

Ultimate Educational Aims, Overridingness, and Personal Well-being

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Introduction

Talk about aims, even ultimate aims, in the philosophy of education is ubiquitous. Among the candidates for being an ultimate aim of education are critical thinking, autonomy, morally responsible agency, and the capacity for love and care. These aims play a pivotal role in regulating and structuring moral, and other types of normative education.

In this paper, we critically reflect on the very idea of such ultimate aims. In section 1 we formulate the problem of identifying and justifying ultimate educational aims and adumbrate our overall view on it. Section 2 outlines a first strategy to tackle this problem in terms of overridingness. In section 3 we give Reason's fragmentation as the principal reason to doubt whether this strategy is coherent. Section 4 sketches a second strategy to deal with the issue by appealing to personal well-being. This strategy is found deficient owing partly, again, to Reason's fragmentation. In section 5 we draw further consequences from the conclusion these two strategies sanction, that there cannot be one ultimate aim or even several such aims of education.

1. Basic Issue and Outline of the Argument

Unless one has special reason to believe otherwise, it would be highly implausible to deny that education has aims. After all, education appears to be goal-directed, or as some say, "teleological." In addition, when it comes to educating our children, we believe that some goals are worthy of pursuit whereas others are not and that some goals are more worthy of pursuit than others. Education is, thus, also value-directed or normative, or as some say, "axiological." It is commonplace to distinguish between relatively specific educational goals or aims and relatively more general aims. As examples of the former, we think that children should have reading, writing, and effective oratory skills, as well as knowledge of cultural history, literature, elementary natural science, mathematics, art, and music. As examples of

the latter, it has been proposed that ensuring that our children develop into autonomous critical thinkers and morally responsible citizens is a good thing.

Some educational theorists have equated education's relatively general aims with education's "ultimate" aims. This is simply because although relatively specific educational aims may vary, and sometimes considerably so depending upon various contingences, such as economic or cultural ones, the ultimate aims seem more basic, stable, and universal. A number of thorny issues associated with educational aims that supposedly are ultimate merit careful consideration. In particular, perhaps one of the most challenging of these concerns their *identification* and *justification*: which of the plausible candidates can be proposed to be ultimate and what reasons can be given in support of the alleged privileged status of a candidate that one proposes is ultimate?

Regarding the identification question, for example, Harvey Siegel in the concluding note of *Educating Reason* asks: "Is critical thinking the *only* educational ideal? Is it *basic* in that it overrides other legitimate ideals? Is it simply one among many other equally legitimate ideals (e.g. creativity, or citizenship, or happiness)?" (Siegel 1988, p. 136) He answers: "..., critical thinking is, at a minimum, 'first among equals' in the pantheon of educational ideals. ... [it] is rightfully seen ..., more dramatically, as the ultimate educational ideal."¹ (p. 137) With respect to the justification question, Siegel offers the following (transcendental) argument:

Consider a case in which that ideal conflicts with some legitimate other. In such a case, one might argue that the other should override critical thinking in this instance. And perhaps so it should. But it requires rational argument, and appeal to reason, in order to make the case for the preferability of the rival ideal to that of critical thinking. And such appeal is, of course, an appeal to, and an honoring of, the latter ideal itself. Consequently, an overriding of

critical thinking by a rival educational ideal at one level requires acknowledgment of the reign of critical thinking at the next highest level. In this way critical thinking must preside over and authorize the force of its rivals.

(p. 137)

We will return to assessing this argument below.

Other educational theorists disagree with Siegel's choice and defence of reason as "first among equals." They propose and support their own alternative candidates. We can agree that besides critical thinking, autonomy, morally responsible agency, and capacity for love and care *prima facie* qualify as equally legitimate candidates for being included in the "pantheon of educational ideals" as ultimate aims. Goals such as democratic citizenship and economic participation we assume to be subsidiary aims. For the purpose of this paper, this selection and classification need not be controversial. Our argument is sufficiently general and does not depend on the specific candidates being privileged. We argue for the claim that *there cannot be one ultimate aim* (or even several ultimate aims). We outline two strategies to identify and justify education's ultimate aims. The first associates these aims with a normative standard, such as the prudential or the moral, which is taken to be overriding. The second strategy associates education's ultimate aims with the "bedrock" standard of personal well-being. Both strategies fail for a (deep) common reason. Education is teleologically and axiologically structured. When we reflect on this structure in our practical reasoning about educational aims, we are, however, inevitably confronted with *the fragmentation of reason*. As we will explain below, the identification and justification of ultimate educational aims presuppose the unity of reason, but this presupposition is false, or at least highly problematic. And reasons's fragmentation brings in its wake the scattering of education's (ultimate) aims.

