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Abstract

Alistair Miller's book, *A New Vision of Liberal Education*, is a dilation of his doctoral thesis, but it is enormously ambitious in aim: "My specific aim in this book is to explore whether aspects of the two traditions [of Enlightenment and Aristotelian ethics] might be synthesised in the concrete form of a liberal-humanist education" (NVLE, 11). Indeed, the arc of Miller's argument ranges from these contrasting traditions of moral philosophy, through alternate versions of liberal education, to a proposal for curricular content. The book is well researched and proceeds dialectically, as Miller sifts through scholarship on liberal education, moral education, and curricula, oscillating between exploratory analysis and prescription. With an abundance of arguments, Miller's "new vision" emerges from a series of intellectual hybridizations. The overarching motivation for Miller, however, is to describe an educational vision that is "liberal" and yet embraces the goodness of ordinary experience — "the unexamined life" — and thereby to reject the presumption that human flourishing requires a philosophical or intellectual life. Whether his hybrid vision is conceptually stable; whether and how his vision is "new"; whether the exploration succeeds in its ambitions — all issues I will discuss — Miller advances a serious and provocative set of proposals for educational theory and practice. [excerpt]

Keywords

Alistair Miller, education, liberal education, unexamined life

Disciplines

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A New Vision of Liberal Education: The Good of the Unexamined Life

Alistair Miller

Routledge, 2016. Pp. 210.

Alistair Miller's book, *A New Vision of Liberal Education*, is a dilation of his doctoral thesis, but it is enormously ambitious in aim: "My specific aim in this book is to explore whether aspects of the two traditions [of Enlightenment and Aristotelian ethics] might be synthesised in the concrete form of a liberal-humanist education" (*NVLE*, 11). Indeed, the arc of Miller's argument ranges from these contrasting traditions of moral philosophy, through alternate versions of liberal education, to a proposal for curricular content. The book is well researched and proceeds dialectically, as Miller sifts through scholarship on liberal education, moral education, and curricula, oscillating between exploratory analysis and prescription. With an abundance of arguments, Miller's "new vision" emerges from a series of intellectual hybridizations. The overarching motivation for Miller, however, is to describe an educational vision that is "liberal" and yet embraces the goodness of ordinary experience—"the unexamined life"—and thereby to reject the presumption that human flourishing requires a philosophical or intellectual life. Whether his hybrid vision is conceptually stable; whether and how his vision is "new"; whether the exploration succeeds in its ambitions—all issues I will discuss—Miller advances a serious and provocative set of proposals for educational theory and practice.

The problematic context for Miller's work is familiar to all educational philosophers: tension between elitist and democratic values in liberal education; tension between a unified school curriculum of general education and the varying aptitudes and pluralistic life aspirations of pupils; perennial concern to establish an effective connection between pedagogy and character formation; and the question of appropriate roles for the moral and the intellectual in the

cultivation of flourishing lives. I commend Miller for addressing these and related issues through the careful refinement of a comprehensive position—even though I confess to significant divergences from his proposed solutions. The educational concerns he addresses are philosophically significant and pragmatically pungent, and he writes with the conviction that our aims matter in shaping the worthiness of outcomes.

My approach will be to follow the arc of Miller’s argument, discussing aspects of his views on morality, liberal education, and the secondary school curriculum. I must of necessity be selective. This is a richly argumentative text, and it presents many tempting endorsements and objections for this reader that I must pass by. In the end, I will turn to an assessment of Miller’s success in achieving a new vision for liberal education.

1. The Moral Vision

The first half of Miller’s book is devoted to articulating a moral vision that will ground “the justified aims of education.” He begins by contrasting two Enlightenment accounts of practical rationality: that of Hume and Kant. He quickly concludes that, concerning morality, “Whereas Hume is all motivation and no reason, Kant might be said to be all reason and no motivation” (NVLE, 14). He argues that Hume assumes our “needs, interests, desires and ends (or goals)...come ready-formed” (NVLE, 12) and offers no ground for determining which dispositions, passions, interests, values, or goals are *worth* fostering. Kant, on the other hand, never explains “how normative reasons for actions can motivate a person to act” (NVLE, 15); Kant never identifies the source of our will to do what is right. Though both versions tell us what *not* to do (i.e., infringe on others), neither tells us what we *should* do with our lives. Miller summarizes: “The problem with Enlightenment rationality is that because it takes freedom to be

the sovereign moral concept, the moral questions ‘How should I live?’ and ‘What is the good life for me?’ remain undetermined” (NVLE, 20).

