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Response

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Response

Chris Higgins

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to Wayne Bowman for arranging this special issue of *ACT*, for his rare combination of patience, persistence, and guidance as an editor, and for his fine introduction. And let me also thank Charlene Morton, Thomas Regelski, Marissa Silverman, and Mark Whale for their responses to *The Good Life of Teaching*.¹ It is rare to have such substantial replies to one's work: I truly appreciate this reception and this opportunity to see my work through new eyes. In what follows, I will attempt to respond to some of their main points. First, however, let me highlight some of the main concerns of my book.

The Good Life of Teaching (hereafter, *GLoT*) offers a virtue ethics of work with special reference to teaching. Since the word "virtue" now has a decidedly Victorian ring, let me immediately stress that there is nothing prim about the ethics on offer in *GLoT*. Indeed, what makes virtue ethics so important and untimely is that it offers us an alternative to the usual bad choice between hedonistic wants and moralistic oughts. I follow thinkers such as Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre in reclaiming an ethics rooted in Socrates' question "How should I live?" and Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* or flourishing.

While we neither could nor should transport ourselves ethically back to Plato and Aristotle's world, it is possible to seek a fusion of ancient and modern ethical horizons, generating ideas that confound the modern moral contrasts of inclination versus duty and of self-interest versus altruism. Virtue ethics is less interested in the question of whether it is permissible to pursue what I want and more interested in the question of what is worth wanting. And while Socrates' question leaves ample room for considerations about the treatment of others, it situates such considerations in the existential predicament of leading one's own life. It asks each of us to try to grasp the overall shape of his or her life. It provokes reflection on what is worthy of our attention, what it is admirable to become, and on what makes life worthwhile.

Thus, while welcoming strictly moral concerns, a virtue approach also makes room for neglected ethical concerns such as the pursuit of a personal project. Where the ideas of self-interest and altruism set up a problem of distribution of existing goods among ready-made selves, ethical projects make new goods available, enriching social life and helping the agent articulate his or her distinctiveness.

Consolidating this contemporary, existentialist reading of virtue ethics is only one contribution of *GLoT*. The key move in my account is to show how such a conception of ethics changes our view of professional ethics. It widens our focus beyond professional obligation to consider the flourishing of the practitioner. Some virtue ethics of the professions simply adopt language of character and disposition in the service of an ethics that remains essentially consequentialist or deontological. In contrast, *GLoT* foregrounds the question of how work contributes to the flourishing of the practitioner: how a practice such as teaching helps teachers, and in turn all of us, to answer Socrates' question.

One might call this "applied" virtue ethics if not for one small problem: it is not applied. Virtue ethics is inherently practical; it gives us resources for challenging the very distinction between principle and application. Here I follow Alasdair MacIntyre in exploring practices as themselves moral sources, distinctive spheres providing access to undiscovered aspects of the good (that which we deem excellent to achieve, worthwhile to engage in, admirable to become, marvelous to behold, and so on). On this view, we do not first work out our principles and then apply them. Our ethical education occurs in the thick of particular, practical pursuits.

And MacIntyre is only one of several major twentieth century thinkers who draw their key inspiration from the practical dimensions of Aristotle's ethics, building on his account of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Thinkers such as MacIntyre, along with John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott, and Hans-Georg Gadamer can be shown to form a loose school of "neo-praxis" philosophy. Together they help us move past the dichotomies between theory and application, tradition and reason, affiliation and self-cultivation. In *GLoT* I pull these thinkers into a common conversation about the nature and meaning of work and especially that of teaching.

The book is structured as follows. Part One considers the ethical dimensions of work (in general), exploring such questions as: How do personal projects relate to professional commitments? What happens to traditions of practice in modern bureaucratic, instrumental

institutions? Which of the major modes of practical engagement with the world are privileged in modern occupations? What forms of knowing and learning are required for and enabled by practice? In Part Two, I deepen the exploration of each of these questions by pursuing it on the terrain of teaching. I consider the place of self-interest in a helping profession; the tensions between teaching and schooling; whether the classroom can be a stage for the teacher's self-enactment; and how tending to the growth of others can both promote and stifle one's own growth.

My overarching thesis, then, is twofold: first, that ethics needs teaching; and second, that teaching needs ethics. To bear out the first idea, I try to show how we get fresh traction with well-worn ethical issues—for example, the relationship between altruism and self-interest, or the nature of judgment—when we work them on the “rough ground” of teaching.² Making the case that ethics matters in teaching is not difficult if all we mean is that given their significant contact with, authority over, and responsibility for the young, the moral conduct of teachers is serious business. But *GLoT* seeks to go beyond these familiar concerns of moral professionalism to target the eudaimonistic dimensions of teaching. Here, there is a genuine question: why does the flourishing of the teacher matter for education?

