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Indoctrination: What is it to Indoctrinate Someone?

Author: Chris Ranalli

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Schools are supposed to educate students by teaching them important facts and skills.

However, schools are sometimes accused of *indoctrinating* students: e.g., coercing them into believing religious views, failing to present widely-accepted scientific facts, or promoting controversial moral or political views.^[1]

But what is indoctrination anyway? Is it always bad? If so, why? Might some indoctrination be necessary, unavoidable, or even good?

This essay overviews notable answers to these questions.

1. What is Indoctrination?

Theories of indoctrination are divided between “content” (*what* is taught), “method” (*how* it is taught), and “outcome” theories (the *results* of teaching).^[2]

1.1. Content: Ideology

The *Ideology Theory of Indoctrination* is a popular *content*-based theory that claims that indoctrination differs from education when what’s being taught is an *ideology*.^[3]

An *ideology* is a worldview, a set of interconnected values and rigid beliefs about what the world is or should be like—which guide people’s thinking and action.^[4] Ideologies include Marxism, Christianity, Humanism, Islam, Nazism, and Liberal Democracy, among other political and religious worldviews.

The Ideology Theory of Indoctrination proposes if students are taught to believe, e.g., that Marxism is correct, that’s indoctrination because Marxism is an ideology.

But why think that teaching ideology is always indoctrination?

One reason is that teaching students to believe ideologies might seem at odds with the educational aim of fostering *intellectual virtues*, such as open-mindedness, curiosity, and sensitivity to evidence.^[5] Intellectual virtues lead students to inquire, think critically, and support their beliefs with evidence.^[6] Ideological thinking, in contrast, leads students to believe that controversial beliefs—e.g., the core doctrines—are indisputably true, established facts without evaluating the evidence.

But the claim that indoctrination always involves teaching ideology has some counterintuitive implications.

For one, it’s hard to see how teaching *without* ideology is possible.^[7] Teaching students why, e.g., democracy is just, is ideological in the sense that it promotes democratic ideology. If ideological instruction is indoctrination, so is mainstream civic education, since it too promotes ideologies. But civic education and indoctrination *are* different.

Proponents might reply by distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘bad’ ideology: bad ideologies are *false* or *unjustified* beliefs; good ideologies are true or justified beliefs, and teaching bad ideology is indoctrination, whereas teaching good ideology is not.

The trouble is that it’s not always clear which ideologies are false or unjustified. Reasonable people disagree about many religious and political ideologies. This makes the Ideology Theory unhelpful for distinguishing indoctrination from education.

1.2. Method: Bypassing Rationality

A promising *method* theory is the *Rationality-Bypassing Theory*. It says that indoctrination occurs when teachers get students to believe things without enabling them to rationally evaluate the beliefs.

Consider students who are forced to attend classes where the instructors teach them that God exists in such a way that they’re not allowed to inquire or challenge it without penalty. Some would consider this to be indoctrination because the instruction

seems to coerce the students into belief as opposed to allowing them to rationally evaluate the reasons for and against it for themselves.^[8]

This theory, however, faces challenges. First, while students' knowledge may be merely memorized, indoctrination can equip them with knowledge of how to defend their beliefs. This can happen when, e.g., students are taught that God exists along with arguments for it and rebuttals to challenges. In this case, students *are able to* rationally engage with certain criticisms of their beliefs, but we're still inclined to say that they were indoctrinated.^[9]

The second is that it might be *good* to sometimes bypass students' rationality: e.g., to help students acquire critical thinking skills, teachers must first get them to accept certain principles of reasoning *without challenging them*: debate can sometimes impede education.^[10]

1.3. Outcome: Dogmatism

A major *outcome* theory says that indoctrination occurs when the teaching produces dogmatism about what one believes. Dogmatism is ignoring or dismissing relevant challenges to one's beliefs.^[11] This is the *Dogmatism Theory of Indoctrination*.^[12]

Consider ISIS instructors who teach their recruits that it's wrong to disbelieve (fundamentalist) Islam. Their instruction results in *dogmatism* among their students because they have good reason to consider other possibilities, but are taught to ignore them.

This seems like a bad case of dogmatism. But some cases of dogmatism seem to be good: e.g., are people who dogmatically refuse to consider climate change denialism seriously doing something wrong?

If not, this opens the door to potentially unproblematic indoctrination as well. If some students are indoctrinated to believe what's *true*, and thereby to dismiss the alternatives, they're simply dismissing false positions. This seems good.^[13]

2. Ethics and Indoctrination

This takes us to ethics. Charging someone with indoctrination suggests that they did something wrong. But is indoctrination wrong? It depends on what indoctrination is.

If indoctrination is a matter of teaching ideology, it's wrong when it *misleads* students. Ideologies often give fixed answers to questions for which reasonable people can disagree: e.g., being taught that

God *definitely* exists (or *definitely* does not exist) misleads students because it suggests that reasonable people don't deny it when they do.^[14]

If, however, indoctrination is a matter of getting students to believe something in a way that bypasses their rationality, this seems *disrespectful*. It seems wrong to bypass students' rationality when they *can* rationally evaluate the belief.

The Dogmatist Theory allows for *good* indoctrination: e.g., suppose students are taught that the Earth is round *and* they dogmatically believe it, as a result. They were never taught the challenges that, say, flat-earth conspiracy theorists raise against it.

Still, maybe that's innocuous indoctrination because doing otherwise gives them the false impression that it's part of a serious debate when it isn't. Misleading people seems wrong, after all. Some beliefs are rightly accepted without considering the alternatives that some erroneously take seriously.^[15]

3. Conclusion

Having a clearer understanding of indoctrination helps us to evaluate charges made against educators. It also helps us to evaluate why indoctrination is wrong, when it is. As we've seen, the answers aren't straightforward.