The opposition between monistic (or unitarian) and pluralistic views on educational (ultimate) aims is, of course, not new. Yet our claim is much stronger than, for example, R.S.

Peters' (1967, p. 27) similar claim that it would be absurd to expect that there could ever be one agreed upon aim of education. According to his later insights, the ineluctable multiplicity of aims is due to the fact that 'education' is an essentially contested concept. (Peters, 1981, p. 32) Unitarianism makes the mistake of stipulating a particular aim of education as the one and only ultimate aim:

... all ... concepts of education are contestable, for what has happened is that an aim of education has been taken as *the* aim and incorporated into the concept of 'education'. It is easy to see how this happens, for education is a teleological type of concept in that it indicates processes of learning directed towards some end. Particular ends that require emphasis can then be singled out to the exclusion of other possible ones and the result is a stipulative definition. (1981, p. 49)

Although we agree with Peters, we note that whether or not stipulative proposals for one or some other ultimate aim are contested is a contingent matter. We claim that unitarianism is not just the result of a superficial definitional emphasis but, in addition, that it rests on a deep conceptual mistake. We reveal and explain why unitarianism *cannot* be true and, consequently, why pluralism about (ultimate) aims is the correct view. To forestall misunderstanding, pluralism is not the same as scepticism about the very idea of educational aims.² The fact that there is no one ultimate aim does not mean that there are no educational aims at all. So, although pluralism about aims is an implication of scepticism about the unity of reason, it is itself not a scepticism about the aims themselves. As we will indicate below, some important consequences follow from this (correct) view.

2. Normative Agency and Overridingness

Even if we take for granted, and it is not evident that we should, that the concept of *something's being an ultimate aim of education* is coherent and fairly transparent, there is the

thorny issue of precisely which aims qualify as ultimate educational aims, and even more pressing, perhaps, the additional issue of the basis on which it is to be decided that some aims qualify as such ultimate aims (if there are, indeed, any such aims). When walking in the “pantheon of educational ideals,” displaying, at a minimum, critical thinking, autonomy, morally responsible agency, and capability for love and care, how are we to identify and justify one (or more) of them as the “first among equals”? The following perspective may shed some light on these issues.

We believe that it is at least partly in our power to see to it that our children internalize moral norms, appreciate the concepts of moral praiseworthiness and moral blameworthiness, and grasp some of the attendant practices, such as overtly praising or blaming others or expressing appropriate moral sentiments, things which go hand in hand with being *morally* responsible agents. If we take one ultimate goal of education to be the goal of attempting, as best as we can, to ensure that our children mature into morally responsible individuals, then educators should engage with children in such a way as to foster attainment of this goal. But we are all aware that the moral standpoint—specifically, the standpoint of what is morally right, wrong, or obligatory—is only one among many normative standpoints. There is, for example, the standpoint of self-interest, the prudential standpoint, the standpoint of love, the standpoint of a particular religion, the aesthetic standpoint, the standpoint of a specific cultural tradition, and so forth. One might, in one’s reflective moments, wonder why we should not strive to ensure that our children turn into prudentially adept agents, or loving agents, or agents steeped in a particular religious or cultural tradition. Expressed differently, one might wonder why turning our children into, for example, self-interested agents or aesthetically sensitive agents are not also ultimate aims of education. Aware that it is at least partly in our power to nurture our children into, as we may put it, different sorts of “*normative agent*”—morally responsible agents, prudentially adept agents, aesthetically sensitive agents,

and so on—and cognizant of the fact that, for instance, the prescriptions of morality can conflict with those of self-interest or love³, why single out the goal of turning our children into morally responsible agents as “fundamental”? If we can raise our children to become different sorts of normative agent, which sort (or sorts) is to be favored and on what grounds?