Miller turns hopefully to an Aristotelian approach. Aristotle’s ethical vision does offer a shared sense of the good: human flourishing. In addition, it prescribes not a conquering of desire by reason, or of reason by desire, but a development of both in harmony, through habituation in virtuous action under the guidance of *phronesis*, practical wisdom. Miller claims that “Aristotelian ethics might be regarded as a synthesis of Kantian rationalism and Humean naturalism” (NVLE, 21). Aristotle thus supplies for Miller what he finds missing in Kant: “the Aristotelian insight that a person must be habituated, cultivated, formed by education and upbringing into a certain sort of person”; and also what he finds missing in Hume: “the Aristotelian insight that human nature...is formed in a civilisation through which higher transcendent interests and values are...are mediated” (ibid.). Miller’s treatment of these monumental moral philosophies is necessarily broad-brush, but the result is persuasive and plausible for his purposes. With judicious modification appropriate to liberal democracies, Miller believes Aristotle’s ethical vision might well provide the moral basis for liberal education.

So far, so good. I concur that aspects of Aristotle’s eudaimonistic ethic may ground liberal education; indeed I have championed this connection primarily in regard to the supreme aim of human flourishing and the resultant opening of a rich virtue epistemology.¹ Miller pursues this connection assiduously and derives much from it, though he also makes significant modifications. Miller views Aristotle through the lens of Alasdair MacIntyre, especially MacIntyre’s concept of a *practice*.² This unsurprising pairing of Aristotle and MacIntyre leads Miller to quite surprising and, for me, troublesome conclusions.

In this Aristotelian-*cum*-MacIntyre approach, focus is on virtues, which are defined in relation to the goal of a practice (a *telos*). Becoming virtuous requires initiation into a practice, habituation, and a period of apprenticeship. One cannot appreciate the good that is distinctive to a practice from the “outside”; one must have been initiated into the practice. Though practical wisdom is required for the virtues, Miller argues (*contra* Aristotle) that “*phronesis* cannot usefully be conceived...as an architectonic intellectual virtue incorporating all forms of practical judgment, because it is impossible to specify the nature of the experience and moral instruction that might produce it in practice....However, it is possible to conceive *phronesis* in the more restricted sense of ‘political judgment’”—that is, “practical judgments about human affairs” (NVLE, 46).³ Miller concludes that both the facts of human development and socialization as well as logical necessity make it impossible for any judgment or practical reasoning to be exercised outside of a practice. In other words, we are already and always initiated; there is no life space outside of participation in practices.

Extrapolating from this claim, Miller rejects the ideal of autonomy. He not only dismisses personal autonomy as an educational aim, he also seems to deny its conceptual coherence. Miller says: “I questioned the assumption of many philosophers of education that the overriding aim of education should be to endow people with ‘personal autonomy’—autonomy in the sense of possessing the capacity to articulate and justify (i.e., to reflect ‘critically’ on) one’s underlying moral principles and values” (NVLE, 194).⁴ Among his reasons are that all values associated with a worthwhile life are located within a socio-cultural tradition and develop through habituation, and that “the reflective engagement in the practices of ordinary life simply does not require (and *could not* require) ‘critical’ reflection on the nature of the underlying ‘paradigmatic’ principles, values and goods of these practices” (ibid.). Miller’s several strands

of argument seem to overdetermine his case: he claims variously that: (1) engaging in critical reasoning and exercising autonomy are not worthy educational goals because they are not required for a flourishing life; (2) moreover, most pupils do not possess the interest or intellectual aptitude for critical reasoning; (3) elevation of critical reasoning thus privileges a particular philosophical, intellectualist personality; and (4) what is more, the ideal of autonomy is logically impossible anyway and appears to exist only when its proponents self-deceptively claim a perspective independent of a tradition or practice.

