

Worldview Understandings and Teacher Authenticity

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Introduction

“I think I may say, that of all men we meet with, nine parts out of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. ’Tis that which makes the great difference in mankind” (Locke, 1968, p. 112). It may well be that John Locke, the philosopher, writing so long ago, overstated a premise. It may also be that—when the word “education” is broadly defined—these words resound as a truthful statement. The process of education does, of course, involve more than schooling. In schools we are educated by teachers, but other methods of educating the human psyche play significant roles in forming individual personalities. For “There are as many different kinds of education as there are different milieux in our society” (Durkheim, 1956, p. 67).

There is a conditioning process that takes place in family settings, in churches, in social groups, in cultural environs, in political arenas, in personal encounters. It happens wherever perceptions about life, living, and the “other” are instilled into a receiving mind, since “An identity is always articulated through concepts and practices made available by religion, society, school, and state; mediated by family, peers, friends” (Appiah, 2007, p. 20). Each individual’s personal philosophy of life—his or her worldview—is, in many ways, the result of subtle—and not-so-subtle—indoctrinations into ways of thinking, doing, and being. Too often we do not understand *why* we are who we are. This happens when we fail intellectually to question the source and the validity of those beliefs that color how we view ourselves, and as we interpret the world in which we live.

Such failure raises moral implications, because “morality resides in the painfulness of indefinite questioning” (de Beauvoir quoted in Arp, 2001, p. 100).¹ Continuous, open-ended questioning is a source of moral reasoning, of personal growth, of personal *becoming*. We understand the intricacies of the moral underpinnings of *who* we are only as we achieve new intellectual awakenings by questioning *what* we believe, and *why*; “Assumptions must be questioned, presumptions must be challenged”

(Berlin, 2001, p. 3). Beliefs must be rethought in light of new knowledge, new understandings, new interpretations based on new experiences because “we form and reform the world in the very act of perceiving it” (May, 1985, p. 137).

A question with moral implications for those who choose to be teachers thus arises, and that is the pedagogically impregnated question, “Who am I;” inherent in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalist understanding, “That which we are, we shall teach.” If we accept Emerson’s premise we teach who we are, then self-understanding becomes a moral priority, and self-understanding requires continuous self-interrogation or the questioning of various ideas and concepts that constitute a personal worldview. “The only choice we have is to be consciously aware of our worldviews and criticize them where they need criticizing, or let them work on us unnoticed and acquiesce to living unexamined lives” (Smith, 2001, p. 21). And the unexamined life lacks a solid moral foundation.

Those whose words and actions directly affect the thinking of others have a unique responsibility to understand the *why* of who they are. Therefore, each teacher has a moral obligation periodically to investigate the basic understandings that constitute his or her personal belief system. “Because teachers are defined by their identity and integrity, who they are is dependent upon what they believe” (Eckert, 2011, p. 22). As teachers, we violate a moral imperative if we allow ourselves to lapse into an unthinking, unreflective acceptance of “what is,” in terms of our personal ways of believing, thinking, feeling, doing, and being. This responsibility presupposes we frequently will examine the presuppositions, assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, perceptions, and personal truths that define who we are as teachers and as human beings. “We need to learn to ask questions of ourselves...risky questions and baffling questions, dynamic questions, and then to live within them” (Ayers, 1992, p. 139). As we live within the risky, life-altering questions, we try on answers. Sometimes these answers fit, sometimes they do not. But each effort is a birthing process, the emergence of a new way to face life’s inevitable ambiguities and paradoxes. The teacher who continues a journey of *becoming* finds personal meaning in Erich Fromm’s (1959) statement that “living is a process of continuous birth...man must be active and creative at every moment of birth” (pp. 156–157). It is the birth of new ideas and new ways of interpreting the world that make possible creative revisions of an otherwise unexamined worldview.

