

## Education After Auschwitz: Take Two

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to trumpet the plea made by Theodor Adorno, in his 1966 paper “Education After Auschwitz”, that, since the forces of barbarity are within us all, a strong initiative that enhances autonomy is “the premier demand upon all education”.*

*The attempt here is to articulate precisely in what these barbarizing tendencies consist, as well as the sort of education that has any hope of neutralizing them. Ultimately, it will be argued that these tendencies can potentially be neutralized through strong educational initiatives that attempt to increase the capacity for reasoned perspective-taking, and hence autonomy, by immersing young people in vigorous “respectful”, “open” dialogical relations with others, that requires that they use “truth-seeking” as opposed to “adversarial” dialogue, and employ their critical thinking skills to enhance rather diminish a reasoned opposition on the assumption that the path toward autonomy is nothing other than the path toward truth.*

*If such an educational strategy seems “atypical” or not worth the effort, this should alert us to the truth of Adorno’s claim: that the fundamental conditions that favor the proliferation of cruel, brutal, callous and inhuman human interaction remains unchecked.*

*This should disturb educators of all stripes since it is they who have the knowledge and the opportunity to immunize those in their charge against the plague of barbarity. Given that this is the case, it would seem to follow that, if educators, nonetheless, refuse to pick up the gauntlet, if they continue to be blind and immobile in the face of this threat, they should be considered culpable, as were their educational forebearers before them, when the unspeakable revisits.*

**Keywords:** *autonomy, education for autonomy, truth, truth-seeking, teaching ethics, dialogical education, philosophy for children, debarbarization.*

## INTRODUCTION

It has been more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a century since the world witnessed the horror of the holocaust: a situation in which citizens of a civilized, highly cultured society rose up to taunt, torture and kill anyone deemed unworthy by the powerful. Surely, such wholesale “inhumanity” was an aberration! How should we view ourselves, and other humans, if it was not?

We get a glimpse at how we in fact view ourselves by examining the notion of “inhuman.” It means cruel, brutal, callous.<sup>1</sup> The fact that we refer to these traits as “inhuman” suggests that we assume that being cruel, brutal, and callous is *essentially* not human—or at least essentially not human for those who live in a “civilized”, i.e., law-structured, society (note that “inhuman” also refers to being barbarous, or savage).<sup>2</sup>

Facts on the ground, however, bely this assumption. A brief search of the internet vomits up at least two dozen accounts of genocides that have taken place since WWII, to say nothing of the common-garden inhumanity displayed endlessly toward those with different colour skin, language, religion, gender, country of origin, sexual orientation, and those with a different ideology. What are the forces that prompt such cruelty? Might education mitigate such inhumanity? And if so, to what degree are educators responsible for ensuring that such a “debarbarizing” (Adorno, 1966, p. 4) education is actually delivered, and not merely talked about? In a 1966 radio lecture, which later become an article (1966) entitled “Education After Auschwitz”, Theodor Adorno makes the claim that “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (p.1).

Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against. One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism. But it is not a threat—Auschwitz was this relapse, and barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favored that relapse continue largely unchanged. That is the whole horror. The societal pressure still bears down, although the danger remains invisible nowadays. It drives

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=inhumanity+meaning&rlz=1C1GGRV\\_enCA751CA751&oq=inhumanity&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l7.6661j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=inhumanity+meaning&rlz=1C1GGRV_enCA751CA751&oq=inhumanity&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l7.6661j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=inhumanity+meaning&rlz=1C1GGRV\\_enCA751CA751&oq=inhumanity&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l7.6661j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=inhumanity+meaning&rlz=1C1GGRV_enCA751CA751&oq=inhumanity&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l7.6661j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

people toward the unspeakable, which culminated on a world-historical scale in Auschwitz. (p. 1)

With these words, Adorno challenges us to make visible the fundamental conditions that threaten continuing relapses into barbarism. As well, given Adorno's claim that "The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again", the challenge is also that educators clearly articulate what a "debarbarizing" education might look like. These two challenges will be taken up in this paper.

