

To Prefer a Preference for the Poor

By Benny Mattis

In consideration of the role that childhood indoctrination plays in the propagation of anti-democratic ideologies, Daniel Dennett (2006) has proposed a policy of religious education whereby children would be taught about a plurality of religions before they reach the age of intellectual maturity, rather than subjected to whatever education or indoctrination is deemed suitable by their respective parents. *Contra* Dennett's call for increased impartiality, this paper argues in favor of an educational bias favoring theological interpretations aligned with the principle of God's preferential option for the poor; such a bias would more effectively guard the capacity of persons for healthy democratic deliberation against anti-democratic tendencies of the kind Dennett wishes to avoid.

A closed-minded disregard for truth is a key characteristic of anti-democratic tendencies denounced by Dennett, which include certain would-be tyrants in the names of God and the poor:

Remember Marxism?...Some of them, the only ones that were really dangerous, believed so firmly in the rightness of their cause that they believed it was permissible to lie and deceive in order to further it. They even taught this to their children, from infancy. These are the "red-diaper babies", children of hardline members of the Communist Party of America, and some of them can still be found infecting the atmosphere of political action in left-wing circles, to the extreme frustration and annoyance of honest socialists and others on the left. Today we have a similar phenomenon on the religious right...They are dangerous, for the same reason that red-diaper babies are dangerous: they put their allegiance to their creed ahead of their commitment to democracy, to peace, to (earthly) justice—and to truth. (Dennett, 2006, pp. 337-338)

Dennett emphasizes reliance of anti-democratic ideologies on propagation through the indoctrination of children: echoing Humphrey (1999), Dennett (2006) reminds his reader that "some children are raised in such an ideological prison that they willingly become their own jailers" (p. 324). "Red-diaper babies", on Dennett's view, are largely such as they are due to their being indoctrinated prior to the full development of their rational faculties; the same goes for religious fundamentalists.

Criticizing such indoctrination, Dennett favorably mentions Humphrey's (1999) basis of educational ethics on what a given child hypothetically *would have chosen for herself*:

If it is ever the case that teaching [a belief system] to children will mean that later in life they come to hold beliefs that, were they in fact to have had access to alternatives, they would most likely not have chosen for themselves, then it is morally wrong of whoever presumes to impose this system and to *choose for them* to do so. (p. 68, emphasis in original)

Rather than totally trusting parental discretion in the matter, Dennett proposes that “We should teach [every child] about *all* the world’s religions...No religion should be favored, and none ignored” (p. 327). This is what Dennett suggests for the education of children “until they are informed enough and mature enough to decide for themselves” among competing religions (and the atheistic rejection thereof) (p. 327). As Dennett (2008) later clarifies, he thinks that such a protocol “will inoculate our children...As long as you teach them this, you can teach them whatever else you want as long as it doesn’t disable them from informing themselves further” (§28). As vaccination prepares children to resist the ravages of a virus, more impartial¹ religious education may strengthen children’s immunity to dogmatism, bolstering antibodies of rationality.

If anti-democratic ideology is indeed alien to the rationality of fully-mature persons capable of “deciding for themselves” among religious and political movements, then Dennett’s solution of (relatively) impartial childhood religious education could be a sensible safeguard for modern democracy. If, on the other hand, the mature rationality of personhood itself bends toward tyranny, then some indoctrination of children, even prior to the full maturation of their rational capacities, could itself better serve as such a vaccine. This latter possibility, as this paper argues, better explains the susceptibility of *persons as such* to anti-democratic ideologies claiming to exist on behalf of God or the poor. Dennett’s goal of increased impartiality in religious education is bound to be insufficient as a vaccination against the anti-democratic movements he opposes; a proper dosage of indoctrination is necessary to achieve his democratic ends. The basis of this argument will be an analysis of Dennett’s notion of personhood; the “Conditions of Personhood” outlined by Dennett (1976) contain seeds of the very anti-democratic pathologies to which he is opposed.