My broad answer to this question can be stated succinctly, as an argument with three steps: (1) education centrally involves self-cultivation; (2) the achieved and ongoing self-cultivation of teachers is a necessary condition of fostering self-cultivation in students; (3) therefore, the self-cultivation of teachers is a necessary condition of education in its fullest sense.

If we zoom in on any one moment in the educational process, teaching may appear as transmission of knowledge and skills; but these moments make sense only against the background of a longer trajectory of personal development. Ultimately, a good teacher helps students cultivate their talents and capacities for a life that is meaningful and rich, responsive and responsible. The teacher him or herself must exemplify this robust personhood in order to serve as a catalyst for student transformation.

What especially concerns me in *The Good Life of Teaching* is to show that good teaching is neither selfish nor selfless, but “self-ful,” and to probe the sources of our resistance to this conclusion. Teaching is typically discussed in terms of service, as a profession that requires—as a practical matter if not a guiding ideal—a significant degree of self-sacrifice. However, if my argument is correct, teachers cannot inspire their students'

development unless they also find ways to keep developing themselves. If the daily practice of schooling is stultifying for teachers, we may lose teachers to burn out or, worse, retain them in a state of "burn in." Teachers without a growing edge often vent their frustration on students, and precisely on those parts of their students that remind them of what they have sacrificed themselves: their capacity to grow and change.

At the heart of my book is the idea that if teaching is to be more than mere instruction, and if schools are truly to educate, then we have to combat the practical and intellectual forces that make the flourishing of the teacher seem like a contradiction in terms. We must challenge the conditions in teacher preparation and practice that make it difficult for teachers to turn their practice into a vehicle for their own growth; we must challenge discourses that rationalize this imbalance in the fundamental educational equation; and we must create new forms of teacher education (initial and ongoing) that assure spaces for the teacher's own growing self.

As a contribution in this direction, the closing chapter of the book offers a framework for grasping the intellectual seriousness and humanistic significance of teaching. It describes the kind of questions that could and should animate both preparation and practice if teachers are to make their teaching a site of, in Dewey's words, "a widening and deepening of conscious life—a more intense, disciplined, and expanding realization of meanings."³

What stands out in reading these four reviews is how, in addition to responding sympathetically and critically to my work, all four reviewers found my book to be an occasion to carry their own thinking about the ethics of teaching further. An author can ask for nothing better than this.

Here, I would like to offer a brief response, doing my best to address the main criticisms of my argument and noting where these reviewers, by focusing on the particular domain of music teaching, enrich our understanding of the ethics of teaching.

All of the major criticisms of my argument can be situated in relation to my claim that we need a virtue ethics of teaching in order to help us move past our tendency to dichotomize teacher motivation into lofty altruism and base self-interest, and to recover the self-fulness of the teacher.

For Silverman and Whale, I have the problem about right, but have chosen the wrong tool for the job. Both argue that virtue ethics is liable to exacerbate the very dichotomy I lament. Both offer relational alternatives: Buber-inspired care theory in the case of Silverman; Buber himself in the case of Whale.

For Regelski, it is not a different solution we need but a different problem. He sees the distinction between the altruistic and the self-interested teacher as important, helping us root out betrayals of the moral core of good teaching. Ironically, though, I have, on Regelski's view, chosen the right tool for the wrong job, even if I am using it incorrectly. That is, he sees me as going too far in emphasizing the agent-centricity and other extra-moral dimensions of virtue ethics, countering with an Aristotle much closer to Kant and Mill, and quite suited to generating the kind of normative force he seeks in professional ethics.

While Morton sees me as having gotten the problem and the solution more or less right, she adds a crucial friendly amendment. With her analysis of the hungry ghost, she points out a bias in my account. Given the rhetoric of service in the helping professions, I spend most of my time worrying about the tendency toward self-abnegation; however, as she rightly points out, genuine self-cultivation can just as easily be subverted by contemporary forms of self-indulgence.

According to Whale and Silverman, virtue ethics cannot, as I claim, help us think our way past the dichotomies between duty and inclination, altruism and self-interest, but at best leaves the agent desperately trying to balance or juggle concerns (what I want and what the other needs) which have been set up as irreconcilable.

For Whale, not only can virtue ethics not do the job, there is indeed "just one way of understanding desire that holds together self and other in equal regard," namely Buber's relational philosophical anthropology (this issue). The "only possible answer" to Socrates' question, How should one live?, Whale suggests, "lies in re-conceiving of every human action and desire as the site of human meeting" (this issue). On Whale's reading of Buber, human beings have one core desire, the desire to realize one's distinctiveness. But for a Buberian, this quest for self-realization can only occur in relation, where in true meeting we discover both the otherness of the other and our own otherness (from our received and reduced hypostasizations of self).