Perhaps we can make some progress with these difficult issues by inquiring into which evaluative standpoint or standard—the moral, the prudential, the aesthetic, and so on—is in some sense paramount, and then identify the ultimate goal of education with the goal of attempting to ensure that our children turn into normative agents of the relevant sort. To that purpose, we develop and evaluate the plausible suggestion that we raise or educate our children with an eye toward ensuring that they turn into the sort of normative agent judged to be *normatively most important*. The yardstick of importance here is the “*overridingness*,” as we will say, of one among many competing normative standpoints, such as the moral, the prudential, and so on. The normative standard deemed most important is overriding, roughly, in the sense that, of all the normative prescriptions or “oughts,” *its* “ought” takes precedence. That is to say, when its “ought” requirements conflict with the requirements of other “oughts,” its “ought” requirements are most weighty.

Suppose, for instance, that moral obligation is overriding. Indeed, the thesis that moral obligation is overriding has frequently been referred to as the “*Overridingness Thesis*”.⁴ Then, if, as of some time, say, noon, a person ought morally to do action *A* at noon or later, and ought, perhaps legally, to do some other action *B* at noon or later, but cannot at noon (or later) do both, then she “plain ought” to do *A* at noon (or later). The phrase, “she ‘plain ought’ to do *A* at noon,” is meant to capture the idea that moral “oughts” are more normatively significant or override other “oughts,” like legal ones.⁵

Adding some details, as we understand it, an overridingness claim is a claim about the relative normative importance of verdicts delivered by various special normative standpoints

such as morality, law, etiquette, self-interest, love, and so on. We can suppose that each of these is a standpoint regarding some concept of obligation. It should be evident, as we have registered, that in many cases the verdicts issued by these different standpoints conflict. So, for example, moral obligation may conflict with legal or prudential obligation. In a specific case, a person may realize that she has a moral obligation to do one thing, a legal obligation to do another, and a prudential obligation to do yet something else, but still ask: “I know what my specific obligations are, and I realize that they conflict, but what ought I to do, *period?*” When a person asks this question, it appears that she is asking about which of these obligations takes “precedence” over or “overrides” others.

Now imagine being in a “conflict situation” in which one is aware that the dictates of morality and those of self-interest conflict. In this, as in all situations, morality passes judgment on what one ought morally to do or what it is morally permissible for one to do; and in this particular conflict situation, morality forbids the action (for example, lying) that is obligatory from the point of view of self-interest. Further, though this action is condemned by morality, morality *itself* cannot deliver a verdict about the relative “normative importance” of what it as opposed to what self-interest recommends. It can simply tell us what is right, wrong, obligatory, or gratuitous from the point of view of its own special moral perspective. Analogously, the standard of self-interest dictates what one ought to do to maximize personal interest, and in the conflict situation, it will proscribe the action forbidden by morality. But even so, self-interest cannot rule on whether *its* prescriptions are normatively-wise more important than those of morality’s. Like morality, it is a “self-contained” standard, restricted to dictating what is right, wrong, obligatory, or perhaps gratuitous from the point of view of its own special self-interested perspective. It appears, then, that we cannot make sense of the question of whether the verdicts of morality override those of self-interest, or for that matter, of other special standpoints unless we suppose that there is an *overarching* normative

standard. Such a standard would concern an all-inclusive concept of obligation, one that passes judgment on the relative normative stringency of the special standpoints. We follow David Copp (1997) in calling such a standard “Reason,” and we will say that (practical) Reason dictates what we “plain ought” to do.⁶ Reason, then, as we use the term, does *not*, for example, refer to the standard which says, roughly, that rationality consists in maximizing (long-term) self-interest. Nor does it refer to a set of powers or capacities, like the powers to deliberate, to make practical judgments, to form intentions or to arrive at decisions, or to reason prudentially. Rather, ‘Reason’ is a label for an overarching normative standpoint.

Recall, the proposal we are entertaining is that we identify the ultimate goal of education (assuming that there is such a single goal) as the goal that is associated with the normative standpoint or standard that is overriding. On this strategy, the goal’s privileged status of ultimacy would be warranted insofar as the overarching standard of Reason dictates that the normative standard with which this goal is associated is supreme. We now argue, however, that there is strong reason to doubt whether there is any overarching standpoint such as Reason.