Conditions of Personhood

“What I wish to do now”, writes Dennett (1976) in a paper clarifying the notion of persons as such, “is consider [some] familiar themes, each a claim to identify some necessary condition of personhood, and each, I think, a correct claim on some interpretation” (p. 177). The first “theme” of personhood listed in Dennett’s article is “being rational”, which for Dennett entails (and is entailed by) “being Intentional” or “being the object of a certain stance” (p. 178).

More specifically, persons are always systems

Whose behavior can be (at least sometimes) explained and predicted by relying on ascriptions to the system of *beliefs* and *desires* (and other Intentionally characterized features—what I will call Intentions here, meaning to include hopes, fears, intentions, perceptions, expectations, etc.). (p. 179)

Dennett warns that “it is important to recognize how bland this definition of *Intentional system* is, and how correspondingly large the class of Intentional systems can be”, pointing out that there is an “actual utility of adopting the Intentional stance toward plants” insofar as they can be successfully understood as behaving in accordance with “beliefs” or “desires” regarding sunlight, moisture, and various other objects of plant interest (p. 180). The fact that we often refer to adoption of the Intentional stance as “personification” of a system illustrates just how essential this notion of rationality is to the notion of what it means to be a person.

The second distinct condition of personhood is reciprocity, or *second-order intentionality*. Dennett (1976) defines “a *second-order Intentional system* as one to which we ascribe not only simple beliefs, desires and other Intentions, but beliefs, desires, and other Intentions *about* beliefs, desires, and other Intentions” (p. 181). This is a precondition for the next condition of personhood listed by Dennett: the capacity for “verbal communication” (p. 186), which allows for collective decision-making, and gives rise to norms like (Rawlsian) “justice” considered as the social order (whatever it would turn out to be) that would be decided

upon by ideally reasonable persons in group deliberation (p. 190). Thus emerges another condition for something to be a “person” in the sense of a moral agent.

Self-awareness, the application of the social-deliberative practice of “reason-giving” (p. 191) to oneself, is the last condition of personhood mentioned by Dennett. Dennett draws from Frankfurt (1971), describing self-awareness as the capacity for “second-order volitions”:

Besides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that, [persons] may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are. (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 7)

Such is the last condition of personhood discussed by Dennett: the capacity to want one’s own will to be different from that which it currently is.

Dennett (1976) notes an apparent distinction between “the [metaphysical] notion of an intelligent, conscious, feeling agent” (p. 176) and “the [moral] notion of an agent who is accountable, who has both rights and responsibilities” (p. 176). On his analysis, however, “the moral notion of a person and the metaphysical notion of a person are not separate and distinct concepts but just two different and unstable resting points on the same continuum” (p. 193). This is illustrated by the mutual interdependence of manifestations of metaphysical personhood and approximations of the norms characteristic of moral personhood: “truth and consistency are norms for belief, and sincerity is the norm for utterance...justice [in a Rawlsian sense] is the norm for interpersonal interactions” (Dennett, 1976, p. 190). These norms presuppose and are presupposed by the conditions of personhood; the norm of sincerity presupposes communication, for example, which itself only functions in an atmosphere wherein utterances can generally be expected to be sincere. Ultimately, for Dennett, “the concept of a person is inescapably normative or idealized; to the extent that justice does not reveal itself in the dealings and interactions of creatures, to that extent they are not persons” (p. 190). Dennett thus unifies the notion of personhood without erasing the difference between its metaphysical and moral aspects.

Limits of Personhood

The conditions of personhood are characterized by approximations of order manifest in certain systems—susceptibility to the Intentional stance, for example, is characterized (as defined by Dennett) by what Anscombe (1957) called the “order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions” (p. 80). Similarly, for Dennett (1976), there is an “order which is there” among sincere communicators (p. 189), and an “order which is there” in societies tending toward justice (p. 190). For Dennett, actual instances of personhood are only ever mere approximations of such order, always falling short of the ideal, and “There is no way to set a ‘passing grade’ that is not arbitrary” (p. 193). If such a “passing grade” were (arbitrarily) set high enough—if the conditions of personhood were sufficiently “strictly interpreted”—then “nothing would ever fulfill” the strict requirements of ideal order (Dennett, 1976, p. 193). As with ideals of mathematical order (perfect circles, etc.), no perfect instances of personhood exist in nature, and natural systems can only ever merely approximate the ideal.