Many answers to life’s persistent questions reflect a tacit worldview—an often-unrecognized way of interpreting experiences, ideas, other people, and ourselves. At some point in a teacher education program the future teacher should be challenged to pull back what

covers his or her unexplored tacit beliefs, and ask risky, baffling questions that may reveal unexpected answers. Some worldviews are based primarily on the cerebral, intellectual, and rational. Others find more room for emotion, intuition, and the imagination. Many connect *both* head and heart, reflecting the understanding that, “I must know with my entire self; with my critical mind, but also with my feelings, with my intuitions, with my emotions” (Freire, 1998, p. 30). Whatever the case, the future teacher should have the academic opportunity—and be encouraged—critically to explore his or her personal worldview.

A personal worldview may be liberating or constricting. It can result in pessimism about what is possible for the self, others, and for the world. It can cloud the soul. Or it may reveal vistas of emerging possibility. A worldview is a theory about life—unspoken, often unacknowledged—but nevertheless lived. A worldview may be passive or active. If one’s worldview is passive, then one will tend to rely on *absolutes*—those pronouncements of someone (or some *it*) in authority—to define the parameters of one’s truth. If one’s worldview is active, then he or she questions absolutes; one is open to new experiences, new interpretations and revised meanings of old knowledge. An active worldview allows one to build upon a partial, fragmentary, changing, incomplete view of what *is* and creatively to reflect upon what *should be*. The difference between a passive and an active worldview is found in how “our mind does not gain true freedom by acquiring materials for knowledge and possessing other people’s ideas, but by forming its own standards of judgment and producing its own thoughts” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 71).

Exploring a Personal Worldview: An Academic Experience

I teach the only educational foundations course in a small, midwestern university’s School of Education. A significant priority in the course revolves around helping future teachers reflect upon the moral dimensions of a classroom setting, no matter what the subject matter. And, of course, “morality makes multiple demands. It is multifold and pluralistic, not singular and monistic in conception.... Emphasis is on a form of thinking” (Hamm, 1989, p. 149). The form of our thinking, including the process and the content, is a major determinant in the moral decisions we make. There is a significant reminder that emerges from the Buddhist tradition: “Thoughts become ideas, ideas become action, action becomes character, and character determines destiny. So, think good thoughts.”

The thoughts that are part of our thinking process reflect the foundational planks that support a worldview. And, one’s worldview affects one’s understanding of life. It involves a belief system implicit in

a teacher's political, cultural, religious, and communal commitments. These commitments then, perhaps subconsciously, influence a teacher's way of doing and *being* in the classroom. A worldview often contains hidden and/or unexamined philosophical assumptions reflected in what we say and do; in *who* we are as intellectual and moral models in the classroom. The pedagogical process that defines the course I teach seeks to awaken students to the moral ramifications of a worldview; to the reality that "we teach who we are."

The attainment of personal wide-awakeness is not always an easy achievement. To be wide-awake is to exercise a listening ear that allows the discordant notes of differing views to enter the inner-consciousness. As defined by a student and future teacher, "An awakened mind is not restrained by ideologies and routines, but aroused by what *may be*; is in a perpetual state of expanding the intellectual imagination" (Spexarth, 2010). It is a mind that is alive to alternative possibilities, open to challenges to entrenched ways of thinking; willing—and able—to make modifications and corrections in one's worldview, and in one's life-direction. To be intellectually wide-awake is to possess an active worldview; it is to be willing to expose the self to the thinking condition that philosophers define as *aporia*.² "...truly [to] learn is...continuously [to] expose the conditioned mind to possibilities to be untaught of what has been taught, unravel the paradoxes and ambiguities of life, and give birth to revised understandings and beliefs" (Do, 2011). This learning involves a network of ideas, concepts, beliefs, and personally interpreted truths about life's multifaceted, and often paradoxical, meanings. The interpretations are often tinged by inflexible, ideological truths that exist in a moral vacuum when they go unexamined and unquestioned.

