

Paper Title: **The Question of Conscientiousness in Liberal Education**

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## **The Question of Conscientiousness in Liberal Education**

In this paper, I examine the question of how to nurture and develop conscientiousness thinkers and future citizens of diverse liberal-democratic societies from the perspective of virtue epistemology linked with the notion of incommensurability as a rhetorical tactic for educators to utilize in the classroom. Notably, there are two dimensions to the argument as I intend to present it. First, I distinguish between good and bad conscientiousness through an exploration of current work in the field of virtue epistemology. Secondly, I propose that the notion of incommensurability as an alternative rhetorical tactic for inter-cultural discourse in liberal education institutions serves as more beneficial foundation for dialogue than traditional universalist strategies. However, I do not deny the importance of articulating a modified universalist strategy in order to help teachers and educators better understand their responsibility as facilitators of inter-cultural dialogue that can serve both as an opening for the legitimization of marginalized perspectives as well as a foundation for critical analysis of reigning values systems. This modified universalist strategy, I contend, is structured around the importance of nurturing the epistemic virtues that regulate good conscientiousness.

My support of a virtue epistemology perspective involves its potential to secure a ‘universalist’ viewpoint that that is legitimately freestanding in the sense that the regulative virtues supporting good or responsible conscientiousness are not linked to any specific comprehensive perspective, including liberalism. However, such a modified universalist approach also depends on the notion of incommensurability as a rhetorical tactic that generates conscientious inquiry. Therefore, I propose that a virtue epistemology perspective sidesteps current impasses between those in educational theory

devoted to universalist and incommensurability perspectives, as well as those who view principles of justice as deleteriously linked exclusively to liberalism. I begin by exploring the notion of good conscientiousness from a virtue epistemology standpoint.

### **Good and Bad Conscientiousness**

In this section, I explore the potential of ‘responsibilist’ virtue epistemology as an educational framework that highlights intellectual character traits that in turn regulate and buttress what I deem good conscientiousness. I contend that that such regulative virtues provide a more capacious link between incommensurable perspectives and therefore promise to potentially re-vitalize democratic education by opening the door for a more inclusive approach to moral and critical inquiry; one that legitimizes and encourages the contributions of (religious and non-religious) comprehensive perspectives to moral deliberation and reflection in public schools.

Let us begin with the notion of good and bad conscientiousness as defined from the standpoint of epistemic virtue theory. Virtue epistemology, broadly speaking, is a normative discipline modeled after virtue ethics. Just as virtue ethicists view morality as person-based rather than act-based, virtue epistemologists view epistemology as person-based rather than belief-based. For virtue epistemologists such as James Montmarquet (1993, 2007, 2008) conscientiousness is the central intellectual or epistemic virtue. However, according to Montmarquet (1993), being merely conscientious is not enough; there must be further qualities of character exercised that regulate or adjust conscientious inquiry. The regulative virtues that correlate with conscientiousness, as Montmarquet defines them, are the *virtues of impartiality*, the *virtues of intellectual sobriety* and the *virtues of intellectual courage*.

As an example of how and why supplemental regulative virtues are needed to support conscientiousness, Montmarquet asks us to consider the case of Hitler. Hitler was conscientiousness in his inquiry into the supposed Jewish/American conspiracy in the sense that he sought the truth of the existence of a conspiracy; however, he was guilty of exercising in his inquiry intellectual vices such as close-mindedness, refusing to take into account any alternative worldview. Moreover, in his inquiry he ardently sought perspectives that supported his own prejudices and ignored those that challenged his assumptions. In his book *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (1993), Montmarquet argues that if we wish to hold Hitler morally culpable for his actions, which are based upon his beliefs, we should also hold him responsible for the formation of these beliefs with respect to the intellectual character traits that were exercised during the inquiry into the supposed conspiracy. In other words, if we wish to hold Hitler morally culpable for his abominable actions, we must also hold him responsible for the intellectual character traits that were under his control to exercise. One can be conscientious in their search for truth; however, they may also be close-minded to other alternative perspectives and opinions, as in Hitler's case. Hitler, in this sense, symbolizes bad conscientiousness, working within a set perspective with no interest in responsible inquiry, i.e. one that is expansive and challenges assumptions inherent in the adhered to point of view and therefore more likely, however, not guaranteed, to lead to truth.