3. The Fragmentation of Reason

The argument against Reason’s existence is straightforward. Suppose it coherent to assume that Reason takes the verdicts given by all the *special* standpoints in any situation where verdicts of these standpoints conflict, evaluates these verdicts in an impartial nonquestion-begging way, and produces an overall verdict as to what the agent is to do. Then it should also be coherent to assume that we may add to the set of verdicts of the special standpoints in situations where these verdicts conflict, the verdict delivered by Reason, and then ask of this expanded set of verdicts, which of *these* is the agent, overall, to take as guidance. To deliver such an assessment, though, we would have to suppose that there is yet another normative standpoint, not identical to any of the special standpoints, nor to Reason, that is able to assess

all the verdicts in the expanded set in a nonquestion-begging manner, and deliver a verdict regarding what the agent ought to do. Call this standpoint “Reason*.” But, then, of course, we could add to the expanded set of verdicts, the verdict delivered by Reason*, and then ask of the verdicts in this still extended set, which of them the agent ought overall to take as guidance, and so on. On pain of not spiraling down an ugly regress, we should conclude that there is no such standard as Reason.

It may be objected that the final “ought” of Reason is *not* to be construed as of any special variety but as an “ought *period*”—a kind of all-encompassing “ought” that transcends the various special standpoints. So, if Reason would be the normatively most important standard for evaluating the conflicting verdicts of the special standpoints and for the choice of how to act, then it does not make sense to suppose that there can be yet another standard, such as Reason*, that delivers verdicts on the expanded set of verdicts, whose members include all the conflicting verdicts of the special standpoints plus the verdict delivered by Reason. But if this does not make sense, one should be equally suspicious about Reason’s claim to be the *most important* and *final* standard—the “transcendent” one—for assessing the conflicting verdicts of the special standpoints. For, we may ask with propriety, why *should* Reason be taken to be the most important and final standard? Why should the transcendent “ought” be privileged? Barring persuasive reason to believe otherwise, it would be implausible to suppose that Reason is “self-validating” in the sense that Reason itself certifies itself as being the most important standard, the final court of appeal concerning the relative importance of the verdicts of all *other* normative standards. But if Reason is not self-certifying in this sense, what then justifies its putative claim to being the supreme and final court of appeal?

Elucidating, let us return to Siegel’s transcendental argument in section 1 and reflect on a particular case.⁷ Take a “conflict situation” in which the duties of love conflict with the prudential obligations of critical thinking. Consider, for example, a case in which a run-away

daughter, addicted to drugs, stands again on the doorstep of her parent's house asking once more for shelter. The situation distills to the following conflict between the "ought" of prudence and the "ought" of love:

- (1) The parents believe (truly) that they ought prudentially—"ought_{prudence}"—to forbid their daughter entrance to the house.
- (2) The parents believe (truly) that, acting "out of" parental love, they ought—"ought_{love}"—not to forbid their daughter entrance to the house.

We may suppose that the parents' belief that they prudentially ought to refuse entry is perfectly justified in light of the daughter's history as a drug-addict, her violent behaviour, her refusal of treatment, self-protection, protection of their other children, and so on.

Now, according to Siegel, in order to make the case for the preferability of "ought_{love}" (love's duties), if this ought would be preferable, involves an appeal to reason, which he again construes as "ought_{prudence}" (requirements of critical thinking). "Such appeal," he explicitly says, "is ... an appeal to ... the latter ideal [of critical thinking] *itself*." (Siegel 1988, p. 137; our italics) Yet this move begs the question. Whether or not "ought_{love}" would on balance be preferable, an overriding judgement cannot be produced from the special standpoint of critical thinking. This prudential standpoint is only just one standpoint among several other special standpoints, such as those of love, morality, and self-interest. Producing a nonquestion-beggingly judgement requires an appeal to the overarching standpoint of Reason. Only Reason can produce an impartial overall judgement. So, in the conflict situation the parents should be guided by the verdict that they "ought_{love}" to let their daughter in the house, only if they plain ought—"ought_{Reason}"—to let her in, that is to say, only if Reason overrides the verdict that they "ought_{prudence}" not to let her in. Consequently, Siegel's transcendental argument is invalid because it question-beggingly equates "ought_{Reason}" with "ought_{prudence}."

thereby unwarrantedly identifying the overarching standpoint of Reason “at the next highest level” with the special standpoint of critical thinking (reason).