Specifically, it will be argued that all human beings are biologically programmed to favor their own group over others and that, hence, *all of us*, given the right circumstances, are prone to the sort of barbarism that is let loose through tribalism, conformity, groupthink, and mob rule. However, these tendencies can potentially be neutralized through strong educational initiatives that attempt to increase the capacity for reasoned perspective-taking, and hence *autonomy*, by immersing young people in vigorous "respectful", "open" dialogical relations with others, that requires that they use "truth-seeking" as opposed to "adversarial" dialogue, and employ their critical thinking skills to enhance rather diminish a *reasoned* opposition on the assumption that the *path toward autonomy is nothing other than the path toward truth*.

It will also be argued, however, that such an educational strategy requires guardrails. In particular, it will be noted that it is crucial to keep in mind that the goal of autonomy, in this context, has a very precise meaning, i.e., that one's thinking has been subjected to the force of objective or impartial reasoning, and hence, that it does not in any way imply "atomization" in the sense of valorizing "doing your own thing" or being a non-conformist just for the sake of it. In addition, it will be noted that, if debarbarization is indeed the goal, then hierarchical educative practices, as well as programs that attempt to directly enhance empathy may be doing more harm than good.

If the educational strategy suggested herein seems "atypical" or not worth the effort, this should alert us to the truth of Adorno's claim: that the fundamental conditions that favor the proliferation of cruel, brutal, callous and inhuman human interaction remains unchecked.

This should disturb educators of all stripes since it is they who have the knowledge and the opportunity to immunize those in their charge against the plague of barbarity.

Given that this is the case, it would seem to follow that, if educators,

nonetheless, refuse to pick up the gauntlet, if they continue to be blind and immobile in the face of this threat, they should be considered culpable, as were their educational forebearers before them, when the unspeakable revisits.

## THE PROPENSITY TOWARD BARBARITY

The human propensity toward barbarity tends to percolate up from certain kinds of answers that we give ourselves to the following questions: (1) Are you “us” or “them”? (2) What shall I do? (3) Who am I?

Let us deal with these in turn.

### Are you “us” or “them”?

Building primarily on his own research in the field of moral cognition, Joshua Greene, in his book *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (2014), presents an abundance of evidence to show that humans, literally from birth, are naturally inclined to separate others into groups of “us” versus “them”, and to significantly favour their “own” over others.

According to Greene, evolution explains this tendency. Greene notes that because individuals can sometimes accomplish things together that they can’t accomplish alone, humans acquired “a set of psychological adaptations that allow otherwise selfish individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation” (p. 23). Greene notes that “Biologically speaking, humans were designed for cooperation, *but only with some people*” (p. 23). This is so because evolution is inherently a competitive process: if there is no competition, there is no evolution by natural selection (p. 24), i.e., “cooperation evolves, not because its ‘nice’, but because it confers a survival advantage” (p. 24). “And thus, insofar as morality is a biological adaptation, it evolved not only as a device for putting Us ahead of Me, but as a device for putting Us ahead of Them” (p. 24).

Greene goes on to note that once cooperative groupings are formed, they must figure out ways protect themselves from exploitation. This requires the ability to distinguish Us from Them, and the tendency to favor Us over Them (p. 49). This suggestion is consistent with anthropologist Donald Brown’s (1991) surveys of human cultures that found that in-group bias and ethnocentrism is universal. Greene

referred to this as “tribalism” or “parochial altruism” (p. 50).

What is particularly troublesome about the human tendency toward tribal allegiance is that it can be so strong that, when push comes to shove, tribal members use reason *not* to be reasonable, but to actually filter out information that is inconsistent with the tribe’s world view—something that neuroscientist Robert Burton writes of in his book *On Being Certain* (2008), as does Jonah Lehrer in his book *How Do We Decide* (2010). Thus, Lehrer notes when commenting on a study done on voting behaviour by Princeton political scientist Larry Bartels that:

Voters think that they are thinking, but what they’re really doing is inventing facts or ignoring facts so that they can rationalize decisions they’ve already made. Once you identify with a political party, the world is edited to fit with your ideology (p. 206).