Regarding this last point, Montmarquet here differs from other philosophers working in the field of virtue epistemology by arguing that the epistemic virtues are not

guaranteed to lead on to truth<sup>1</sup>. Rather, according to Montmarquet, they simply reflect intellectual character traits that someone in pursuit of the truth would *want* to have.

Montmarquet's argument has interesting implications for educational theory not the least being that a virtue epistemology-based strategy can provide the basis for fostering the capacity for inclusive and expansive inter-cultural discourse; therefore, I will outline his larger argument prior to examining the possibilities of such a framework for pedagogy.

According to Montmarquet, moral responsibility is dependent on what we *believe*. For example, if we believe we do not have to look for more evidence and take action on what we hold to be truth (if, say, we are a racist who believes that other races are savages) we have to be held culpable for our belief, *as well as* our actions that result from our beliefs. In this sense, we have a *direct*, not an indirect, doxastic responsibility. Doxastic responsibility, then, is based on the capacity we have to control the exercise of certain qualities of epistemic character; epistemic virtues and vices. An extreme dogmatist may be conscientious, but not epistemically virtuous; e.g., as with Hitler, he or she may be close-minded in their pursuit of truth. Put simply, responsibility for belief is to be understood in terms of responsibility for action. We are responsible for what we believe in just those situations in which it *matters*. As Montmarquet (1993) goes on to state, "But this is not because responsibility for belief is derivative of responsibility for action. Rather it is because our direct responsibility for being virtuous in what we believe consists in our responding appropriately to the differing demands of particular situations." (p. ix). In this sense, the epistemic virtues are to be restricted to those whose exercise one *can* plausibly be held responsible; therefore, the epistemic virtues are

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Those tending to scientific naturalism in epistemology like Alvin Goldman (1994) think of epistemic virtue merely in terms of qualities serving objective truth while Montmarquet, who focuses merely on virtuous motivation is wedded to no such conception.

*counterparts* to the moral virtues. They are normative, but for Montmarquet they do not include aspects such as intelligence or creativity, qualities which may lead to virtue. We cannot be held responsible for having or exercising these qualities, simply because they are part of our natures.

Regarding alternative models of justification, Montmarquet asks us to consider once again the Hitler case with respect to both externalist and internalist accounts of doxastic and moral culpability.

#### *Externalist*

The principles and processes that led Hitler to his beliefs are unreliable and unlikely to produce true beliefs. His acts, then, are unjustified and he is morally culpable. However, this outlook, for Montmarquet, is flawed. He asks us to consider Mary Smith, who knocks her husband out with a right cross as he runs at her in the dark. She made the mistake of taking him for a threatening stranger. Her beliefs, to the externalist, are unjustified. How do we morally evaluate her act? If there is no fault, there can be no culpability. If Hitler's shortcoming was that his beliefs were not reliably formed (like Mary's) we cannot hold him culpable just because his reasoning was inadequate. Mary may not have been epistemically justified, but she is *morally* justified. The externalist has, then, an implausible view of epistemic justification in this case.

#### *Internalist*

Hitler had time and access to information, which he could have used to verify his belief (unlike Mary). However, Montmarquet responds, say Mary *had* had prior warning. Suppose she had been told she was apt to making such mistakes (perhaps she is prone to hallucinations). Still, she panics and lashes out. She remains unjustified in her belief, but

*still* not culpable – anyone might panic under the circumstances. According to Montmarquet, “Mere epistemic unjustifiability of one’s beliefs cannot ground the moral culpability of actions based on those beliefs” (p. 6). Hitler’s culpability cannot be grounded on the mere epistemic unjustifiability of his beliefs. His actions still may be excusable.

The claim that lack of justification is *itself* relevant for culpability is implausible. Montmarquet wishes to argue against the view that Hitler had time to justify his beliefs – that his actions (i.e. not taking the time to justify) are to be blamed, but not his beliefs. He therefore argues “against the claim that doxastic responsibility is *always* derivative of some more direct responsibility we bear for actions relating to our beliefs...If we ask what philosophers generally do not seem to have asked – the further question of why such culpable agents do not perform these appropriate actions, what we find is that underlying this failure on the level of action are still *further* (putatively) justifying beliefs” (p. 8). In other words, I am not going to check why I did not check why I did not check, etc. I will act because I believe that I have all the evidence that I need. Supplying a belief at every level for why you opted not to check once again is *regressive*. As Montmarquet states, “What is at issue here in such a case is whether one’s original assurance that further checks were unnecessary *justified* one’s not making further checks” (p. 10). As critics of Hitler, we say that it did not, but *why* does it not justify his immediate action based on his belief? We may fault him for his beliefs; however, on pain of generating a vicious regress, we cannot blame him for having these beliefs based on our ultimately faulting him for not taking appropriate actions by way of verifying them. Our responsibility for what we believe is not *derivative*, simply, of our responsibility for what we do. Our