Miller hopes to show that “the unexamined life” is worthwhile; that one can live “an ordinary life” of participation in practices, a life without critical reflection on values, and it can be a morally good, flourishing life. The values and virtues of such a life are intrinsic to the practices in which it is engaged; they are acquired through habituation—not through philosophical questioning. Miller even resists MacIntyre’s stipulation that “a living tradition of inquiry is in part constituted by a ‘continuous argument’ as to the nature of its goods” (NVLE, 52), because it suggests that participants in a practice are continually engaged in rational critique and justification of its axiological basis. Miller analogizes Kuhnian paradigms and MacIntyre’s practices; he notes that “for scientific research and applied science to be carried on at all, there must be a generally accepted paradigm.” Most people simply work within the standard paradigm. He concludes that “radical innovation...is generally speaking produced by scientists of exceptional imagination and creative power” (NVLE 55). The morality of such an “unexamined,” paradigmatic life derives from tacit knowledge, not from explicit articulation of metaethical choices. Miller intends all these descriptors (“ordinary,” “unexamined,” “flourishing,” “unreflective,” “moral,” etc.) to denote an identifiable, unified sort of life, though

they seem to name overlapping but incongruent characteristics. But what mainly unites such lives is what they are not—they are not philosophical or intellectual or “critical.”

Here I must confess confusion: is the unexamined life claimed as: (1) a worthy life for naturally non-philosophical people; (2) the best life *because* it is not philosophical; or (3) the only sort of life truly possible, regardless of philosophical pretensions? At various points, it seems Miller claims all three. And if there is a good to be found for some in the practice of philosophical reflection or critical thinking, does that good not enhance ordinary life?

2. The Educational Vision

If the proper aim of liberal education is not autonomy and critical thinking, what is it? What values and virtues should be promoted, and by what methods? How should we structure the curriculum? Miller focuses on secondary education in answering these questions. He makes no distinction between general and liberal education; and his answers are intended for universal education in liberal democracies.⁵

Miller believes that the overarching aim of a flourishing life requires: (1) preparing students for engagement in worthy practices and (2) developing their ability to make sound practical judgments about human affairs. The virtues he elevates are traits conducive to wholehearted engagement in practices. He tentatively identifies five groups: (1) “the intellectual virtues,” by which he means “dispositions governing our attitude to work (industry, application, perseverance, concentration...)...because they are essential for undertaking the lengthy period of apprenticeship training that is needed if a practice is to be mastered” (NVLE, 93); (2) “the caring virtues,” including kindness, compassion, empathy, and generosity; (3) justice; (4) courage and

honesty; and (5) temperance. He regards wisdom or *phronesis* not as virtues, but “rather as goods that arise from the exercise of other virtues and out of the engagement in practices” (ibid.).

Our contemporary curriculum that presents students with a set of disciplines is not adequate, Miller argues, for these educational purposes. Like many incarnations of liberal education, it harbors intellectualist assumptions, caters only to certain academic interests and aptitudes, and fails to prepare students for ordinary life. Moreover, it does not achieve even its avowed but misguided aims, Miller claims—though he acknowledges it “has merit for the small minority of pupils with the aptitude and inclination for sustained academic study...those for whom the pursuit of knowledge and truth as an end-in-itself can serve as a motivating ideal” (NVLE, 139). Viewing the disciplines as practices, Miller persuasively argues that one cannot realize the goods internal to, say, mathematics or history, by relatively brief, introductory experiences. Realizing the goods of a complex practice requires habituation, apprenticeship, and extended time to learn through a range of experiences. Realizing the good of mathematics requires lengthy, specialized study at more advanced levels; and it also requires ability and interest in those who pursue it. Without these, even earnest teaching will provide only “superficial knowledge” and drudgery.

