

Close Engagements of a Collegial Kind: an Introduction

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Michael Hand's project in *A Theory of Moral Education* (Routledge, 2018) is to establish a rationally defensible core set of moral standards. Teachers and parents can then teach this to children, enlist their full moral commitment to it with penalties for non-compliance, without having the charge of indoctrination levelled at them. This forcefully argued thesis has already attracted much attention, including responses in this journal and others, reviews and another forthcoming symposium (e.g. Clayton and Stevens, forthcoming; D'Olimpio, forthcoming; Drerup, forthcoming; Ferkany, 2018; Maxwell, forthcoming; Peterson, 2018; Tillson, 2017; White, 2016, 2017).

There are striking parallels between this ambitious project and a body of work on moral education in the 1970s. Three stand out.

First, the contributors to that earlier body of work, (prominently, e.g., Richard Peters, 1974; Paul Hirst, 1974; John Wilson 1977, but others too), were similarly ambitious in their desire to put moral education on a solidly rational foundation and keen, like Hand, to establish this independently of theological support. This is explicit in the title of Hirst's 1974 monograph, *Moral Education in a Secular Society*. Again, like Hand, their bugbear was indoctrination. Hand's work, like the earlier work, is distinguished by its clarity and its confidence in the persuasiveness of painstakingly careful argumentation in establishing a basis for moral education. He controversially claims, 'We are morally motivated to the extent that we are moved to help those in need and refrain from violence by a subscription to a moral code that requires these things.' (Hand, 2018, p9)

Second, Michael Hand is focussed on real world educational problems, using the term 'practitioner-aligned' to describe his theory. He means by that that the 'question it purports to answer, or the problem it purports to solve, is one recognised by and troubling to practitioners' (Hand, 2018, p13). Hand has in mind the difficulty facing parents and teachers who, aware of their responsibilities for the moral education of their children and school students, are often uncertain of what they should be doing.

Philosophers of education working in the field in the 1960s and 1970s shared this concern. Their writing and the in-service courses and day conferences they ran were similarly intended to illuminate issues in moral education felt to be troubling to teachers and parents, including the place of indoctrination and indeed punishment.

Third, this suite of critical commentaries and Hand's response to them resembles the earlier work in its constructively collegial nature. In the 1960s and early 1970s some staff and doctoral students working on moral education and attached to the Institute of Education and Kings College London formed what they termed 'The Moral Group'.

The Moral Group met frequently, two or three times a term, usually late in the evening after formal classes and seminars. Seriously committed to the part philosophy of education could play in the improvement of education, they read each other's draft thesis or book chapters, listened to each other's half-formulated ideas and felt a responsibility, like Hand's critics, not to hold back on root-and-branch critique in the interests of forwarding the whole project. Members might use words like 'terrifying' and 'baptism of fire' to describe their feelings on presenting to the group and yet to have others read one's work so attentively was truly encouraging. And led to collaborative publications with other scholars. See, for example, the edited collection by Cochrane, Hamm, Kazepides, (1979), the first two of whom, along with three other contributors, were in the Moral Group.

The three responses to Hand's theory, very much in the spirit of that group, are impressively clear, well-argued and academically collegial.

Hand's elaboration of his position, even with caveats and qualifications, does not convince David Aldridge that confidence in the well-foundedness of a moral code will produce the human sympathy necessary to the moral life. One of the members of that 1970s group would have welcomed this. He was perplexed (and sad) that his working-class landlady who had nursed him through flu was not acting morally because she had no rational justification for her action: she 'just felt so very sorry for him'.

Doret de Ruyter notes in Hand's presentation of his case too many 'armchair' philosopher's generalisations and urges on him the wisdom of investigating how far

the empirical claims he employs in his normative arguments are solidly substantiated. How and in what way to draw on empirical research to strengthen, or to make more nuanced, claims was a concern of the Moral Group too, and inspired collaborative teaching and writing ventures with psychologists and sociologists.

Collegiality reminiscent of the Moral Group shines through De Ruyter's final comment to Hand encouraging him in a second edition of *A Theory of Moral Education* to draw on empirical work that could strengthen his case. Such encouragement is not surprising, because Doret de Ruyter was a member for years of a tightknit Netherlands group working on moral education and appreciates the benefits of collaboration in producing insightful and practically useful work (See, e.g., papers by Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker, 1999, 2004 in this Journal).

John Tillson, whilst admiring Hand's skills of lucid exposition, rigour and insight, has serious doubts about the problem-of-sociality justification which Hand claims supports his core set of moral standards. It seems to permit the impermissible as in the case of cruelty to animals and in the case of slavery perhaps even require it (if that were compatible with averting outbreaks of conflict and sustaining cooperation).

Michael Hand acknowledges the 'close engagement' of his three commentators with the text and their 'weighty' criticisms, but concedes little in his response. As any self-respecting member of the 1970s Moral Group might have done, he staunchly defends his central claims. This makes for tense reading, inviting the reader to consider: how far are the three critical commentaries on target? Have Hand's responses succeeded in effectively demolishing their criticisms? Are there further perspectives and responses, not found here, which need to be articulated? Perhaps in future issues of this journal more voices will join this debate.

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