responsibility for the intended *effects* of what we do *is* derivative of our responsibility for an action.

The key to understanding doxastic responsibility is in understanding the epistemic virtues. For Montmarquet, our notion of an epistemically virtuous individual appears to include certain collateral virtues beyond conscientiousness. The epistemic virtues are dispositions if not governing choice, at least affecting the will. They are dispositions to put forth appropriate *effort*. They are not dispositions to choose a belief. In short, they are active frames of mind, not unthinking habits. However, the question remains, how or in what way are we responsible for the exercise of these virtues? According to Montmarquet, “Doxastic responsibility is grounded in the control we have with respect to one aspect, one modality, of the belief-forming or belief-holding process” (p. 47). When considered from a Kantian viewpoint, we should have the proper attitude toward the Moral Law; what Kant termed ‘respect’. But not only does our attitude count, what we *do* is of course important as well. My attitudinal responsibility and my volitional responsibility are the same. For Montmarquet, “direct responsibility for the having of a normatively correct attitude, far from being incompatible with a direct responsibility for the proper expression of this attitude, requires such responsibility” (p. 48). This responsibility is not continuously regressive. Doxastic responsibility should be put on the same footing as actional responsibility. According to Montmarquet, “The analysis of doxastic responsibility ends in precisely the place where our underlying view would have supposed it to end: namely, with the question of one’s responsibility for exerting some *reasonable effort* in regard to the truth” (p. 55).

In light of all this, we may ask what is the range of our doxastic responsibility? What attitudes are we typically responsible for maintaining regarding our beliefs? Montmarquet answers with an example of a man sitting and watching the evening news on television. A report shows a man accused of a crime being arraigned in court, and as he watches the program the viewer mumbles under his breath, ‘I hope he fries’, or something along those lines. This response is spontaneous and unreflective. Now, say the viewer’s twelve-year-old son walks in the room and asks the man if the accused is guilty. The man now has two options: reflect and give a virtuous answer along the lines of, ‘The courts will decide if he’s guilty or not, son’, or, tell his son that the accused is indeed guilty. With respect to the latter response, the man can be held culpable for not considering his belief. In this sense, according to Montmarquet, we are able to be epistemically or morally virtuous *when we have reason to be*. In other words, one does not have to assume a constant epistemic or moral attitude. Responsibility in this sense takes the form of a positive attitude towards contrary and even contradictory perspectives, for such perspectives do not threaten, but widen understanding and potential for truth. We do not need to be in a constant mental state – just be ready to respond to the ever-present possibility “that special reasons for being conscientious will present themselves” (p. 64). Considerations of virtue and vice are not applicable at the immediate level, like the spontaneous response to the television.

Put simply, it is not thoughts or motives that are to be held culpable, but the *person him or her self*. We judge not the vice but the person’s character and we judge their character based on the traits that abide. A normative judgment, epistemic or moral,

in other words latches on to certain features of *persons*. It latches on to epistemic activity insofar as this manifests recognizable traits of personal character.

Montmarquet then presents his version of subjective justification using the following example: Suppose two people are trying to figure out if ‘p’ is true. John may get closer to Jim in his perceptually justified belief (via objective evidence). However, Jim may have *personal* justification for believing what he does, even if it is not as justifiable. The point is in separating the *belief*, which enjoys a specific justification, and the *person* being justified for having that belief. A person can be *subjectively justified* in having a certain belief instead of being (in terms of that belief) “objectively justified”. If we are to blame someone for believing ‘p’ (without epistemic justification) “it must have been possible for her to determine that her belief was not virtuously held” (pp. 103-4). This is Montmarquet’s thesis of subjective justification: we may not have had all the materials to consider (from some Cartesian/objective standpoint) and therefore might not be objectively justified, but we still can be subjectively justified if we use the materials we have and reflect virtuously on them. Montmarquet’s notion of subjective justification is in opposition to externalist and internalist notions of epistemic justification noted above.