Though we may believe unreservedly in a certain set of truths, there is always the possibility that some other set of truths might be the case.... The moral justification for our actions comes from the tolerance we have shown to other ways of being in the world, other ways of considering the case. (Menand, 2001, p. 440)

It is just such tolerance, a willingness open-mindedly to explore diverse ways of believing, doing, and being that provides a moral compass for the direction of classroom encounters. Even the professional teacher must be alert to the possibility—as rare as it might be—of contracting a case of *aporia*; and making the necessary corrections in a personal worldview. It may be that "all genuine learning begins with unlearning" (Wu, 2009, p. 38).³ To "unlearn" requires a rare kind of risk-taking, intellectual courage. "It is not enough to have the courage of your own convictions, but you must have the courage to have your convictions challenged" (Phillips, 2001, pp. 3–4).

My foundations of education classroom is a place for future teachers to ponder upon the thought, “we teach who we are.” Students are reminded in various ways that *who* they are is not static: if...*if* they have the courage to ask those risky, baffling, morally challenging questions of their personal worldviews. In the words of one student: “Human beings are made up of questions. These questions must be kept alive; they are what keep us moving, creating, wondering” (Kennally, 2010). The process of *becoming* involves questioning. It involves shaping, verifying or changing, evaluating, and fine-tuning a worldview. It is a process replete with moral implications. Moral decisions are imbedded in the various “truth” understandings—personal definitions and interpretations of Truth and truths—interconnected within one’s personal worldview.

Fine-tuning one’s worldview requires removing the “mind-forg’d manacles” (Blake, 1958, p. 52) that keep a person bound rigidly to imposed ways of interpreting his or her world. It requires an evolving awareness—and a critical assessment—of the assumptions and presumptions which are the foundational stones of one’s personal philosophy of life. This involves a growing recognition of the political, religious, cultural, social, and economic influences that have shaped and continue to shape our worldview. “You can only live *your* life when you understand all these influences, and—through understanding them—begin to discover your own way of thinking and living” (Krishnamurti, 1974, pp. 83–84). As one better understands the whys of one’s personal worldview one becomes a more *authentic* person: becomes more sensitive to the views of others, better able to live with the paradox of different but often equally valid answers to significant life-defining questions; better able to identify alternative life possibilities and select from various available options. “One of the prime elements of human uniqueness is the ability to create and exercise new options. The ultimate test of education is whether it makes people comfortable in the presence of options” (Cousins, 1981, p. 17).

The presence of options: This is why my foundations of education classroom focuses on the dialectical. We discuss, converse, dialogue, challenge, and question. We speak, *and* we listen, as co-teachers and co-learners. We share ideas, beliefs, and values based on diverse personal political, social, cultural, and religious assumptions. We learn from each other. “We must come to realize that a variety of meanings and interpretations is what ultimately makes life truthful” (Hightower, 1981, p. 206). We better understand our own interpretations of ideas and issues when they are placed in connection with—and analyzed in counterpoint to—other options, other worldviews. We may come to

agree with a teacher education student that “perfunctory thinking satisfies nothing; half-truths solidify nothing but laziness of mind” (Stop, 2013). The horizon of a personal worldview may be expanded by way of an on-going classroom dialectic in which critical responses and challenging questions are welcomed and incorporated into the learning experience. Even the mysterious may be welcomed into the classroom; with the understanding that “a little mystery in life leads to great explorations” (Foster, 2010).

Students—and teachers—need to understand how their own, lived realities are encased in a worldview. A worldview grows from transmitted traditions, and also from lived experiences. A worldview is a philosophy of life. Therefore, it involves answers to philosophical questions regarding the metaphysical (what is real/true?), the epistemological (how do I know what I know?), and the axiological (how do I define, and achieve the moral and the aesthetic “good”?).