But even if the idea of a transcendent standpoint was coherent, and Reason existed, there still would be serious difficulties with any supposedly overarching standpoint such as Reason. A verdict of Reason regarding the supremacy of some specific standpoint, such as the moral or the prudential, would appear to presuppose that the “oughts” of these various specific standpoints are in some manner *commensurable*, so that one specific “ought” can properly be said to override all the others. Yet there are no guarantees whatsoever that such commensurability makes sense.⁸ Moreover, even assuming commensurability and comparability, there would be the further question as to precisely *which feature* of the conflicting verdicts of the specific standpoints is being compared. It would be pretty unhelpful to say “strength of the competing ‘oughts’” without explaining to what this, in turn, amounts. We do not exclude the possibility that there are several different accounts of what precisely Reason compares (assuming that such a standpoint exists in the first place) to arrive at an overall judgement regarding what an agent plain ought to do. We simply point out the need to defend such an account if sense is to be made at all of overridingness.

Reason, if it existed, represents a unifying standpoint from which to evaluate the competing claims of different practical “oughts.” Once the different normative considerations are impartially weighed, Reason can issue an overall judgement regarding which of the competitors in the “ought” pool gets its backing. When a specific “ought” has the sanction of Reason, this “ought” is supposed to override all other competitors. We have argued, though, that there are good reasons to believe that there is no such standpoint as Reason. If there is no such standpoint, then no “ought” (or no normative standard) is overriding. What would be the significance of *any* normative standard’s failing to be overriding? One of the most salient consequences is that we would be saddled with a kind of scepticism about the unity of

practical reason, to wit, there would be no single overarching standard to which one could appeal to settle what one plain ought to do in conflict situations. Practical reason would, in a manner of speaking, be “fragmented.” Without Reason, we would be left with an assortment of “oughts,” none of which overrides the others.

The fragmentation of practical reason delivers a death blow to the first strategy that we have outlined in section 2 to identify and justify education’s ultimate aims. Devoid of any overarching standpoint such as Reason, any specific normative standpoint fails to be overriding. Hence, *any* educational goal that is associated with one or other of these specific standpoints in the manner in which we previously explained fails to be supreme. The execution of this strategy yields the result that it is false that there can be an ultimate educational aim.

4. Ultimate Aims and Personal Well-Being

The second strategy to identify and justify education’s ultimate aims is closely tied to personal well-being. Let us briefly hark back to Aristotle to situate this strategy. In early sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book I) Aristotle advances what appear to be some “bedrock” or foundational aims that supposedly carry their justification on their sleeves. The bedrock aims he identifies concern what is good for both individuals and society at large. These aims have to do with what it is to flourish as persons and as citizens. Elaborating, according to Aristotle, the good life is the life of flourishing and virtue. To achieve a state of well-being, proper social institutions are necessary. The political setting must enable people to cultivate the peculiarly human excellences, the virtues, which are necessary for the good life. Indeed, Aristotle proposes that the state should actively encourage people to inculcate the virtues in order for its citizens to flourish. Their flourishing, in turn, ensures that the political order itself flourishes as well.

The second strategy plausibly assumes that the rock bottom aim of education is to raise our children in such a fashion that, of the many different ways in which their lives could turn out, each child gets a life that is good in itself—that is intrinsically valuable—for him or her. On this strategy, then, identifying and justifying what we may call education’s “specific, substantive, and ultimate aims,” such as ensuring that our children develop into agents capable of love and care, requires exposing how this aim is essentially associated with personal well-being. Witness, for instance, how John White connects the aim of autonomy to the “fundamental” one of personal well-being:

Personal autonomy is a central liberal value. It rests on an even more fundamental value in human life—personal well-being. Autonomous well-being is only one variant of the more general concept, given that people can flourish or not flourish in non-liberal—for example, traditional-tribal—as well as liberal societies (White 1999, p. 193).

The execution of this alternative strategy is, however, hindered by two formidable obstacles. First, on the assumption that personal well-being is non-trivially associated with education’s ultimate aims, *in what* does such a bedrock standard consist and *how* can it select among the possible specific aims? Second, why should it be assumed that *personal well-being* is the final arbiter of what the ultimate goals of education are to be?