At such moments, rationality actually becomes a liability, since it allows us to justify practically any belief. The prefrontal cortex is turned into an information filter, a way to block out disagreeable points of view (p. 206).

Paul Bloom, in his book *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (2013), also presents a host of empirical studies to support the view that we are born with this “irrational” tendency to sort others into groups of Us and Them—a tendency that can be produced in the lab simply by having people dress in red versus blue, or sorting people as a function of stated preference for one artist over another. Bloom notes that the natural reaction when meeting a stranger is not compassion, but fear and hatred. In this regard, we are like other primates, as Jane Goodall noted when describing gangs of chimpanzees who happened upon another tribe: if there was a baby, they’d kill and eat it; if there were females, they would mate; if a male, they would mob him, rip his flesh from his body, bite off his toes and testicles, and leave him for dead (Bloom, p. 103).

Tribalism that gives rise to the sort of barbarism that Goodall describes is thus a natural human proclivity. And unless one is a Lamarckian<sup>3</sup> who holds the view that centuries of cultured civilization has somehow transformed biology, we must assume that, aside from the hope of new creative possibilities that each birth

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Darwin’s explanation of evolution, i.e., that it was powered by natural selection as a function of environmental fit, Lamarck believed that one could inherit traits that one’s parents had acquired during their lifetimes.

brings (Arendt, 1958), each child also brings with her a tribal tendency that has the propensity to revitalize the fundamental conditions that threaten continuing relapses into barbarism.

And for those of you who hope that such tribalistic tendencies are routinely culturally smothered by the kindly “goo” of democracy, you would do well to read Kelly Hayes’ (2022) recent interview with Talia Lavin, author of *Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy* (2020). Although Lavin writes primarily of right-wing radicalization, her description fits any group across the political spectrum when she says that these folks live in social media echo chambers in which they are subject to non-stop propaganda where people continually radicalize one another into tightly conforming groups through the corralling pressure of the hatred and disgust expressed for the outgroup. Hence the title of Hayes’ piece: “Fascism Gone Mainstream”.

### **What shall I do?**

Non-human animals don’t ask themselves the question “What shall I do?”; their actions are entirely determined by the environment in which they move. Human beings, on the other hand, because they have the capacity for self-conscious language-use and have the capacity to imagine themselves in the future, can ask themselves “What shall I do?” Still, though, their actions will not be qualitatively different from their non-self-conscious cousins if the answer to this question is provided by the environment in which they move, if the answers they seek are those prompted by such questions as “What is everybody else doing? What are those ‘in the know’, or those in power, telling us to do?”

This is the implicit message of the research carried out by Adorno et al. (1950/1993) when they argued that at least part of the vulnerability of those subjected to Nazi propaganda was due to a not-uncommon personality construct that they referred to as “an authoritarian personality”: “a personality syndrome which evidenced a kind of predisposition toward an unquestioning respect for authority” (Kreml, 1977, p. 2).<sup>4</sup> The bottom-line conclusion of this research is that we miss the point if we over-focus on the message; if we assume that the source-problem in Nazi Germany was that, somehow, evil had suddenly bubbled up in that part of Europe, and that the way to prevent future eruptions is to manage the

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<sup>4</sup> A finding that was later empirically supported by Milgram (1962).

message. Our focus, rather, should be, as far as possible, to deconstruct those influences that promote authoritarian personality constructs. We need to, in other words, educate our charges not to ingest messages that *we* deem worthy. We need, rather, to educate our charges so that *they* can manage messages in the sense that they can evaluate their worth. We need to be acutely aware that when human beings ask themselves “What shall I do?”, if they look to others for guidance, rather than shouldering the responsibility of seeking guidance from their own powers of reasoning, whether or not barbarity is the result is merely a matter of moral luck (Nagel, 1979).