My philosophy of education, which influences my teaching methodology, my relationships with students, and my responses to diverse and contentious educational issues, is an outgrowth of my worldview. And, “a worldview, I have discovered, begins as autobiography” (Ochs, 2009, p. 464). This means I must strive for self-awareness, and I must provide opportunities for my students to ask provocative question of who they are, why they are who they are, and who they have the potential to become. “It is self-discovery that allows us humans to feel and care; to be genuine, and to understand and live-out our system of values and beliefs” (De Vies, 2003). This is why I understand that, as I engage the heads and hearts of students: “...the time has come for doing moral philosophy. This means an examination of the lives we live, an intensified consciousness of the choices we make” (Greene, 1973, p. 219).

Moral Philosophy in the Classroom: Dissecting Worldviews

When I—only half-jokingly—warn students at the beginning of a semester to be ready for the “headache class,” I am preparing the groundwork for doing moral philosophy. I am metaphorically tilling the classroom soil for the growth in individual students of the “intensified consciousness” that begins to understand the reality of a personal worldview: the “why” of personal choice. I hope to “cultivate students’ inner-eyes” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 102). The inner-eye provides a focus for the intensified ability to see deeply into the self, and to ask questions of what is seen. “Our inner-dialogue is priceless, and we only need listen to it” (Hendrix, 2011). I want students to “do” moral philosophy; to scrutinize personal worldviews, and, in the process, become more intensely free, autonomous, and authentic human beings.⁴

To “do” moral philosophy is not easy. It involves asking questions of one’s basic beliefs. It presupposes challenging the assumptions, preconceptions, and truths that define how an individual life is lived. “Moral growth requires an open-mind, and the ability to question, doubt, and re-think established beliefs” (Wood, 2013). Such digging into the self may cause earthquakes in a person’s worldview. But, “it is very important, it seems to me, to have self-knowledge, which means going very deeply into oneself...so that the mind has no deceptions, no illusions” (Krishnamurti, 2004, p. 137). Firmly indoctrinated, illusionary deceptions are difficult to counter, but doing moral philosophy in the classroom opens an academic space in which the fresh air of countervailing ideas are allowed to circulate.

Not all academic settings are designed to provide the free-flowing, dialectical atmosphere in which to challenge students—and the teacher—to do moral philosophy. But the very nature of a foundations of education classroom allows teacher and students to find personal ways to cross the boundaries that separate different ways of viewing the world. “Only fluency across boundaries provides a clear view of the world as it really is, not as seen through the lens of ideologies or dogmas” (Wilson, 1998, pp. 13–14). A boundary-crossing fluency is not easily attained if our view of the world is askew; if “*we all just see the world through this little distorted piece of Coke bottle*” (Melvin & Thompson, 1992). One’s ability to discard the metaphorical coke bottle and cross worldview boundaries may, however, be a capacity gained while engaged in the “doing” of moral philosophy.

This type of vigorous “doing” requires the thoughtful doer to engage the mind in an active, skeptical, questioning process that many writers have defined as critical thinking. It is critical thinking that is imperative for doing moral philosophy, which, in turn, reflects the moral imperative for teachers continually to examine, and, as necessary, revise personal worldviews. “All beliefs, dogmas, doubts, emotions should be critically analyzed, questioned, and then reevaluated and re-questioned continuously” (Bernier & Williams, 1973, p. 13).

Reflecting upon the foundations of education in an academic setting requires intellectually wrestling with controversial political, historical, cultural, philosophical, and even theological aspects of education. It calls for the critical thinking that so characterizes doing moral philosophy. “The critical thinker is an examiner of life, always alert, ready to pay attention, interested in everything, constantly asking ‘Why?’ and taking delight in the process of discovery” (Forni, 2011, p. 8). Of course, discovery is not always a delight. In intellectually and emotionally struggling with the demands of doing moral philosophy, in open-

mindedly examining our personal worldview, we may discover a moral blemish in our personal way of thinking. How we react to this discovery reflects a character trait. “Let him be made to understand that to confess the flaw he discovers in his own argument...is an act of judgment and sincerity.... To change his mind and correct himself, to give up a bad position...are rare, strong and philosophical qualities” (de Montaigne, 2003, p. 139).