The potential of virtue epistemology as an educational framework has been explored elsewhere (see, for example, Hyslop-Margison, 2003; Kilby, 2002) and lauded for its promise to combat intransigence in students’ opinions and beliefs in the face of diversity and promote contextual understanding of alternative perspectives. I explore it in the next section as a way of re-visiting issues of how to navigate between dueling and incommensurable comprehensive perspectives in public schools, opening the possibility

for a modified universalist approach based on the responsible development and application of the epistemic virtues as a liberal educational imperative. It is a fairly obvious statement that educators should be devoted to nurturing good conscientiousness, which depends in turn on certain regulative virtues over which the agent has direct control. However, the sort of good conscientiousness I am advocating needs a better foundation for inquiry than a single bracketed perspective or pedagogical strategy devoted to harmony and universalism as understood in terms of that perspective. I argue below that the notion of incommensurability provides this better foundation for liberal education, and, when explored in conjunction with a modified universalism based on the virtues of inquiry as opposed to principles linked to one specific comprehensive perspective at the expense of others, can serve to re-vitalize democratic education that legitimizes alternative and marginalized perspectives. Furthermore, this alternative strategy better outlines the responsibilities of teachers reluctant to engage in the type of values discourse required for democratic deliberation for fear of either promoting relativism or furthering indoctrination.

### **Incommensurability and Universalism**

I began by examining the notion of good conscientiousness from a responsibilist virtue epistemology standpoint, concentrating on the work of James Montmarquet. I argue in this section that such an approach can prove most beneficial when combined with the notion of incommensurability as a rhetorical tactic rather than traditional universalist strategies based on a harmony of values or a single value of justice or

autonomy from which myriad comprehensive perspectives vary widely with respect to internal interpretation or justification.<sup>2</sup>

I begin by exploring the notion of incommensurability through a close reading of a recent article by Tim McDonough (2009), who defends incommensurability as the new rhetorical tactic for liberal education, replacing traditional universalist strategies.

However, I also do not deny the need for educators to embrace or articulate universals as they are reflected in different cultures and perspectives as a way of creating an inter-cultural dialogue and as a tool for reflection on the values systems of the greater society in both national and global contexts. My focus is therefore on the educational implications with respect to the responsibility of teachers as mediators or regulators of inter-cultural reflective and analytic discussion with the goal of understanding, inclusion and expansive critical reflection. I maintain that despite the reality of incommensurable value systems and the dueling threats of relativism and indoctrination in the classroom, teachers need to understand their responsibility in universalist terms regarding effective conscientious moral inquiry. This is opposed to educational strategies that endorse a ready-made system with its own exclusive internal harmony, the quickest road to fostering bad conscientiousness.

Let us begin by exploring the notion of incommensurability more closely. In his paper, *The Hypothesis of Incommensurability and Multicultural Education*, Tim

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<sup>2</sup> My main impetus here arose from the need to articulate and promote truly freestanding educational strategies for inquiry and deliberation in order to eliminate the problematic possibility targeted by Rawls in *Political Liberalism* (1996). Rawls was justifiably concerned about the possibility that if certain freestanding principles are viewed to be linked to liberalism as a comprehensive perspective, those who disagree with a liberal viewpoint may be too easily inclined to reject 'liberal' principles as well. I argue here that educators can bypass this problem by grounding a modified universalist approach in the epistemic virtues of responsibilist inquiry, incorporating as well the reality of incommensurable comprehensive perspectives.

McDonough argues that certain utopian narratives can act as examples of incommensurable systems and can be put to pedagogical work. They can do so in the form of a comparative study that can potentially create passageways leading from one bounded system to another with the hopes of articulating new shared and legitimized norms. Incommensurability can serve, according to McDonough, a critical discursive or rhetorical function necessary in multicultural and global societies. The notion of incommensurability as posited by McDonough provides a logical and rhetorical ground for pedagogy that “teaches students the knowledge and skills needed to creatively interact in the public realm betwixt or between cultures” (p. 203). This grounding is missing when curricula appeal to philosophical and political frameworks that make no room for the notions of incommensurability or base pedagogy on theories dependent on harmony rather than conflict, contradiction, and interpretation or translation.