### **Who am I?**

The question “Who am I?” is very much related to the question “What shall I do?” in the sense that the answer to the latter question will depend on how big the “I” is that asks the former question. This is so because “I’s” vary in size! No one is born with an “I”; the “I” of self-consciousness, i.e., the capacity to imagine oneself from the perspective of another or what Cooley (1964) refers to as “the looking glass self” (p. 184), is a post-birth phenomenon that emerges as a function of interpersonal interaction (Mead, 1934; Gallup, 1977) and grows by degree as the result of being able to take ever greater number of perspectives into account, that then must be integrated by ever more abstract reasoning (Piaget, in Ginsberg and Opper, 1969); a phenomenon that can be captured by the notion of “quantitative expansion and qualitative upgrading” (Gardner, 1981).

The goal of strengthening the “I” so that it is strong enough to seek the responsibility for answering the question “What shall I do?” and in so doing, expand even further by gathering up the predicates that are accurate descriptions of one’s actions (e.g., courageous or cowardly, etc.) (Gardner and Anderson, 2015) and hence becoming ever more “reasonably autonomous” in the Kantian sense (1967) is not obviously attractive, as John McDowell notes in his article “Autonomy and Its Burdens” (2010).

There are many reasons why this might be the case. For one, reason is a stern task master. The paradox of self-determination, aka self-construction, is that it requires self-subjection to the normative force of reason (McDowell, 2010, p. 9); i.e., we must do as we are told by reason. As well, it is exceedingly difficult to identify whether or not one’s reasoning might be defective, i.e., to determine if it is

a “genuine reason” (McDowell, p. 11) or whether the reasoning reflects “a mere prejudice that informs the thinking of (one’s) community” (McDowell, p. 10). Given that this difference makes *all* the difference, “it is natural to hanker after a criterion” (McDowell, p. 11) supplied by another to help one determine the answer. But, says McDowell (p. 12), there is no such criterion: “One has to resolve for oneself the question whether the way one finds oneself inclined to think is the right way to think”. Autonomy is a responsibility that sits on individuals.

### **Taking these questions together**

If we combine the insights gleaned from our analysis of these three questions (1) Are you “us” or “them”? (2) What shall I do? (3) Who am I?, we come to the conclusion that the human propensity toward barbarity is anchored in our evolutionarily acquired propensity toward tribalism, that will *not* be tempered if individuals do not acquire a sufficiently strong self to prevent the natural tendency to duck responsibility when faced with potentially unpopular answers to the question “what shall I do?”

Thus, the answer to the challenge of how to articulate what a “debarbarizing” education might look like seems to be an *education that strengthens the self*—a conclusion that echoes Martin Shuster’s in his book intriguingly titled *Autonomy after Auschwitz* (2014). This also accords with Adorno’s recommendation when he says that “The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating” (p. 4). “What is necessary is what I once in this respect called the turn to the subject” (p. 2).

### **A “DEBARBARIZING” EDUCATION STRENGTHENS THE SELF**

**A strong self is one that seeks autonomy through reason.**

In his book *Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality* (1955), psychologist Gordon Allport describes a child as having two pathways of growth: “All his long life, this being will be attempting to reconcile these two modes of becoming, the tribal and the personal: the one that makes him into a mirror, the other that lights the lamp of individuality within” (p. 35). Referring to Maslow,



Allport refers to these two kinds of motives respectively as a deficit motive and a growth motive. He says that “Deficit motives do, in fact, call for the reduction of tension and restoration of equilibrium. Growth motives, on the other hand, (are) in the interest of distant and often unobtainable goals. As such they distinguish human from animal becoming and adult from infant becoming” (p. 68).

