

ARTICLES

Abstract

This paper discusses two conceptual relations between teaching and rationality and uses the case of Jim Keegstra, a teacher who was dismissed for his unorthodox teaching, such as that the Holocaust never occurred, to illustrate the points. Firstly, Keegstra failed to promote rationality and thereby failed to educate his students. Secondly, it is shown that in teaching situations there is a logical presupposition of rationality which Keegstra did not meet and which ironically contributed to his "success".

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TEACHING AND RATIONALITY: THE CASE OF JIM KEEGSTRA

The Jim Keegstra affair¹ doubtlessly will be much discussed in Canadian education. It will likely serve as a paradigm case of the teaching of prejudice and as the basis for discussion on how to avoid such teaching. It raises as well questions about the role of the teaching profession and how it disciplines colleagues. The question of the control and monitoring of curriculum content is also raised by this case. In this paper I want to consider one of the philosophical issues that is raised by this affair. Philosophers have long argued that teachers have the responsibility to develop rational thinking abilities in students. As long as teachers are concerned to educate children in this way there are limits, both moral and epistemological, on what can be done in the classroom. One of these limits stems from the goal of developing rationality: to foster irrationality among students is a clear case of the misuse of the teacher's responsibility. The Keegstra affair gives us the opportunity to reflect on these issues because it raises them in a stark, unusual, and frightening way. Not only do we have a clear case of an irrational position being promulgated; we have it being accepted by students as if it were rational. I hope to examine these issues so as to illuminate further the relation of teaching and rationality.

Jim Keegstra was a social studies teacher in the small, rural community of Eckville, Alberta until he was dismissed from his position and subsequently charged and convicted under the Criminal Code of Canada for his teachings. His dismissal was based on the claim of his school district, which was later supported in court, that his teaching failed to conform to the provincially mandated curriculum, and his Criminal Code charge was "willfully promoting hatred against an identifiable group." These descriptions barely serve to reveal the enormity of his teaching and its impact on his students. Among his teachings were the claims that there is an international Jewish conspiracy which is seeking to establish a world government and which has been responsible for such events as World War I, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the metric system and that the Holocaust never occurred. By all reports he was a popular teacher and a respected member of the community; he was the mayor of Eckville at the time his teachings came to be known outside his community. He was also a "successful" teacher in that the students he taught came to accept his teachings as being true and well-founded.²

Before discussing the particulars of the case I first want to look at the concepts of teaching and rationality. It is clear that teaching is an intentional activity. The activity of teaching is triadic in that there is someone, a teacher, teaching something, content, to someone, a student or students.

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How we describe an instance of teaching is determined by the intention of the teacher. We say of teachers that they are teaching, say, multiplication when it is their intention to get the students to learn how to multiply numbers. We do not need to know anything about the intention of the student to make such a judgment, and knowledge of the content the teacher uses may not reveal what is being taught. Observing, say, that children are reading short stories may not reveal that they are learning about metaphor. Rather, knowledge of the intention of the teacher is always sufficient to determine how the activity is to be described. This point is not just of academic interest because it is through the intention of the teacher that a situation is established which gives the significance of the activity to others in the situation. The teacher's intention provides the meaning of the activity for the students. Knowledge of the teacher's intention is what enables students to see the point of the activity. Without knowing this intention the students will not immediately see what the teacher is doing and so, in order to make sense of their situation, they have to determine in some way what the teacher is about. Success in teaching can then be seen to rest in part on the teacher and the students sharing a common view as to what the point of the teaching is. It is in this way that the teacher's intention becomes intersubjective and provides significance and meaning to the situation in which the teacher and the students find themselves.