McDonough approaches the subject by examining the notion of incommensurability as a hypothesis generated within linguistics and applied to cultural issues by the anthropologist Benjamin Whorf. McDonough criticizes this hypothesis in the first instance for its unwarranted extension by Whorf, however its significance remains when the hypothesis “emerges in its promotion of a critical and reflexive movement within the discourse of the human sciences” (p. 204). In reference to linguistic incommensurability, McDonough cites an example of Whorf’s analysis of the Hopi’s use of language. Whorf argued that cultures were symbolic systems sharing and participating in linguistic grammars and vocabularies, therefore “different cultures reflected radically different world views” (p. 206). McDonough notes,

The Hopi’s way of speaking of the motion of water as producing a rippling of the surface of a continuous body was closer to our scientific understanding of the natural phenomena. The way of speaking of ‘a wave’ in English actually misleads us into thinking of waves as individual parts of

the body of water that are in motion. Hopi notions of time and space permit an understanding of waves as a continuous, propagating and harmonious transformation of substance. p. 206

In other words, from Whorf's analysis a specific culture could come to understand the conceptual limits of their discourses. According to McDonough, the Hopi example, "meant not to prove linguistic relativity, but to point to much more complex and deeply imbedded issues of alternative patterns of thought and action rooted in linguistic and cultural differences" (p. 206). This did not force the conclusion that it was impossible to communicate across cultures in every instance, nor did it need to withstand testability and the refutation of its critics who viewed it as a proposing radical cultural relativity, for McDonough does not use incommensurability as testable theory, but rather a rhetorical tactic. Therefore, it remains, for its proponents, as a challenge to those who maintain that their own linguistic conceptual schemas represent the world as it is absolutely and universally. The notion of incommensurability is a reminder, then, of the importance of expanding one's inquiry – battling against a sort of academic or epistemic tunnel vision. As McDonough states it, "Whorf saw the radical differences of symbolic systems as a resource for the advancement of our understanding and knowledge through a process of inquiry into alternative possibilities (other languages and logics) and the opening up of our conceptual world-view through the repatterning of our own modes of representation" (p. 207). Incommensurability is significant not because it points to a specific truth or a correspondence to an external reality, but that it puts the idea of a specific truth into question. As Whorf himself views it, the notion of cultural relativity urges not a "passive tolerance of radically different others, but sees in this radical otherness a source and possibility of intellectual, scientific, and cultural growth" (p. 208). This is a possibility to be explored and understood, rather than restricted or discouraged, one that challenges the

reigning concepts underpinning social and human sciences such as correspondence theories of truth, objectivity, and referentiality. McDonough argues that the hypothesis of incommensurability is best grasped through a rhetorical lens. It cannot be taken as a gesture that represents reality, or else there remains no connection or hope of meaning between unbridgeable cultures. Rather, it can be harnessed as a tactical gesture within the human sciences. As McDonough succinctly puts it, the hypothesis of incommensurability has a “reflexive payoff” (p. 209).

McDonough sees us as educational theorists moving from a liberal position where the notion of universality performed a function similar to that of incommensurability. As we move to a less liberal and more multicultural position, incommensurability, McDonough argues, should become the new watchword that performs the reflexive function previously supplied by universality. The idea of translation is examined by McDonough as an example of how *commensurability* uses a different set of criteria for inter-cultural relation building: “Translation converts the language of the stranger through the re-representation of the other’s speech in accordance with the rules and the vocabulary of the home language. The goal of translation is the establishing of a correspondence between symbolic orders based upon a shared sense of the representational truth of propositions” (p. 210). This does not of course accommodate for difference; rather it reduces difference to a harmonious set of values to be agreed upon with respect to one reigning cultural idea.