Silverman draws less on Buber himself and more on the Buber-inspired Noddings (and care theory generally) and on enaction theory. From Noddings, she derives the idea that caring relationships form the kernel of the good life. Silverman shares my worry about teacher burnout but argues that the choice is not between care of the other and care of the self, but between integral and compromised caring relations. When a true relation of care exists, Silverman holds, the one caring is enriched as much as the cared-for. From the latter she takes the notion that there is no self in the first place without relation. Quoting Thompson, she writes that ““human subjectivity is from the outset intersubjectivity, and no mind is an island”” (this issue, 98).

What is most striking about these responses is how close they come to my own conclusion, in my brief but crucial discussion of Jessica Benjamin: “Intersubjectivity is actually more fundamental than subjectivity. There is no selfhood without recognition, and there is no recognition without mutuality. It takes, if you will, two persons to make a person” (*GLoT* 168).

What is so helpful about Benjamin’s theory is the way it helps us appreciate not only the centrality of intersubjective phenomena but its complex, dialectical nature and unrelenting instability. Just as Whale urges me to, I conclude that awareness of the distinctiveness of self and other emerge in tandem and within relation, as we climb out of the hall of mirrors of identification and projection and achieve greater contact with the differentiated other. But Benjamin also shows us how difficult such relationships are to set up and sustain, a difficulty at least not immediately suggested by the metaphor of meeting.

Whale’s criticism makes it apparent that I have not made sufficiently clear my subscription to an intersubjective philosophical anthropology, though neither is this aspect of my work terribly hidden. The logic identified by Benjamin in interpersonal relations is echoed in Gadamer’s account of the dialogue with tradition (which plays a starring role in Chapters 4 and 8). Our encounters with traditionary texts are not dialogues arranged between strangers. Rather, the strangeness of the text and of ourselves emerges in the course of the dialogue (and then only if we slowly learn to notice the ways we prefigure the otherness of the text to fit into our categories). This basic idea appears again in my discussion of Hegel’s concept of practical *Bildung* (*GLoT* 7).

Nor do I have any interest in “man” as an “island.” I thought Donne settled this in 1624, but if not, then Charles Taylor’s extension into ethics of Mead’s social psychological

insights and Wittgenstein's private language argument sealed the deal (I treat this issue, among other places, on pages 24–5). I am certainly sympathetic to Silverman's basic point that authentic, substantive relations with students are full of mutuality and probably constitute one of the chief goods internal to the practice of teaching. As I tried to show in my critical explorations of the tensions between schooling and teaching (see, e.g., Chapter 6, 248–54, and *passim*), I am also sympathetic to the notion that there are structural conditions that make the realization of teaching's internal goods impossible. I nowhere mean to suggest that changes in the teacher's stance are a panacea for the problems of teacher flourishing.

Indeed, I worry that Whale and Silverman themselves go too far in this direction, acting like a complex practical problem can be countered by theoretical fiat. If we accept the theories of Buber and Noddings then we will see that to give is to receive. And indeed, to give is to receive... except when it is not.⁴ We must explore where and why mutuality in (asymmetrical) pedagogical relationships (in the context of modern schooling) flourish and fail; it is not helpful to theoretically demand their existence. And this is precisely what is valuable about Silverman's personal story. She gives a sense of how possible and how fragile it is to teach in a way that does justice both to the teacher's vocation and the "dominant vocation" of the person who teaches (with this phrase, Dewey refers to our existential task to keep becoming; I discuss this in Chapters 4, 5, and 8). But in offering us this story she also proves the worth of Socrates' question. She is wrestling with her life narrative, with what is genuinely good and how to keep such goods near the center of her life. She is no island: the goods that move her are relational. And yet no one can face Socrates' question on her behalf.

In replying to Morton and Regelski, and here I must be more brief, I would like to emphasize how their responses not only challenge my argument, but extend it in light of issues particular to music education. Though there is much in Regelski's lengthy and erudite response, the central worry seems to be that teachers, and perhaps especially music teachers, may lack sufficient altruism. That is, contrary to my worry that caught up in the needs of students, teachers may forget to attend to their own needs, Regelski suggests that music teachers neglect the fundamental requirement of teaching: to be oriented toward the growth of one's students. He offers multiple candidates for what pulls teachers away from this orientation. First, he suggests that it is often the real connection music teachers feel for the goods of

music that distract them from the needs of students. Regelski writes, “The temptation is great, then, for [teachers who are also musicians] to be self-fully rewarded by the music-making they do with their students and, consequently, to assume that just performing music with students (or providing ‘experiences’ and ‘activities’ in general music classes) is automatically educative” (this issue, 52). And he adds interesting variations: the teacher who preaches a gospel of classical music denigrating other musics; the teacher who prioritizes the quality of the student ensemble’s performance without thinking of the costs of promoting hyper-competitiveness and excluding students. Such “musicianist” teachers, Regelski suggests, are those “who, with quasi-religious zeal, put music, musical values, and their own musical interests and needs in the forefront of their teaching practices, thus treating their students as proto-professional musicians in the same way they were treated by their university directors and studio teachers” (this issue).