The deficit motivation generates a feeling of “must”; the need to maintain self-consistency for one’s self-image, on the other hand, generates a feeling of “ought” (p. 72). The must-consciousness precedes the ought-consciousness, and the shift signals a move away from tribalism toward individuality (p. 74). Allport describes the drive towards individuation as a function of “proprie” striving towards what Karen Horney described as “an idealized self-image” (p. 46). The central characteristic of proprie striving is that “its goals are, strictly speaking, unattainable” (p. 67). It is this ever-receding characteristic of proprie striving that confers unity upon the personality (p. 67), or personal integration (p. 82). And Allport goes on to say that the measure of one’s intellectual maturity is one’s capacity to feel less and less satisfied with answers to better and better problems (p. 67).

Thus, instead of thinking “I am me and not you because my body is separate from you”, Allport suggests that you ought to be able to think “I am me and not you because my self is separate from you”. The difficulty with this suggestion, of course, is that one first needs to create a self in order that it can have such an individuating influence. This, indeed, was Paul Tillich’s message in his influential book *The Courage to be* (1955) in which he argues that recognizing one’s potential and standing on guard for it, requires courage—hence the title of his book. He argues that “The affirmation of one’s essential being in spite of desires and anxieties creates joy” (p. 14) and, quoting Seneca, that this joy is not the joy of fulfilled desires; rather it is something that needs to be learned (p. 14). This is the joy that “accompanies the self-affirmation of our essential being...the courageous Yes to one’s own true being” (p. 14). He goes on to say that knowledge of one’s essential nature is mediated through reason—the power to have adequate ideas (p. 21)—something captured by Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power (p. 26). According to Tillich, the courage to be as oneself is the courage *to follow reason and to defy irrational authority*. This is not the individual self as such which affirms itself but the individual self as the bearer of reason (p. 116). Man can affirm himself only if he affirms not an empty shell, a mere possibility, but the structure of being in which he finds himself before action and nonaction. One must participate in life! (p. 152).

A strong self, aka an autonomous self, is one that does not submit to authority of the tribe, but nonetheless, submits to a different authority, namely the authority of reason (Kant, 1967). What is interesting about this kind of submission is that, since the adequacy of one's reasoning can only be estimated by testing it against its strongest opposition (Popper, 1963; Habermas, 1992; Gardner, 2009), an autonomous self, rather than being *self-sufficient* as the name implies, is anything *but*.

Autonomy requires (1) a distinct kind of relationship with others; (2) a distinct way of engaging in dialogue; (3) a distinct kind of critical thinking; and a (4) commitment to, and deep understanding of, truth.

We will deal with these in turn.

### **1. Autonomy requires a distinct kind of relationship with others.**

Unhappily, the very word “autonomy” tends to give rise to the counterproductive assumption that the opposite of tribal self is an independent solitary self that takes directions in isolation from others; that such a self listens only to her own voice, albeit perhaps a reasonable one.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

While an autonomous self does indeed differ from a tribal self, s/he does not differ because s/he isolates from others; s/he differs because of the *kind* of relationship s/he establishes with others. Rather than one of mimicry, an autonomous individual engages in vigorous, albeit welcoming, dialogical reasoning relationships with others, a kind of relationship that Stephan Darwall refers to as “second-personal” (2006). This is so because s/he knows that s/he can only estimate the adequacy of her own reasoning by subjecting her viewpoints and assumptions to a vigorous falsification process; what Habermas (1996) refers to as “communicative rationality”. Or, in Habermas' terms “assertions and goal-oriented actions are more rational the better the claim that is connected with them can be defended against criticism” (p. 9). And he goes on to say (p. 18), that:

Anyone participating in argumentation shows his rationality or lack of it by the manner in which he handles and responds to the offering of reasons for or against claims. If he is “open to argument”, he will either acknowledge the force of those reasons or seek to reply to them, either way he will deal

with them in a “rational” manner. If he is “deaf to argument”, by contrast, he may either ignore contrary reasons or reply to them with dogmatic assertions, and either way he fails to deal with the issues rationally.