Executing the second strategy requires getting clear on personal well-being. This task invariably demands that we tread into the deep waters of axiology. The key question that needs to be addressed is this: When is one’s life good in itself for the one who lives it? There are competing views about in what the good life consists. Hence, a clarification of the putative bedrock standard of personal well-being is inherently associated with the debate concerning alternative so-called “life-ranking axiologies.”⁹ Regarding personal well-being, Derek Parfit distinguishes a number of theories:

On *Hedonistic Theories*, what would be best for someone is what would make his life happiest. On *Desire-Fulfilment Theories*, what would be best for someone is what, throughout his life, would best fulfil his desires. On *Objective List Theories*, certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things. (Parfit, 1984, p. 493)

Quite independently of which of these competitors, or others (if any), is the correct view, there is a general problem that arises in connection with each competitor, if any one of them is to play an ineliminable role in identifying and justifying ultimate educational aims (as the second strategy recommends). There seems to be no satisfactory answer to this question: How can the bedrock standard of personal well-being select among the possible aims?

Suppose that the good life *is* the pleasant life of hedonism.¹⁰ One's life is, then, going well for one if it contains a net balance of intrinsic pleasure. But there is no *a priori* reason to believe that, generally, our children's lives will go well for them in this sense, if each were to live, for instance, a moral life as opposed to a prudential life. There is no reason to suppose, for example, that a calculated life of crime need not be imbued with a salutary net dose of pleasure. So, depending on the sort of individual one is, and various contingences, such as social, cultural, or economic ones in which one finds oneself, the sort of life that constitutes the good life for the one who lives it can vary considerably across individuals. One might live the good life if one lives the self-interested life, or the moral life, or the prudential life, or the aesthetic life, or a life with each of these ingredients. Hence, since the good life is compatible with educating for a host of things, the standard of well-being is unable unambiguously to select one thing as education's specific ultimate aim. This strategy, thus, seems to imply that what we should educate for, when it is ultimate aims that we have in mind, can be vastly heterogeneous. This makes it challenging, to say the least, to settle on whether we should

strive to educate our children with an eye toward ensuring that they turn into normative agents of one specific sort.

The alternative strategy assumes that the good life for the individual is the final arbiter of what the ultimate goals of education are to be. But it is difficult to conceive of any persuasive justification for this assumption. Why is it not just as plausible, it might reasonably be queried, to align the ultimate aims of education with *social welfare*? With respect to the rock bottom aims of education, we could against the backdrop of Aristotle's view contrast educating for personal well-being with educating for good citizenship or "social betterment," where the notion of social betterment is widely construed as, roughly, "world betterment." The question "What makes a life good in itself for the one who lives it?" should not be confused with another: "What sort of life contributes to the intrinsic value of some world?" A life that is highly valuable in itself for the one who lives it may have very little to do with the overall intrinsic value of a world; it may have low extrinsic value. It is, thus, important to distinguish between educating with an eye toward making the life that the child lives better, in itself, for the child, and educating with an eye toward making some world intrinsically better. So, given this distinction, why should we not educate in the light of what one may advance is the equally foundational aim of making the world we live in as good as we can?

The present strategy may eventually run into a conflict between personal well-being and social welfare as the bedrock aims of education. Ought we to educate with an eye to maximize personal well-being? Or, alternatively, ought we to educate with an eye to maximize social welfare? If there is some truth in the thesis of Reason's fragmentation in section 3, then there is no answer to these questions. Unsupplied with a transcendent, overarching standpoint such as Reason, we just do not know whether we "plainly ought" to opt for personal well-being or social welfare as the bedrock aim of education. We cannot make a principled or justified choice between the bedrock standard of personal well-being or

that of social welfare to identify and justify education's ultimate aims. There would also not be any guarantee of convergence: according to the first standard autonomy might be the ultimate aim, whereas according to the second it might be morally responsible agency. As before, the fragmentation of reason entails the scattering of education's ('ultimate') aims. Again, there cannot be one ultimate educational aim.

5. Pluralism about Educational Aims

Analytical educational theory is dominated by two key questions: (1) What do you mean by 'education'? and (2) How do you know that 'education' is 'worthwhile'? The first is a question of conceptual analysis, while the second is a question of justification. Our examination of the yardstick of overridingness and the standard of well-being to deal with the problem of identifying and justifying ultimate educational aims is first and foremost motivated by justificatory concerns. Regarding these concerns, the impact of Reason's fragmentation on the very idea of ultimacy and hierarchy among education's aims is quite dramatic. Our critical reflection leads to the conclusion that there cannot be justifiably singled out one ultimate aim of education. Lacking a transcendent standpoint such as Reason, there even cannot be several ultimate aims justifiably set apart from some other subsidiary ones.