The intentionality of teaching requires that some presuppositions about the rationality of the actors involved have been made. To have the intention to achieve some end and to choose actions that are believed likely to bring about the end require that the agent be, to some degree, rational. Any intentional situation has both a goal and some means for achieving that goal. What one does is done to realize some goal, and the agent believes that the action is efficacious towards meeting the goal. Hence, an agent has constructed a means-ends relation. It is this feature of intentionality that presupposes rationality. The extent of the presupposition is revealed by the features of adopting a means-end claim. The agent must believe that it is true that the means will bring about the end. The means must be, in the agent's view, consistent with the end. Usually if there are other means to the same end, the one the agent has chosen is believed to be the most efficient unless more efficient means have features that the agent judges to be undesirable. That is, if we can point out to the agent that there are other more efficient means to the end, the agent should either choose the more efficient means or defend the original choice on other grounds. Finally, the agent must believe that it is possible to perform the action that will bring about the end. All of these beliefs about the situation are part of what it means to act intentionally. They also involve making judgments about the world and oneself that are subject to intersubjective standards of correctness. If the agent fails to be rational then these judgments cannot be made and the action cannot be held to be rational.

Frederick Olafson has discussed several ways in which the level of rationality displayed by the person can be questioned: ignorance, irrationality and unconscious intention.³ One charge that can be made about a person's intention is that the person is in error or ignorant of the facts. A teacher's actions may be based on information that is limited or inaccurate. If so, the outcome of the action may well be different from what the teacher intended. But this is not inconsistent with the presupposition of rationality; indeed the fact that we do not always achieve what we intend is a simple fact of life. We can intend to reach certain goals, but we cannot intend that the world be such that our beliefs about the world are always correct. Even if we know that a person's intentions are based on ignorance we can still characterize the person's action by his or her intention, though we may, from our vantage point, put certain qualifications in our account. That is, we might say that the person thought he could improve the students' ability to multiply numbers by showing them a film about rabbits. The presupposition of rationality still holds in that the person's beliefs,

intention and action are still seen to be related as if the beliefs were true. So we have the same presupposition of rationality which shows that it is consistent with the possibility of error.

Olafson characterizes an irrational⁴ act as one which, "rests on beliefs which are not only false but also should have been seen to be false by the person in question."⁵ Here the person's actions are held in the face of accepted criteria or information. The situation is different from the previous one because there it would be possible to correct the person's beliefs. In this case, because the person refuses to accept what should be known, the person is not likely to correct the situation. To a degree this sort of situation can be incorporated into the presumption of rationality. Even if we feel that the person's action is based on an irrational belief we can still attribute an intention to the person and see the point of the action. In this way we can participate with the person in the intersubjective world of agency and can see the significance and meaning of the intention. However, at the extreme the person's beliefs may be so at variance with what is publicly accepted that we cannot participate with the person in the situation. We no longer share a common world with the agent. "The requirement of rationality is thus one that is bound up with intersubjectivity."⁶

The third sort of case relates to unconscious intentions or motivations. Olafson argues that these do not force us to give up the presupposition of rationality so long as we abandon the "assumption that the unconscious lies outside the intentional life of the agent or is segregated from that life in such a way as to be inaccessible to him."⁷ Instead we should construe unconscious intentions as those which one does not acknowledge publicly to others or privately to oneself because, perhaps, they conflict with others that one is willing to state or acknowledge. Given this construction, unconscious intentions can become conscious when, say, the person's conflicts are resolved. This allows the same presupposition of rationality to hold. It may be the case, however, that a person's unconscious intentions are so at variance with what he or she does that they cannot be made public without great difficulty; in such cases the agent may become a patient in need of therapy. So again we have a range of cases from the fully conscious intentional action through the unconscious intention that can be corrected and made conscious to the intractably unconscious intention where the person's rationality may well come into question. But in any event the existence of unconscious intentions does not force us to give up the presupposition of rationality.