Although personhood most strictly interpreted may be an unrealistic goal for any human, it is nevertheless possible to reach some conclusions (based on Dennett’s enumeration of the themes of personhood) regarding the rational response of a given person to this very situation of finitude. We can assume that such a person will find herself in a social order, which will be neither minimally nor maximally just, and whose members will thus neither minimally nor maximally approximate the norms of personhood. She will be capable of second-order volitions. Keeping in mind her limited approximation of (Rawlsian) *democratic* ideals, and therefore her approximation of *Dennett’s* notion of personhood, she can be called Person_D from here forward. These premises can inform an anticipation of her (i.e., a typical person’s) rational development, all else (including theologies which might have been taught to her as a child) being equal.

All else being equal, given Person_D's tendency toward justice and capacity for second-order volitions, she will tend to form second-order volitions aiming towards justice: she will wish to become more just. By wishing for an increased degree of justice in her own will, Person_D will in practice be adopting an even stricter interpretation of personhood (as personhood and justice have been defined in terms of each other). Two directions she might take in this process of self-scrutiny correspond to the two aspects (moral and metaphysical, respectively) of personhood: Person_D may either seek to become more just in dealings with other persons around her, or she may seek to determine which of the entities around her can properly be described as persons in the first place. Although their answers may inform each other, one can never ask both of these questions simultaneously; the investigation of each presupposes an answer to the other.

The Social Justice Warrior

The first possible path Person_D could embark upon would involve a scrutiny of her own interpretation of personhood, considered in its *moral* aspect. Viewed through an increasingly stricter interpretation of moral personhood (“of an agent who is accountable, who has both rights and responsibilities”), the imperfect social order in which she is situated—as well as her fellow members of that social order—would appear relatively unjust. In turn, as the process advances, Person_D's neighbors would fail to “pass” as persons on her stricter interpretation of personhood, to the extent that they constitute the unjust social order in which she finds herself. This possibility is in accordance with Dennett's (1976) characterization of personhood:

Our assumption that an entity is a person is shaken precisely in those cases where it matters: when wrong has been done and the question of responsibility arises. For in these cases the grounds for saying that the person is culpable...are in themselves grounds for doubting that it is a person we are dealing with at all. (pp. 193-194)

As the increase of strictness in her interpretation builds upon itself, Person_D would cease to ascribe personhood to any members of the actual social order in which she originally found herself, recognizing their lack of personhood relative to ideal members of a perfectly just society.

At the infinite limit of this developmental path lies Person_D's transformation into the character here called the Social Justice Warrior². Having adopted a maximally morally strict interpretation of personhood, the Social Justice Warrior outright denies any personhood of those entities which constituted her original flawed social order, given their failure to display sufficient justice; these entities (formerly considered fellow persons) are no longer for her the kind of things that ought to be reasoned with. Indeed, no ascription of personhood can be verified on the Social Justice Warrior's ultimately strict interpretation, although she may ascribe personhood to the poor and the outcast. By this I refer to those whose interests are excluded from the unjust social order, whose personhood cannot thereby be undermined by the injustice thereof. These outcasts are the only entities with respect to whom the Social Justice Warrior can seek justice.

The Knight of Faith

The second path Person_D might take—the path of self-scrutiny through stricter interpretations of personhood *metaphysically* considered—lead to relevantly similar (and antisocial, from the initial perspective of Person_D) results. As Dennett (1976) writes,

Relativity infects the satisfaction of conditions of personhood at every level. There is no objectively satisfiable sufficient condition for an entity's *really* having beliefs, and as we uncover apparent irrationality under an Intentional interpretation of an entity, our grounds for ascribing any beliefs at all wanes, especially when we have (what we always *can* have in principle) a non-Intentional, mechanistic account of the entity. (pp. 193-194)

If Person_D followed the path of increasing metaphysically interpretative strictness to its limit, she would ultimately become unjustified (by her own lights) in ascriptions of personhood to any given entity in the natural world. Rather than (like the Social Justice Warrior) coming to view her original social order as impersonal due to its lack of justice, she would begin to see it as insufficiently deserving of justice due to its very impersonality; like the Social Justice Warrior, she would tend to see the entities around her as simply not “passing” as the kind of thing which one ought to reason with.