To review, McDonough argues that the significance of incommensurability is to be found in its reflexive impact within a particular discourse. However, in order to be effective, incommensurability must be seen as a possibility, if not a fact. McDonough

argues that incommensurability occurs in special ‘utopian’ instances. As a beginning point, he states that ‘strong incommensurability’ occurs when there is a radical difference between two co-existing closed and symbolic cultural systems, usually found in narratives such as Plato’s *Republic* and Marxist accounts of the final stages of Communism. According to McDonough, “These systems to the extent that they are held as true or real are functionally incommensurable—that is, hybridisation between these systems and any other is or would be impossible” (p. 211). McDonough views such narrative constructions of utopias as static forms, “not systems really but static orderings” (p. 212) as with the philosopher kings, guardians and poets. They are closed and bounded in their narrative form and, as such, “laboratory specimens of symbolic, socio-cultural systems” (p. 213). He distinguishes these types of systems from existent symbolic systems that rely for the articulation of its many parts “upon a metaphoric process, not merely the stating of a foundational myth, but the use of analogy to draw connections across differences” (p 213). Master or primary symbols, such as those in the *Republic* are substituted in existing systems through historical challenges. For example, as McDonough notes, the divine right of kings becomes the rights of men, and the city of God becomes the Roman Empire. Such substitutions occurs in order to “maintain coherence and accord between differently developing social entities” (p. 214). In other words, closure for such utopian systems cannot be maintained.

What can we learn from such incommensurable utopias? To begin with, idealistic formulations guide our actions to a certain extent. Yet, as McDonough maintains, such idealistic formulations inevitably become infused with real-world substitutes and engagements. Of course, they need not be if those tied to idealistic formulations live their

lives in closed-off communities, however this is not the case in liberal public education. Analyzing and considering symbolic structures reveals their incompleteness and contingency, “as they function within an external, public discourse” (p. 215). As McDonough goes on to state, this engagement is not one between the symbolic systems “but between speakers who are more or less reliant upon these symbolic systems for their normative expressions.” Furthermore, “They become no longer an account of ontological essences, but rather the means and medium by which people articulate their beliefs and hopes in time, in public, and in practice.” (p. 215).

McDonough calls for the establishment of new relations between closed utopian and lived normative systems. In order to understand how we read these systems differently today, and what meaning we can draw from them and how we can apply this meaning to moral reflection and discourse, we need to legitimize and encourage expression linked to these ‘stolid’, closed, and sectarian systems. McDonough hints at the possibility of exploring how Bush’s America and the system of justice as students are aware of it now compares to that outlined in the text of the *Republic*, or, I might add, the Bible, the Quran, or the political and ethical works of Mill and Locke.

Creating passageways between conflicting comprehensive systems or narratives, symbolic or otherwise should be the priority of any moral/citizenship educational program dedicating to fostering understanding and tolerance in diverse societies. McDonough maintains that what the hypothesis of incommensurability could effectively do is “open the borders of the existing Western social science discourse to accommodate difference, different criteria of truth, and to assist in the expansion of human knowledge through cultural intercourse” (p. 210).

I have argued along with McDonough that incommensurability can serve as a new form of rhetorical tactic in replacement of traditional liberal commitments to universalism. In the final section below, I propose how virtue epistemology can provide a practical framework for teachers devoted to utilizing the tactic of incommensurability as a basis for dialogue. A pervasive problem that must be addressed is one that I have often seen reflected in my own students preparing for work as certified educators in public schools. I refer to the reluctance of addressing any values systems in the classroom for fear of accusations of indoctrination. A more responsibilist approach places focus on the epistemic virtues of conscientious inquiry into incommensurable values systems. I review below how this alternative approach provides the opportunity for students to articulate, explore, and create, rather than passively internalize, their own values and principles through inclusive and expansive discourse.

### **Review: Putting Virtue Epistemology to Work**

In their recent article, *Philosophy of Education and the Gigantic Affront to Universalism*, Penny Enslin and Mary Tjiattas (2009) defend a *qualified* universalism against those who wholeheartedly reject universalist strategies, stating that, “We need a general framework for critical assessment. We are forced by interest in diversity itself to develop criteria to assess practices we find, asking which are acceptable and worth preserving and which are not. We need ‘universals’ that are facilitative rather than tyrannical” (p. 5). Such universals should not lend themselves to abstraction, but rather, as Sharon Todd (2009) argues in the same volume, emerge through attempts to articulate fragments of greater truths as understood from the perspective of myriad traditions and cultures. However, once again, the problem lies in the need to articulate a usable

universalist strategy for conscientious inquiry and articulation that teachers can rely upon as unlinked to any comprehensive perspective. As Montmarquet argued, the epistemic virtues reflect intellectual character traits that one in pursuit of the truth would want to have. I maintain that it is the nurturing of these capacities for responsible discourse that can be integrated as dependable strategies for inter-cultural discourse in public schools, creating an opening as well for the legitimization of marginalized incommensurable perspectives that expose the reality of conflict rather than harmony. The teacher who fears indoctrination need only find her responsibility in ensuring the utilization of these virtues in discursive inquiry.