Thus, in contrast to “deaf” interactions with those not toeing the party line, genuine interpersonal reasoning, or second-personal interaction, requires, as Darwall (2006, p. 56) notes, the assumption on the part of all participants that the win is a function of the relative strength of reason-offerings and not a function of the desired outcome on the part of any one participant (p. 21). It is only by adopting a “second personal” stance—what he also refers to as a form of “reciprocal respect”—that one can presume that one’s claims have any legitimacy outside of one’s own idiosyncratic view of the world.

In his book, *Human Agency and Language* (1983), Charles Taylor similarly argues that engaging with others is absolutely crucial for the emergence of human agency, what we are here referring to as autonomy. Thus, he argues that “the community is also constitutive of the individual, in the sense that the self-interpretations which define him are drawn from the interchange which the community carries on” (p. 3). And elsewhere (1994) he argues that “We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometime in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us”, (p. 33); “My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others,” (p. 34).

## **2. Autonomy requires a distinct way of engaging in dialogue.**

Having established that a *different kind of relationship* with others (i.e., open as opposed to closed) is necessary to move toward autonomy, it is also important to emphasize that a *different kind of dialogue* is also critical.

People simply exchanging viewpoints is not sufficient to nudge participants toward autonomy. This is so because participants generally begin a dialogue with the assumption that theirs is the correct position and their goal is to convince others of the error of their ways. This results in “adversarial” interchange (Gardner, 2022) in which participants *listen only to refute*. By contrast, in “truth-seeking” dialogue, participants genuinely reflect on the merits of another’s viewpoint from that other’s position which hopefully results in what Gadamer called the fusing of horizons (Gadamer, 2004). Autonomy-promoting dialogue, in other words, is distinct in that

it requires *active listening*, as opposed to being merely politely silent when someone else is speaking.

Quoting Fichte, Darwall (2006) highlights the difference between “truth-seeking” and “adversarial” dialogue by arguing that we need to make a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of address with the former being characterized “summoning” the other’s will, as opposed to “impermissible ways of simply causing wanted behaviour” (p. 21), i.e., that second-personal address is reason-giving in its nature. It differs fundamentally from coercion in that it seeks to direct a person through her own free choice and in a way that recognizes her status as a free and rational agent. It is, as it were, an attempt to guide rather than goad (p. 49).

### **3. Autonomy requires a distinct kind of critical thinking.**

As noted above (Lehrer, 2010), the better one’s reasoning power, the better one’s ability to filter out disagreeable input and hence protect one’s preconceived ideas from being undermined! Thus, “excellence” in education, such as requiring that all or most students take critical thinking courses has the potential to enhance tribalism and all its fascist proclivities. It is of note that Germany won 68 Nobel Prizes in the 38 years from the time the Nobel Prizes began in 1901 until the beginning of the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> There was nothing obviously wrong with German education.

Like knives, critical thinking skills are Janus weapons; they can be used for good or evil. It is for that reason, that the onus lies with educators who equip their students with these weapons that, *at the same time*, they educate their students about the importance of restricting their use to move *toward*, not *away* from, truth; that they educate their students to use their critical thinking skills to *strengthen*, not *weaken*, their opponent’s position (Gardner, 2009a; Battersby and Bailin, 2018)—at least insofar as that opposition is offered in the spirit of Darwall’s (2006) “second personal” exchange. And, importantly, that they educate their students that changing their minds in light of stronger reasons is win for who they are becoming, and the antithesis of “loss of face”.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes/>

#### **4. Autonomy requires a commitment to, and deep understanding of, truth.**

A debarbarizing education can take many forms. However, one essential ingredient in any educational enterprise that lays claim to being debarbarizing is the educator's commitment to, and understanding of, truth.

