – Cattell appears to be more optimistic. By adopting religion and reformulating God, we may all come to worship and obey 'a super-individual consciousness with which the individual can maintain a communion' (Cattell, 1938, p. 77). In theory, any individual may contribute in a positive way to the group project, just as any individual may enter the more conventional religious fold. Of course, from the eugenic perspective, relative contribution is dictated by the normal distribution where 'the lower variant' can 'achieve happiness and avoid criminal self-assertion by [direct] submission', while 'the upper variant' is 'rescued from cynicism and despair' by their commitment to the communal project towards which all genius will turn with religious fervour (Cattell, 1938, p. 120). Across the spectrum of human variability we will be governed by our emotional commitment to this religion of human progress. Everyone will seek to contribute according to what is deemed good and beneficial for human development where all troubles and hardships are justified as necessary steps. Reproduced here is the circular logic of biblical discourse:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

## 19.

So this is my provocation: both psychology and education continue Cattell's work. Insofar as we deny this statement and snub Cattell, rejecting his inhumanity and celebrating our own, we only descend further into the reductive, circular logic that Cattell exemplifies so well and so clearly.

Psychology and education are similarly attached to abstract ungraspable ideals that proclaim their humanity and hence elevate themselves above dispute. Where eugenics was

committed to the pursuit of biological health, psychology and education add notions of social, economic and political health. Orientated by the idea that health in this world is calculable in the most general sense, and realisable, education and psychology came to redefine the appropriate limits of everyday conduct. In pursuit of a healthy, which is to say ordered and orderly population, education secularised and adapted practices of moral formation through the newly established mass school, while psychology secularised practices of subjective care by promoting itself as their replacement. Psychology and education took on the role of assisting individuals to live the good life, a life that was increasingly defined 'biopolitically'.<sup>4</sup> This is dangerous since a biopolitical order is one that also hides conflict, contradiction and systematic exploitation behind a commitment to its own, specifically scientific, definition of human flourishing, where overall population health and security become its principal concerns. It is at this point that the totalising moral scheme of religious discourse is replaced by its secular equivalent, combining the attempted realisation of an abstract calculable good with individuated techniques designed to align subjectivity with this effort. The good that is to be worked towards remains, of course, as indisputable as it is ill-defined.

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As disciplines, psychology and education take social and individual well-being as their primary object. The problem with this achievement is that in claiming to be its guardians, they actively exclude other rival conceptions of the good life. Indeed, other conceptions of the good life are scarcely possible now that the definition and defence of social and individual well-being has been so comprehensively defined by these agents of government.

## 21.

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In their institutional forms, both psychology and education have managed to firmly embed their moral imperium in everyday practice. By ensuring that citizen-subjects are adapted to the society in which they were born, by ensuring that they live productively, safely and contentedly, adopting its needs as their own, they prohibit other conceptions of what it might mean to live well in society with others.

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To the extent that radical social critiques pose a challenge to well-being as it is currently defined and pose a threat to the good life we have been educated to accept, they are extinguished by default, as negative and inhumane. Radical action, involving a fundamental and violent interruption, entailing some sort of temporary deprivation in order to change how deprivation is perceived and constructed, is rendered unthinkable.

## NOTES

1. Closed-circuit television cameras have expanded hugely in recent years, in Britain in particular, to the consternation of some.
2. Psammetichus, who reigned during the 26th dynasty of Egypt (664–610 BCE).
3. In other words, their ‘free’ time is also invested by capital (see Debord, 2009 [1967]).
4. Michel Foucault develops this concept in a number of places (see Foucault, 1998 [1976], 2003 [1976], 2004 [1978]). I explore some of the ambiguities and potential dangers of the pursuit of population health in Allen (2014).

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