At the maximally strict limit of this path, the only possible ascription of metaphysical personhood would be a construal, like the one here described by Jewish existentialist Martin Buber (1923/1970), of the *whole world* as the manifestation of a personal system, i.e. God:

Looking away from the world is no help toward God; staring at the world is no help either; but whoever beholds the world in him stands in his presence... The You-sense of the man who in his relationships to all individual Yous experiences the disappointment of the change into It, aspires beyond all of them and yet not all the way toward his eternal You... The You-sense that cannot be satiated until it finds the infinite You sensed its presence from the beginning. (pp. 127-128)

Even on the strictest interpretation of metaphysical personhood, the adoption of an *all-encompassing* personal stance³ could not be undermined by way of mechanistic explanation, because its object would itself subsume all mechanical interactions, making it thereby immune to the ‘uncovering of apparent irrationality’ to which finite mechanisms⁴ are prone. At this limit of development, the character here called the “Knight of Faith” ascribes personhood to—if anyone—God alone (the “infinite You”). She cannot reason or seek justice with anyone else.

Justice and Love

The Knight of Faith and the Social Justice Warrior are indifferent to earthly justice in ways similar to Dennett’s “red-diaper babies” and religious fundamentalists, so Dennett seems to be mistaken in his suggestion that a lack of preference in childhood education could effectively inoculate persons against such extremism. All else being equal, considered apart from the imposition of bias instilled through childhood indoctrination, and given the maturity of their rational faculties, persons as such will tend toward anti-democratic anti-sociality in the names either of God or of the poor, locking themselves in ideological prisons of their own making by denying the ascription of personhood to those with whom they might otherwise engage in rational discussion. It appears that Dennett’s sought-after inoculation against tyranny will have to be an inoculation against the more self-destructive tendencies of impartial rationality itself, rather than (as Dennett suspected) a minimization of religious bias.

The natural development of democratic persons into anti-democratic extremists also turns Humphrey's criterion for educational ethics on its head: if, later in life, children will (all else being equal) develop into either a Social Justice Warrior or a Knight of Faith, then they would not choose an open-minded and pluralistic education for themselves, but rather choose indoctrination for themselves of the kind that some Marxists or religious fundamentalists would choose for their children. Of course, one cannot indoctrinate a child in all the ways of the Social Justice Warrior and the Knight of Faith simultaneously, any more than one can indoctrinate a child in Marxism and Christian Fundamentalism simultaneously. However, in the subject of religion, there is a synthesis which would be agreeable to both Knight of Faith and Social Justice Warrior alike: this is the theological principle of God's preferential option for the poor.

Although God's option for the poor may find expression in other religions, the words of Pope Francis (2013) neatly express the idea as it appears in the Catholic tradition: "God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself 'became poor'" (§197). Ultimately, the principle insists upon the harmonious union of justice with God and justice with the poor: it insists that, if they are pursuing their missions properly, the Knight of Faith's drive for justice with God and the Social Justice Warrior's drive for justice with the poor ultimately converge. As a theological principle, the notion of God's preferential option for the poor does not busy itself with questions of "the existence of God" (which lies in the domain of philosophy of religion more so than that of theology), but rather states that, on the hypothesis that justice with God is to be pursued, justice with the poor is approached in that very same motion (and vice versa). In the realm of religious education, a theological bias in favor of this principle—rather than an open-minded indifference to theological content—is something that the Knight of Faith and Social Justice Warrior alike could have chosen for their younger selves, given the option.