The discussion so far has focussed on the presupposition of rationality in intentional actions including, of course, teaching. I have argued that teaching, as an intentional action, presupposes some degree of rationality which may not be entirely clear in some cases due to ignorance, irrationality or unconscious intentions on the part of the teacher. But the concept of rationality is related to teaching in another way which I will now consider. Not only is rationality a presupposition of teaching but it is as well a criterion for acceptable teaching. Teaching can be criticized if it promotes irrationality in students. While it is of course possible to teach children irrational beliefs, just as it is possible to teach false or silly beliefs, something serious has gone wrong in such cases. Any instance of teaching will have a point or intention as has already been discussed. But there is a generic point to teaching; a generalized intention that gives significance to the class of teaching activities. The point of teaching in general is to expand the knowledge, ability and understanding of the students. This will only occur if what is learned by students is in accord with publicly acceptable and justifiable standards of belief and action. If the teacher deliberately instructs contrary to this standard, the teacher has missed the point of what the activity is all about. While we would not want to be too critical of cases of teaching where what is taught is false, (after all from time to time everyone has to correct what one has learned), we do want to criticize those cases where falsehoods are deliberately promulgated in such a way so as to inhibit the student from

questioning what is being taught or considering alternatives to it and leaving the student unable or unwilling to correct the beliefs. We criticize this not just because it results in students acquiring false beliefs or even because the teacher instilled false beliefs deliberately. Rather we want to criticize such actions because they inhibit and frustrate further learning on the part of the student and because the canons of rationality have been frustrated. So in this way the principles of rationality serve as a standard for teaching and in a general way give significance to the activity.

In an open society education is concerned to promote independent, knowledgeable and purposive thought and action. A teacher is expected not just to be a baby sitter, an agent of socialization or a model of ethical behaviour for young people, although the teacher might do all of these from time to time. What makes teaching important is the special purpose that exists in the relation between the teacher and the student. The teacher is to help to enable the student to think and act on his or her own as an independent agent. To do this the student needs to come to adopt the standards of rationality. Only when the student has accepted standards of rationality as governing one's own actions will independent, knowledgeable and purposive thought and action be possible. The teacher's role, then, is inextricably bound up with rationality in that it governs one's actions and gives significance to one's work.

A range of other possible educationally worthwhile goals, such as creativity, wisdom, moral character and autonomy, depend upon the ability to think rationally. Of these I wish to consider only autonomy as it is most pertinent to the Keegstra case. An autonomous person⁸ is one who is, at least, able to adopt beliefs and make decisions for himself/herself independently of the direction, command or influence of others or which are not adopted simply to receive the favour or approbation of others. The basis on which an autonomous person adopts beliefs or chooses actions is his or her evaluation of the case. The person makes judgments of truth and falsity and of desirability and undesirability. The person will have to attend to facts, evidence, reasons and principles. In doing so the person will have to be consistent and impartial. In a word, the person will have to be rational. As a consequence if a person is taught not to be rational the person cannot be autonomous. It is in this way that rationality is a precondition for autonomy, and if the latter is to be an educational goal, the former must be as well.

I will now turn to the Keegstra affair to show how the previous discussion highlights and illuminates this difficult case. Keegstra's teachings failed to meet the standards of rationality in both ways that have been identified. Taking the second way in which rationality is related to teaching first, his teaching did not result in rational thinking on the part of his students. Not only did the students learn his position but they learned it in such a way as to prevent them from being open to other positions and being able to correct their beliefs should they come to see that they are in error. While some students may have adopted his beliefs in order to answer class and examination questions "correctly" or to get a grade in the course without becoming committed to those beliefs, it is clear that there were students who accepted the beliefs and the particular conspiracy theory that contains them.