But the deeper problem, says Miller, is that this discipline-centered approach rests on a philosophical, “research” model of liberal education that values cultivation of intellectual powers, critical reasoning regarding values and presuppositions, and the pursuit of theoretical understanding and epistemic autonomy. Miller’s preference is an approach based on a rhetorical, neo-Roman, “humanist” model. Its characteristics are: (1) content “drawn from the humanities rather than the sciences—and from the humanities treated in a particular way: not primarily as disciplines worthy of study...or as means of pursuing knowledge and truth for its own sake, or

even as means of training the mind, but as repositories of stories and lessons of human experience” (NVLE, 147); (2) reasoning that is practical rather than theoretical, seeking wise decisions rather than explanatory theories; and (3) training of the ability to articulate one’s best thoughts and to argue persuasively from one’s deepest values.

In this rhetorical spirit, Miller proposes a core curriculum that features grammar and rhetoric and the humanities, aimed not at producing literary sensibility, but “reconceptualising literacy as the art of developing and structuring an argument...and the humanities as funds of stories of human experience—a moral and cultural inheritance” (NVLE, 168-69). He also proposes to feature one subject studied in depth, “a subject that need not be academic in nature but that must have the characteristics of a practice and, so far as possible, be wholeheartedly engaged in. It would thereby serve to inculcate the virtues, primarily intellectual but also moral, that are essential for adult engagement in practices” (NVLE, 195).⁶ The subject might be cooking or carpentry or music as well as history or mathematics. “There is...no reason that pupils should not specialize early in the craft, trade, or art form that they envisage one day being their vocation” (so long as the choice is a worthwhile activity)...and “it is unlikely that a pupil’s passionate interest in a particular field will have no relevance to some future occupation” (NVLE, 132).

There is much to say about this proposal, but at the practical level, one wonders how many such studies-in-depth any one school can offer? And is this arbitrarily chosen subject intended as an exemplary, sustained apprenticeship with benefits transferable to other practices? Surely not: according to Miller, if it is to have “wholehearted” engagement, it would require at least a rough match between the selected subject and each student’s inclination and ability. Although I agree that the values of craftsmanship are salutary and regrettably absent from most

contemporary liberal education curricula, they may better be located in co-curricular programs and internship opportunities. They are—as Miller acknowledges—currently given space at the undergraduate level in co-curricular programs, internships, outdoor challenge programs, and service learning.

Miller’s version of grammar and rhetoric is designed to prepare students both “to lead a virtuous life and to reconcile or choose between conflicting goods” (NVLE 168)—in short to have practical judgment about human affairs (*phronesis*). Yet, Miller claims, there is little need for the critique of a tradition from within and no possibility of autonomous, critical reflection on one’s choice of practices from an independent perspective. His moralistic use of literature as a repository of life-lessons does more than reject aesthetic formalism: it encourages literalist readings, and it collapses to immediate and direct impact what should be a longer and subtler psychological chain between the reading of literature and the shaping of character.⁷ Moreover, if this is to be the comprehensive core curriculum, the aspirations for quantitative, scientific, historical, and political literacy are quietly abandoned.

3. The New Vision

Miller writes, “My argument in this book is neither radical nor conservative; rather, it is quite simply, that the ordinary life, ‘the unexamined life’, can also be the good life” (NVLE, 191). I want to question both these assertions.

First, let me speak to the goodness of the unexamined life. “Simple goodness” is indeed a genuine phenomenon. I refer to the natural, unphilosophical, and morally good character displayed by a person whose virtues are unself-conscious and who forgoes metaethical justification. As Bernard Williams, Raimond Gaita, Christopher Cordner, and other thinkers

have reminded us, such simple goodness is not often comprehended in our formal ethical theories.⁸ But although simple goodness is real, without the capacity for critical reflection, it is fragile. Unexpected events, life's passages, contact with the unfamiliar, quiet thoughtful moments—such experiences may generate what Nel Noddings called “questions central to life.”⁹ They prod us to examine our lives. And these proddings are not as rare as Miller implies; they are not as scarce as paradigm-shattering scientific theories. They arise not just for philosophers or intellectuals, but for craftspersons and “ordinary” others busily pursuing the goods of their practices. But the resources one needs fully to articulate, pursue, and perhaps resolve for oneself such questions, essentially involve the capacity for self-reflection and critical thought. Reliance on habituation and the tacit ethos of a practice or craft leaves one vulnerable to ignorance, to challenges to cherished values, and to the suasion of the powerful. It downplays the importance of moral understanding.¹⁰