Properly understood, the preferential option for the poor is not meant to minimize other forms (racial, gendered, or otherwise) of social exclusion by narrowly focusing on economic hardship. As Gustavo Gutiérrez (2013) writes,

The poor themselves are called to make an option that gives priority to the “insignificant” and oppressed. Many do so, but it must be recognized that not all commit themselves to their sisters and brothers by race, gender, social class, or culture. (pp. 131-133)

Neither is the option for the “poor” intended to exclude those whose interests *are* represented in the social order, and whose moral standing is thereby undermined:

No one, poor or nonpoor, is outside the love of God. By preferential, we say that the poor are the first, but this is an ordinal number. There is a second, third, and fourth, and while the poor are the first, the others are the second. This...universality of God’s love goes first to the weakest. (p. 147)

In contrast with the anti-democratic restrictions on recognition endemic to impartial rationality, the principle of God’s preferential option for the poor calls for consideration of everyone’s interests, regardless of moral performance as well as social status.

A degree of this phenomenon of what Gutiérrez calls “gratuitous love” (pp. 65-66) could supplement the tendency of persons to justice in a way that addresses Dennett’s concerns for democracy. The mere tendency of persons as such toward justice contains within itself no mechanism by which the pursuit of earthly justice would endure and persist through the discovery of higher and higher standards; the doctrine of gratuitous love could provide this mechanism. If the pursuit of justice with one’s peers is based on gratuitous love, rather than on those peers’ abilities to “pass” as instances of personhood, then one’s pursuit of earthly justice will not disappear when standards of personhood are raised. Gratuitous love can become aware of ideal perfection, and therefore (by contrast) of earthly imperfection, without abandoning the ever-demanding project of earthly justice with respect to mere natural approximations of personhood. Properly understood, then, the theological principle of God’s preferential option for the poor functions to maintain the pursuit of earthly justice with which Dennett is concerned.

Earthly justice is threatened not only by antisocial childhood indoctrination, but also by antisocial tendencies latent within personhood itself. Regardless of the policy implications which might follow, the prospect of an educational “vaccine” for such pathologies is apparently in the interest of a democratic society. As a candidate formula for such a vaccine, the removal of preference in childhood religious education is no solution, given the logical paths of development for rational, justice-seeking persons in social orders of only limited degrees of justice. Instead, by preferring to educate children in theologies which emphasize God’s option for the poor, democratic societies might inoculate persons against some of the most tantalizing temptations to tyranny, even while recognizing the justice-oriented truths on which such anti-democratic movements parasitically feed. Cultivation of gratuitous love enables citizens to continue the democratic experiment even in the glaring face of their own inadequacy, finitude, and lack of justice.

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Note on Institutional Affiliation

Portions of this research were done while I was a student at Marquette University.

Endnotes

¹ Dennett (2008) acknowledges that “the more complex and darker” aspects of the world’s religions might be more appropriately introduced as part of the high school curriculum, rather than taught to very young children. This is a reasonable qualification of his position, but it does not go far enough: a specific bias favoring God’s preference for the poor is necessary in order to realize the democratic aim of inoculating against extremism in the names of God or of the poor.

² The reader is invited to compare the Social Justice Warrior and the Knight of Faith with the characters after which they are named (found in the imaginations of popular culture and Søren Kierkegaard, respectively). Such a comparison is outside the scope of this paper.

³ Per Dennett (2006), the hypostatization of non-mechanistic minds (such as God) may be explained by Barrett’s (2000) notion of a “Hyperactive Agent Detection Device” (HADD). However, the characterization of any ascription of personhood as “hyperactive” itself must presuppose a line differentiating false positives from accurate detection of “true” personhood, begging the question of which entities are truly proper objects of the Intentional stance. From the point of view of the Knight of Faith, for example, finite physical systems treating each other as persons are themselves the ones with a HADD. A common-sense notion of “proper” agency detection, which is required for the demarcation of improperly “hyperactive” agency detection, is a notion which is already rejected by the Knight of Faith and Social Justice Warrior alike.

⁴ I emphasize the shortcomings of “finite” systems (rather than specifically “physical” systems) in anticipation of the suggestion that souls, spirits, etc. could withstand a strict interpretation of personhood. If such a system was finite, then it could be influenced by non-identical systems (e.g., other spirits, or Ghost-busters perhaps) in a way relevantly similar to limited physical approximations of personhood.