It is the acceptance of this conspiracy theory that makes the position thoroughly irrational. According to this conspiracy theory all information is controlled, so that any evidence one finds that contradicts the theory does not count against it but is rather further confirmation of the theory. Anyone who speaks against the theory is thus an agent or a dupe of the conspiracy. Physical evidence that might count against the theory could have been constructed or faked, and so it too is seen to be further evidence for the theory. The conspiracy theory is in this way self-serving in that part of the theory serves to protect it from defeat. If one accepts the theory, one is at the same time

accepting beliefs that prevent one from ever seeing that the theory may not be correct. It is constructed so as to inhibit a person from questioning it; to do so is to be part of the pros and cons of the theory, one cannot reason about it. In that reasoning is prevented one cannot hold the theory rationally. Although the theory has all the trappings: "facts," "evidence," "predictions," and "explanations;" it is in reality nothing but dogma, a set of beliefs purportedly about the world but which is accepted on faith and is held tenaciously in spite of any evidence to the contrary. In teaching students to hold such a position, Keegstra forced students to hold an irrational set of beliefs. Since the doctrine has all the appearance of being rational one fears that some of these students at least will see the conspiracy theory as an example or model of rationality. If they do this, then the result is they may be less likely to be rational in the future. Since their picture of rationality is itself irrational they may try to make all their beliefs fit such a pattern. So, one can conclude that Keegstra failed in his responsibility as a teacher to promote rational beliefs and understandings among his students and may well have thwarted the possibility of the students' becoming autonomous individuals.

Looking at this case with the first relation of teaching and rationality in mind, *viz.*, the presupposition of rationality that is required by intentional action, a very important fact about teaching is made clear. Of the three ways in which the presupposition can be challenged, the second, irrationality, would seem to be the most applicable here. This is not a case of unconscious intentions; Keegstra was completely aware of what he wanted students to learn. We may, however, feel that because his actions are so at variance with common knowledge there must be some intention of which he is not aware and so he may become, in our view, a candidate for therapy. As well it is not just a case of ignorance, or even tragic ignorance, because he was not open to correction. It is most clearly a case of irrationality because not only were his actions based on beliefs that are false but he should have been able to see their falsity. That is, the use of publicly accepted and justifiable standards of knowledge would show that the conspiracy theory is untenable.

The implications of this are interesting, and in this case, somewhat frightening. As we have seen, the presupposition of rationality is a result of the intersubjectivity of intentional situations. In order for the other participants in the situation to make sense of and to see the significance of the agent's actions they must accept the presupposition that the agent is acting rationally. In this case the students were faced with a teacher acting from irrational beliefs. What were they to do? They did the only thing they could: in order to make their situation intelligible they credited the teacher with being rational. Because teaching is an intentional action which presupposes rationality, the only way one can see another's behaviour as an instance of teaching is to grant the presupposition. In seeing the teaching as being rational they incorporated the teachings into their own belief systems. But because the beliefs were themselves irrational the students came to accept an irrational position.

This is a general feature of teaching. In order for students to become participants in the teacher-student relationship there must be some ground on which one takes the role of student. One part of this relationship is that one presumes the teacher to be rational. One cannot be a learner if one does not accept that the teacher is acting rationally. If the student does not accept that the teacher's ends and means are related efficaciously, there is no point in attending to what the teacher is doing. Without such a presumption the teacher's actions would appear pointless and senseless. This is not to make a psychological claim; it is, instead, to make a logical point that stems from the nature of the situation they find themselves in. In most cases one need not pay attention to the presumption because it is met. But in cases such as this the presumption becomes

telling. It, in a way, makes the work of the irrational teacher much easier. Because he or she is in a teaching situation, he or she is presumed to be rational. Without this presumption there would be no point in attending to the teacher. But because the presumption is that what an irrational teacher will do is rational, one is more likely to accept what is being taught. Unfortunately the result is that the student has been led to an irrational position because of the presumption. It would seem that the sort of learner a teacher like Keegstra would have the most difficulty with, besides those extremely knowledgeable about the topic hence not likely to be a student in a classroom where it is being taught, is the cynical or very skeptical person. People with these traits would be less likely to accept the presupposition of rationality. But these are character traits that we would not want to encourage in children in schools. So, the logic of the teaching situation, which presupposes that students see the teacher as being rational, was instrumental in reaching the unfortunate results.