In a nutshell, Regelski counters my image, of a teacher run down by years of self-neglect in service to the needs of students, with an image of a person who has one foot in the helping profession of music education and the other in the less other-directed practice of music making: a person who has ample time outside of work for self-cultivation and enjoyment, and who blithely carries this me-and-my-music-first attitude into the classroom to the detriment of students. My response is that my interest was and remains how teachers could, without sacrificing their fundamental pedagogical orientation, make their practice into vehicles of their own flourishing. (For my reading of how the goods of teaching flow *from* the teacher’s attentiveness to students, subject matter, and the relations of students to the subject matter, see Chapter 8). I certainly do not deny the possibility that one can have a range of vocations and avocations each with different forms or degrees of self-fulness. However, I maintain that it is dangerous if one is existentially abstemious in one’s primary vocation. As I remark in Chapter 1, we cannot quarantine our pursuit of the good life to the weekend. However, I had hoped to make equally clear that one is not a self-ful *teacher* if one must abandon the fundamental ethos of teaching in order to be fulfilled in the classroom.

What I most appreciate about Regelski’s response and similar moments in the other three responses is the way that the particular terrain of music education helps qualify and extend my conclusions. As I argue, the meaning of the good life is productively refracted (though not hopelessly splintered) in the prism of the many longstanding practices. And while I argue, *contra* MacIntyre, that teaching is a practice, I freely admit that finding the right scale

here is key. For it may be that the goods internal to Reggio Emilia style primary education are rather different from middle school English and again from high school band direction. And here a point made by several of my reviewers is of particular interest. The music teacher (like, on the whole, the teacher of drama, the athletic coach, the chess club sponsor, et al.) typically has a dual existence as a member of two practices. And whereas some instruction in so-called academic subjects can too often and too easily degenerate from engaging in poetry, history, or math to just doing school, the para-curricular subjects seem to do better at maintaining the integrity of the practice. To be sure, Regelski's cautionary tales are well-taken; but must we not also insist that the presence of the practice in a vital way—really putting on a play, really playing soccer as the game is to be played, really making music with insight and feeling, etc.—is the reason these school subjects (despite their official marginalization) remain vividly at the center of school memories for so many?

In the Introduction, I offer the image of the artist, with work whose existential dimensions are clear, with a studio space to withdraw to between worldly engagements, and I offer this image as a telling contrast to the work of school-teaching as typically configured. I am asking in effect what happens to the artist in the teacher. What Regelski and others helpfully point out is the way teachers of the arts (musical, visual, and dramatic) face this question in a much more explicit and pointed way. How does one keep a genuine foothold in each practical world without making a mockery of either? I welcome this as a wonderfully rich question, just the sort we should be debating in the ethics of teaching for which I call.

Let me close by simply underlining the generous and insightful contribution of Charlene Morton. I love the way she literalizes and then extends the central metaphor of the epigraph to Chapter 5. With Kafka, I figure the teacher's asceticism as a kind of eating disorder. But to my worry that teachers will forget to seek nourishment in trying to provide for others, that they may over time lose touch with what it is that would feed them, and that they might finally rationalize their own lostness as a steely virtue, Morton offers another diagnosis. She sees music teachers (and other teachers, and, indeed, all of us in late capitalism) as even more likely to suffer from a kind of bulimia. Feeling empty, we greedily stuff ourselves with empty calories, only to feel more empty. I had, of course, built a formal symmetry into my analysis, distancing self-cultivation not only from selflessness but also from self-interest narrowly construed. And in various places I do bear this out: for example in my discussion of Arendt, I note how what she calls "action" simultaneously lifts us out of our

unsatisfying little world of personal concerns and enacts who we are in our distinctiveness (see Chapters 3 and 7). At the same time, I find Morton's riff on this topic fresh and insightful. She describes well how and why the question is not only one of giving and taking but about the genuineness of the goods we do pursue, and about the addictiveness of "getting and spending" (Wordsworth) even when the goods are ostensibly not of the crassly material variety.

Let me end where I began, by expressing my gratitude to these scholars for sharing both their points of connection and their disagreements.

Notes

¹ Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

² I refer of course to Wittgenstein's famous statement in §107 in the *Philosophical Investigations*, but also to Joe Dunne's pioneering *Back to the Rough Ground*. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 46e; and Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 359.

⁴ This nice phrase comes from Wayne Bowman in personal correspondence.