Simple goodness can be exploited. The goodness displayed in interpersonal interactions can sometimes be drawn to support public policies that are morally reprehensible. What protects this goodness and prevents exploitation is *phronesis*. Aristotle linked practical and theoretical wisdom, but Miller's conception of practical judgment does not include critical reflection or autonomy. What is left, I believe, is not sufficient to be protective.

When I review Miller's educational proposals, what I find missing is the sense of liberal education as *liberating*. This has been a professed aim of liberal education from its ancient origins: to free students from narrow prejudice and mindless rehearsal that results from knowing only the status quo, from having no self-reflection, critical thought, or enlargement of imagination. I find little regard for the transformative power of education in this book. Miller stresses that pupils have the abilities and interests they do; educators should initiate them into

practices that draw upon these (apparently rather limiting) constraints. Though Miller wishes to champion the goodness of ordinary life, this sense of the “given-ness” and permanence of aptitudes and interests can, ironically, encourage condescension: some have critical capacities; most just don’t.¹¹

I agree that it is a narrow, elitist prejudice that equates the flourishing life, the aim of education, with being a sophisticated moral philosopher. But avoiding that does not require the abandonment of autonomy or self-reflection. Miller is clear that, as citizens of liberal democracies, all students need to acquire practical judgment regarding human affairs; but this seems not to include much in the way of theoretical understanding. The “intellectual” virtues he commends are those needed to be an apt apprentice. Initiated into a practice deemed worthwhile, habituated into its virtues, individuals can enjoy distinctive intrinsic goods, leaving unexamined the basic principles or values of the practice. Miller does not challenge the context of liberal democracy, nor does he engage feminist or postmodernist scholarship. For these reasons, I find Miller’s assumptions and proposal to be deeply conservative: flourishing as the benign neglect of potentially subversive critical thinking.

Fifty years ago, R. S. Peters authored *Ethics and Education*. He too set out to explicate the moral basis of education and asserted that “Education involves the initiation of others into worth-while activities.”¹² Miller retains the basic philosophical framework of the Peters era, but much of the newness of his vision involves the rejection of specific elements: autonomy, critical thinking, a general education that features an introductory array of disciplines, and the need for philosophical reflection on the goods and assumptions of practices in which one may engage.

¹ See Daniel R. DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish: A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education* (New York: Continuum/Bloomsbury, 2012).

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Bloomington: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

³ It would have enhanced Miller's presentation had he explicitly distinguished *praxis* (practical reasoning) from *phronesis* (practical wisdom, the exercise of practical reasoning with excellence).

⁴ The rejection of autonomy as libertarian free will would perhaps be less surprising; but this is a rejection of the basic capacity for critical thinking about one's values and commitments.

⁵ An aspect of Miller's intellectual hybridization is that he retains the context of liberal democracies while rejecting its paramount values of intellectual freedom and autonomy in education.

⁶ By "intellectual virtues," recall, Miller means those traits that facilitate apprenticeship: perseverance, attention, industry, etc.

⁷ The proposal echoes Plato's requirements for literature in *Republic* and the view of William J. Bennett, *Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁸ See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Christopher Cordner, *Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

⁹ Nel Noddings, "Conversation as Moral Education," in *Educating Moral People* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 123-24.

¹⁰ See my *Learning to Flourish*, 193-99.

¹¹ It would have the accuracy of caricature to say that Miller's "simple life" is what Plato envisioned for his artisan class in *Republic*: virtuous engagement in practices to which individuals are suited by aptitude; the emulation of moral exemplars in literature; and the lack of ability or need for dialectic, which should be left to those naturally capable.

¹² R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 71.