I would like to consider some of the lessons of this for teaching. The first is, of course, never to let such things occur. The fact that the teacher held irrational beliefs shows that something went wrong in his own education. If it is true, as I have tried to indicate, that the promotion of rationality is a generalized intention of all teaching situations, then somewhere along the line there was a failure in Keegstra's case. He did not have the ability to see the problems and incoherence in the beliefs and theory that he adopted. It would be wrong, I believe, simply to blame his failure on his teachers in schools on the basis of what I have said. Not all that a person learns is taught in a classroom. In this case, the social dynamics of Keegstra's religion, culture or even geography might have been instrumental in his reaching the beliefs that he did. But as strong as these influences may be they do not lessen the teacher's commitment to the promotion of rationality. Teachers can never shirk their responsibility to try to develop rational thinking in their students, even in the face of countervailing social factors.

The other major lesson stems from the experience of the teacher who initially replaced Keegstra. After hearing the students' responses to his teaching, which was correct, this teacher began to think that he was "crazy."⁹ He was faced with students who had adopted an irrational position which provided answers to all objections. As he was the only person who held a different view, it is understandable that the replacement teacher began to doubt himself. The standard view, which to the new teacher had also been the ordinary view, was for the first time one held by a small minority. And because it was such a standard view, it was one he probably did not have to think seriously or deeply about when he learned it. That is, because one learns so much in the course of one's education one cannot investigate or research the basis of everything one learns; one comes to accept much on the basis of authority. But when something previously regarded as non-controversial suddenly becomes controversial one may not have all the arguments or evidence at hand to refute the position. But when one is in such a situation and the others will not even listen to refutations one is in a very difficult spot. One hopes that the new teacher's rational abilities will be strong enough to see him through such frustrating times and that he will have the ability and resources to develop and present strong arguments for the correct position. An explicit knowledge of the canons of rationality and of explicit tests for theories in general may help teachers who find themselves in situations where they have to fight irrationality.

One cannot help wondering about the long term impact of the Keegstra affair. The students subjected to his teaching have now left the school system and so it is unable to correct their beliefs. The children now in the school will of course receive appropriate, or at least more appropriate, teaching. Over time the impact of Keegstra's teachings may dissipate. Without the continuing reinforcement of a persuasive teacher and with the further impact of other sources of information

the beliefs of the former students may change. Again the social dynamics of their lives may well have a more important influence than can be described here. But what is not clear is whether their capability to think rationally has been permanently impaired. Perhaps this is a case where the fact that a teacher's influence is often not as strong as we would like it to be is something for which we might be thankful.

Résumé

Cet article présente deux types de relations conceptuelles entre l'enseignement et la rationalité. Pour illustrer ce fait, l'auteur utilise le cas de Jim Keegstra, un professeur qui a été congédié pour avoir soutenu devant ses élèves l'idée très peu orthodoxe que l'Holocauste n'avait jamais eu lieu. Ainsi, Keegstra, en refusant de promouvoir la cause de la rationalité, a failli à sa tâche d'éducateur. D'autre part, il est démontré que dans toute situation d'enseignement, il doit exister une présupposition de rationalité, condition que Keegstra n'a pas respectée, ce qui, ironiquement, a contribué à son "succès".

Notes

¹ For an account of Keegstra's teachings and their effects on students, which I will use in this paper, see Robert Mason Lee, "Keegstra's Children", *Saturday Night*, Vol. 100, No. 5, (May 1985).

² See Lee, op. cit., for instances on this and other points mentioned about the case.

³ Frederick A. Olafson, *The Dialectic of Action*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) pp. 52-58. The discussion of intentionality here derives much from this work.

⁴ Perhaps not too much weight should be placed on the terminology. In R.S. Peters' distinction between irrationality and unreasonableness *Reason and Compassion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) pp. 92-99 the present case would fit better under Peters' unreasonableness. Although I will not defend it, I feel Olafson's terminology is the more accurate and useful.

⁵ Olafson, op. cit., p. 53.

⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

⁸ For more on autonomy see Peters, op. cit., pp. 48-54.

⁹ Lee, op. cit., p. 44.