As a result, pluralism about the aims of education is the correct view. The scattering of education's aims is incompatible with no matter what kind of unitarianism, be it moral or rational, individual or social, or whatever. Critical thinking, autonomy, morally responsible agency and capability for love and care are on a par: there is no "first among equals." By parity of reasoning, the assumption (we initially made in section 1) that democratic citizenship and economic participation are only subsidiary aims is also unjustified. Moreover, even more traditional aims such as religious devotion and cultural initiation are as legitimate candidates as critical thinking and autonomy for being included in the "parliament of educational goals." So, all aims are equal.

As remarked in section 1, this pluralism does not imply scepticism about the aims themselves. Reason's fragmentation and education's aims being scattered are no reasons to doubt the teleological and axiological structure of educational endeavours. When we educate, we act purposively and with an eye to bring about something worthwhile in our children. The main consequence of pluralism is this. Which aims we select to direct our educational practices is predominantly a matter of contingency. The aims we pick out and put emphasis on depend to a large extent on the social context and cultural setting in which we live. Of course, the way in which we were ourselves taught and the way in which we teach our children *explains* why we find it so natural to think that, for example, educating for morally responsible agency is *the* ultimate aim of education. However, although we can explain our talk about education's ultimate aims, we cannot justify such talk for the reasons given in this paper.

If humans had a purpose or *telos*, then maybe we could determine education's foundational aim as the aim of equipping us to do whatever we would have to do to fulfill this purpose. But we do not have any such all-encompassing, unitary purpose. Perhaps the best we can do by way of identifying (non-ultimate) aims is to reflect on things like personal well-being *or* the sort of world that would be best, and then tie education's (scattered) aims with these things. "But why settle on personal or worldly betterment rather than, or to the exclusion of, others things?" one may still ask. To this question, we think, there is no illuminating answer or such an answer may be hard to come by.

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Notes

¹ In *Rationality Redeemed?* Siegel still holds the view "that the fostering of rationality and critical thinking is the central aim, and the overriding ideal, of education" (Siegel 1997, p. 2) while believing "that this ideal is by far the one most widely advocated in the history of philosophy of education, from Plato to Dewey and beyond." (p. 189, note 1)

² For such radical scepticism about (some types of) educational aims, see, for example, Standish 1999 and Standish 2003.

³ We assume that such conflicts are possible. For convincing illustrations of this possibility, see, for example, Williams 1976 and Slote 1983.

⁴ Needless to say, the Overridingness Thesis is controversial. Some opponents include: Foot 1972; Wolf 1982; and Copp 1997.

⁵ "Plain ought" is a term Feldman introduces in his discussion of overridingness. See Feldman 1986, pp. 212-215.

⁶ Copp plausibly suggests that Reason would have the properties of "comprehensiveness" and "supremacy." He explains that Reason would take the verdicts given by all the special standpoints in any situation where various obligations conflict, "evaluate these verdicts without any question-begging; and ... produce an overall verdict as to what the agent is to do [Reason] would be 'comprehensive'" (1997, p. 94). Further, he says that Reason would be the normatively most important standard for evaluating such verdicts and for the choice of how to act: "Hence, an agent *ought simpliciter* to comply with its overall verdict. ... [Reason] would be 'supreme'" (1997, pp. 94-95).

⁷ For the relevance of critical thinking in the context of practical reason, see, for example, [author].

⁸ For this point, see Zimmerman 2002, pp. 239-242.

⁹ For an instructive survey of these axiologies, see Hurka 2006.

¹⁰ The general problem remains when one opts for a desire-fulfilment theory or an objective list theory. On desire-fulfilment theories, it is satisfaction or frustration of intrinsic desires that contribute to well-being. But there is no *a priori* reason why a life of self-interest should more satisfy one's intrinsic desires, while a moral life should more frustrate them. The intrinsic desire for friendship, for instance, might systematically be frustrated by one's self-interested projects, whereas the intrinsic desire for self-fulfilment might amply be satisfied by one's dedication to a moral cause. On objective list theories, it is possession of goods such as knowledge, beauty, freedom, love, power, and so on that contribute to well-being. But since the list is heterogeneous, the standard of well-being ineluctably is ambiguous.