The point is to create and regulate, rather than avoid, inter-cultural discourse between incommensurable perspectives in diverse societies, and education should be leading the charge as well as setting the example for conscientious discourse. As David Brooks (2009) wrote recently in a New York Times op-ed piece in the aftermath of the Fort Hood tragedy, too seldom does this sort of conversation between religious and non-religious narratives (utopian or otherwise) take place. Brooks argues that much of the conversation following Major Nidal Malik Hasan's killing spree was shrouded in political correctness. Brooks states that such a response was understandable, yet ultimately patronizing, a way of policing commentary so that the "unwashed yahoos in Middle America would not go one racist rampage". As Brooks concludes,

Worse, it absolved Hasan — before the real evidence was in — of his responsibility. He didn't have the choice to be lonely or unhappy. But he did have a choice over what story to build out of those circumstances. And evidence is now mounting to suggest he chose the extremist War on Islam narrative that so often leads to murderous results. The conversation in the first few days after the massacre was well intentioned, but it suggested a willful flight from reality. It ignored the fact that the war narrative of the struggle against Islam is the central feature of American foreign policy. It ignored the fact that this narrative can be embraced by a self-radicalizing individual in the U.S. as much as by groups in Tehran, Gaza or Kandahar.

It denied, before the evidence was in, the possibility of evil. It sought to reduce a heinous act to social maladjustment. It wasn't the reaction of a morally or politically serious nation.

Such serious conversation will be – and is – no doubt contentious, however necessary. Education cannot ignore its role in policing or regulating responsible inquiry as a necessary capacity of citizens of liberal-democratic societies prepared to engage in such inter-cultural discourse. This discursive phenomenon is already a commonplace in popular culture, with open and often heated arguments between secular humanists and iconoclasts such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Bill Maher and their religious counterparts playing out in magazines, newspapers and cable television programs, not to mention the Internet. It is time that educators joined in, cognizant of their ultimate responsibility to creating conscientious inquiries. Too often, as David Carr (2007) noted, have these arguments denigrated into caddish griping and cheap shots. Questioning whether religious education is at all relevant at this time in history, Carr argues that,

apart from the one-sided and condescending character of much recent devil's advocacy—not to mention the fact that this is more likely to inflame than calm current hatreds and antagonisms—it may be a saner course to try to promote better understanding of the positive spiritual and moral meaning that many have found in religious faith. Indeed, it is hard not to be struck by the churlish, graceless and philistine failure of such recent critics of religion to give any recognition to the culturally significant and substantial moral, spiritual and aesthetic achievements of much religious aspiration—still less to appreciate the extent to which such aspirations have shaped billions of good, decent and charitable lives. It is the present claim that no education devoid of such appreciation could be other than a woefully impoverished affair. pp. 671-72

I am not arguing here whether or not religious education, or religious perspectives for that matter, have positive or negative effects on society, although I do hold my own contentions on the matter. I do agree with both sides of the particular secular humanist/atheist versus religious debate, along with pundits such as Brooks, that such a critical discourse must be brought to the fore. Education needs to address the issue of

incommensurability head-on, and teachers are our sergeants on the front lines, so to speak, training future citizens to develop the capacity for responsibilist participatory parity. Teachers should be aware of, and not shy away from, their responsibility as facilitators of this important discourse. A re-adjustment of the notion of universalism unlinked to liberalism or any other comprehensive perspective, however dependant on them, and grounded in the epistemic virtues provides an opportunity for a more expansive moral and critical inquiry that education for democracy demands.

In conclusion, one major positive aspect of such a virtue and responsibilist discursive approach is that new principles can be articulated in the classroom through conscientious inquiry and self-discovery rather than through passive absorption of any enforced and prepackaged monist framework. There should be no fear of indoctrination or despair of relativism; the only pedagogical responsibility lies in ensuring responsible exploration of incommensurable perspectives in public schools devoted to developing conscientious democratic citizens. An important sense of agency, inclusion and involvement can be established when students are encouraged to utilize, interpret, and modify values as bases for further deliberation and reflection.

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