Notes

[1] See Thiessen (1984) for an overview. See Merry (2005) for an overview and vindication in certain cases.

For example, private religious schools have been accused of indoctrinating students into believing religious views, or for failing to impartially present scientific facts, like the age of the Earth. Private secular schools have also met charges of indoctrination. In the UK, the American School of London has recently been accused of so-called 'racial indoctrination'. See Wolcock (2021). And public schools have been criticized for indoctrinating students for teaching evolution and for promoting moral or political views that some find problematic. For example, several public U.S. schools have been charged with 'Marxist indoctrination'. In April 2021, Lt. Governor of Idaho, Janice McGeachin, formed the *Task Force to Examine Indoctrination in Idaho Education*. North Carolina has also taken formal measures to curb what it takes to be 'indoctrination' in public schools. See Greene (2021). German schools under the Nazi regime have been cited as indoctrinating students. See the Holocaust

Encyclopedia (2021). Universities, the media, and social networks have also been accused of indoctrination.

[2] See Callan and Arena (2009).

[3] See White (1967).

[4] For this definition of ideology, see Fine & Sandstrom (1993). There are other definitions of ideology which define ideology as *beliefs or ways of thinking which prevent the believer from accurately interpreting reality*. According to this definition, ideologies are always *epistemically bad*, that is, bad with respect to getting knowledge and avoiding ignorance. See Mills (2017).

[5] Many philosophers argue that a major aim of education is to foster intellectual virtues, like curiosity and open-mindedness. Critical thinking also seems to be an intellectual virtue. See Siegel (1988) See Pritchard (2013) and Baehr (2013) for the idea that education should aim at cultivating intellectual virtue.

[6] Of course, having intellectual virtues does not guarantee true or justified beliefs. Intellectual virtues can help prevent one from forming false or unjustified beliefs, but having intellectual virtues does not guarantee that one will acquire true and justified beliefs. A student in a hostile environment, say, one where it's extremely difficult to tell what's true and what's false, might make lots of mistakes despite their open-mindedness, curiosity, and sensitivity to evidence.

[7] This is an example of the 'paradox of indoctrination'. Education aims to produce students who hold beliefs rationally and open-mindedly, but that requires that students accept principles of reasoning methods that they either can't or shouldn't rationally evaluate. See Macmillan (1983).

[8] See Kleinig (1982) and Merry (2005) for this position. The Rationality-Bypassing Theory is connected to the idea that indoctrination is essentially a kind of *belief manipulation*. See also Yaffe (2003).

[9] See Callan and Arena (2019) for this objection. They write: "...the most flagrant indoctrinators will frequently appeal to chains of reasoning when teaching their beliefs. Religious or political indoctrination, for example, will commonly involve instruction in standard arguments that purport to disclose the erroneous reasoning on which heresies are based. And some (though certainly not all)

instances of indoctrination occur in venues entered into voluntarily by those who become victims of indoctrination" (Callan and Arena 2019, 108).

[10] This can happen when there is a debate, but at least one 'side' of the debate approaches the topic from a highly misinformed position and so debating the issue can make that side appear more reasonable or evidence-based than it really is. In educational contexts, discussing and debating as though both sides are equally controversial can mislead students and thereby disrupt education.

For example, if students are learning about the Holocaust, it would mislead students to have a serious discussion of Holocaust denialism (under the guise of 'revisionism') as an informed position about the history of the Holocaust.

Sometimes people say that 'both sides' of a debate—for example, about climate change, or the effectiveness of vaccines—are equally worthy of serious consideration. This is incorrect when one 'side' is not a reasonable, informed position: there's the presentation of different viewpoints as being equally reasonable (or equally problematic), which is motivated by wanting to appear fair to all sides, but this is misleading when at least one of the viewpoints is misinformed and unreasonable and so should not be presented as a view for serious consideration. This is referred to as 'bothsiding'. See Boyd (2017).

[11] See Battaly (2018) for this way of thinking about dogmatism. What counts as a *relevant alternative* to one's belief is philosophically controversial. Some philosophers say that a challenge or alternative belief is relevant when it is objectively likely to be true. Other philosophers say that an alternative is relevant when the believer has good reason to think that it's likely to be true (even if it's not objectively likely).

[12] I develop and defend a dogmatist or closed-mindedness theory in Ranalli (forthcoming). See also DiPaolo & Simpson (2016) for a dogmatism theory.

[13] Some philosophers make this same type of claim about echo chambers. For example, see Lackey (2021).

[14] Some philosophers make this kind of argument for no-platforming: that platforming people with false or repugnant positions essentially misleads students about which positions are really part of serious debate. See Levy (2019).

[15] There can be different ways in which dogmatism, that is, the tendency to hold a belief without

considering seriously the alternatives to it, can be judged to be good or bad.

One way is by focusing on whether it is *epistemically* good or bad, where this means roughly ‘good or bad with respect to keeping true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs’. See Fantl (2018) and Battaly (2018) for why open-mindedness is sometimes epistemically bad. This is different from *moral* and *prudential* evaluations of whether dogmatism is good or bad. Dogmatism might be judged to be epistemically good even if it is morally bad; or morally good even if it is epistemically bad; or morally and epistemically bad, but prudentially good, that is, good for the person who is dogmatic. An example of morally good but epistemically bad dogmatism would be a case in which the person holds a belief they acquired irrationally but owing to their irrationally held belief, they fail to consider seriously false morally-repugnant challenges to it.

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About the Author

Chris Ranalli is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at VU University Amsterdam. He received his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Edinburgh. He specializes in epistemology, with interests in philosophy of mind and the intersection of epistemology and ethics. He is currently exploring topics in social and political epistemology. chris-ranalli.weebly.com

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