It is these morally embedded, rare, philosophical qualities we seek to stimulate in those students preparing to be teachers. It is through personally engaging in the “doing” of moral philosophy in the classroom, through exposing cracks in personal worldviews, that future teachers grow as human beings capable continually of refreshing their moral sensitivity to life’s inevitable conundrums, ambiguities, and paradoxes. As one future teacher writes in a weekly reflection essay:

Teachers should be constantly at battle with their worldviews. A well-qualified teacher is on a continuous journey for answers that she or he may never find. Educators should not only continue to test their beliefs, but challenge their students to do the same. Through this process teachers will change the way they think, which in turn likely alters the way they approach their educational methods.⁵ (Traffas, 2012)

The testing of beliefs by open-mindedly interrogating one’s personal worldview is integral to doing moral philosophy. And this mind-shaking, often mind-*shaping*, activity should be part of every future teacher’s academic experience. The classroom activity of self-inquiry, of evaluating, questioning, and challenging beliefs which define the self, allows an individual “to probe deeper levels of reason and insight with a sense of intellectual adventure” (Schneider, 1996, p. 22). The academic “doing” of moral philosophy is impregnated with intellectual adventure. It is “intellectual” because it is a thinking, reasoning, insight-generating, mentally challenging, belief-questioning process. It is an “adventure” because it is an exploration of previously unexamined intellectual and emotional terrain. It is an enlightening exposure to differing ways of interpreting life experiences. It is an exposure that is “characterized by the release of the individualized viewpoint and the sustaining of multiple and dynamically changing and even contradictory viewpoints at the same time” (Zajonc, 2010, p. 104).

Reflecting upon a personal worldview with open-minded, reflective consideration of other changing and diverse belief systems allows one to engage in a morally imbued, internal dialectic. Such reflection involves “a form of speculation which consists of pouring over an often well-known truth, discovering further horizons to it as well as hitherto

unsuspected connections with other truth” (D’Arcy, 1946, p. 206). A School of Education should provide at least one classroom academic experience where the future teacher is given wide-ranging opportunities intellectually to hear—and, more importantly, “listen to”—opposing worldviews; views often impregnated with cultural, racial, religious, political, and social indoctrination. “When united in a conversation in which understandings and worldviews are shared, we stand a better chance of reducing the limitations and narrowness of our existing worldviews” (McKenzie, 1991, p. 125).

It is through sharing of views that we come to understand “the story of your education is in large part one of self-dialectic” (Wofford, Jr., 1970, p. 66). A dialectic can only take place within the self when two or more contradictory viewpoints are given a hearing.⁶ It is when a self-dialectic has taken place, that personal decisions may be viewed as morally defensible. And, we are reminded “the teacher as a moral agent [is] condemned continually to choose” (Greene, 1973, p. 184). This existential—and ethical—responsibility makes the practice of moral philosophy an important ingredient of a teacher education program. Existentially ethical decisions are those that escape the bounds of unreflective, conditioned conformity to what someone else has defined as fact, or truth, or reality. Such open-minded reflection on life’s realities allowed one future teacher to say: “I no longer see my teaching role as imparting the goals and aspirations that were imparted to me. I see it as a way to enlighten, encourage, and challenge students to *become*; to *be* and not just to *do*” (Lix, 2001).

Doing moral philosophy in a classroom allows the student to define his or her individually authentic sense of life; to be wide-awake to options and newfound possibilities. It provides opportunities for the critical examination of personal worldviews, and the morally sound motivation to make necessary readjustments when necessary. In the words of an undergraduate student on an intellectual quest: “The wonder of life is that we will never know when we will be faced with a moment of truth and understanding” (Martin, 2011).

Concluding Considerations

“Teaching is an inherently moral enterprise” (Thomas, 1991, p. 66). This statement opens wide the door to many interpretive possibilities. The teacher is, indeed, a moral agent; whether he or she is fulfilling the role of an authority, model, friend, inspirer, motivator, questioner; the list goes on. And it may be that “moral authority is the dominant quality of the educator” (Durkheim, 1956, p. 88). The basic premise of my argument is there is truth to the maxim “we teach who we are,” and this reality has moral implications. Too often teacher education programs

focus with dedicated intensity upon the technical/instrumentalist/measurable aspects of teaching, at the expense of consideration of the mysterious “who”: the inner-self of the teacher. This self, consciously or subconsciously, establishes the atmosphere of the classroom, and encourages or stifles positive relationships and learning opportunities.

It has been said, “we are mysteries unto ourselves.” Each teacher has a moral responsibility continually to seek to unravel this mystery that so penetrates U.S. classrooms. Such responsibility requires periodic, perhaps continuous, self-interrogation of one’s belief system. Critical, introspective inquiry of one’s worldview can only be meaningful if it includes consideration of differing ways of interpreting the world and answering life’s BIG questions. “Dedication to the truth means a life of willingness to be personally challenged. The only way that we can be certain that our map of reality is valid is to expose it to the criticism and challenge of other mapmakers” (Peck, 1978, p. 52).⁷

A worldview, one’s map of reality, affects one’s understanding of his or her personal moral responsibilities, and is implicit in a teacher’s political, cultural, religious, and communal commitments. And, these commitments, perhaps subconsciously, influence a teacher’s way of doing and *being* in the classroom. In one future teacher’s words: “I will now choose to live the examined life as an intellectual adventure” (Wilbert, 2010). It is at this point we consider the importance of “doing moral philosophy” as an important component of a teacher education program. To probe at the roots of one’s personal belief system, one’s worldview, helps to generate a “constructive restlessness” (Brandon, 1976, p. 4): that inner disquietude which motivates an individual to question not only *who* he or she is, but also *why*. It is the restless, open-minded search for answers to these self-defining questions that are vital to the doing of moral philosophy, and to becoming an authentic individual. After all, it is the answers—including the uncertain, conflicted, and paradoxical ones—that provide the future teacher with a better understanding of the struggle to be both existentially authentic *and* a moral model in the classroom.

Endnotes

¹ There is a connection here to a thought expressed by the actress, Rosalind Russell, playing Mother Simplicia, in the film, *Where Angels Go... Trouble Follows*: “Self-examination is always painful” (Frye & Neilson, 1968). And, here a reminder of a thought from theologian,

- Paul Tillich (1966): “I was able to reach intellectual and moral autonomy only after a severe struggle” (p. 36).
- 2 Aporia is that unprepared-for condition that comes over a person when he or she has been absolutely sure of the validity of a conviction, or a “truth,” and then, after open-mindedly listening to opposing views, suddenly thinks: “I have been wrong.” But, Bertrand Russell may have been correct. In order to experience the condition of aporia, “(t)here must be preliminary uncertainty.... We should admit that even our best-formed beliefs probably stand in need of correction” (Russell, 1926, p. 176).
 - 3 We are reminded: “Human beings constantly create and re-create their knowledge, in that they are inconclusive, historical beings engaged in a permanent act of discovery” (Freire, 1996, p. 119).
 - 4 We are reminded that: “Authenticity is the reduction of phoniness toward the zero point” (Pirsig, 1981, p. 183).
 - 5 A fellow student in the same class wrote: “The true struggle of the human being may be to examine his or herself...to find personal, ever-changing truths” (Manion, 2012). And, as noted by a student during a previous semester: “For learning to take place we must shake up our worldview” (Thudium, 2009).
 - 6 This process was defined by a former student as an “inner dialogue.” She writes: “Our inner dialogue is priceless. We need to take time to listen” (Hendrix, 2011).
 - 7 When we reflect upon our map of reality we may want to consider: “Our worldview is the picture we paint of reality. And just as Monet’s paintings can educate our eyes so that we leave the museum conscious of light sparkling off every tree and building, so a successful worldview leaves us open to experience” (Ochs, 2009, p. 465).

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