If an educator is a relativist (i.e., there is no truth) or a "soft relativist" (i.e., truth's only place is in science), students who ingest either of these messages will, when faced with real-life challenges, simply move in unison with the strongest force. Or, as Erich Fromm, a Jewish psychoanalyst/sociologist who fled the Nazi regime in 1934, puts it (1947/1968), if we do not have confidence in our capacity to "reasonably" answer the fundamental questions of how we ought to live (p.14), the result will be the acceptance of a relativistic position which proposes that value judgments and ethical norms are exclusively matters of taste and arbitrary preference (p. 15). After all, if there is no truth, why not enthusiastically engage in genocidal activity if it benefits oneself or one's tribe? Why not lie, cheat, and steal if tangible rewards are the result? Why refrain from any barbaric act if there is little chance of retribution?

If, by contrast, an educator infects all those with whom s/he has contact with a passion for pursuing the best, or least worst, answer (aka, "truthier" or "truth with a small 't'" (Gardner, 2009a, p. 29), and if s/he also adamantly insists that, since the truth-seeking process is one of eliminating the weakest of all potential contenders,<sup>6</sup> the only way to pursue the best answer is to be open to reasoned opposing viewpoints, then, on the assumption that selves grow as a function of taking into account ever-greater numbers of viewpoints (Gardner, 1981), these two commitments combined will serve as a catalyst for self-growth and so move selves toward ever higher levels of autonomy.

It is important to reiterate that it is critical that an educator's commitment to truth not be confined to the empirical realm. If we are serious about preventing Auschwitz 2.0, it is essential that students are zealous about pursuing truth in the realm of ethics as well as in science (Gardner, 1999), and that they have the opportunity to communicatively reflect not only on big questions such as whether, and if so why, it is wrong for one group of humans to harm another group, but also on everyday seemingly mundane questions such as whether, and if so why, for example, one should confront a friend that has committed an act that, on the surface, appears unethical. It is critical that students be given the opportunity to tackle

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<sup>6</sup> Like getting rid of dirt to have cleaner clothes.

*real-life ethical issues* in community with others so that they have the experience of realizing that it really is *true* that some answers do not survive falsification, and so come to the realization *themselves* that it is not the case that everyone's opinion is as good as everyone else's, and that the worth of any opinion is always and only a function of the strength of the reasons that back it.

*Philosophy for Children* is such a program.<sup>7</sup> By engaging in facilitated *Communities of Philosophical Inquiry* (Kennedy, 2012) students experience the difference between, on the one hand, just giving reasons for what they believe and, on the other, attempting to offer *will-directed* reasons (Darwall, p. 21), i.e., engaging in a form of dialogue in which there is a recognized common goal of seeking "objectively valid norms" (Fromm, 1947/1968, p. 25) rather than multiple individual over-lapping and contradictory goals of attempting to score a "win" for one's own preconceived view of the world.

*Philosophy for Children* has the added benefit that it is designed to be implemented from elementary grades through to adulthood. This is critical because, as Adorno (1966) notes

One must labor against this lack of reflection, must dissuade people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves. The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection. But since according to the findings of depth psychology, all personalities, even those who commit atrocities in later life, are formed in early childhood, education seeking to prevent the repetition must concentrate upon early childhood. (p. 2)

## Summary

Thus far, it has been argued that in order for educators to take up Adorno's challenge of "never again Auschwitz", they need to educate so as to promote reasonable, strong, autonomous selves which will require educating for (1) a distinct kind of relationship with others (reciprocal respect); (2) a distinct way of engaging in dialogue (active listening); (3) a distinct kind of critical thinking (to strengthen opposing views); and (4) a commitment to, and deep understanding of, truth.

Such an education, however, also requires that educators put up guardrails

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.icpic.org/>

as they embark on this journey. Those guardrails consist of (1) having a clear understanding that autonomy is not the same as non-conformity; (2) that hierarchical education may be doing more harm than good; and (3) that empathy-promotion may be doing more harm than good.

We will deal with these in turn.

## Guardrails

### 1. Autonomy is not the same as non-conformity.

It is important to emphasize at the juncture that, while autonomous selves rarely bend to the demands of conformity *simply in order to conform*, this is not to say that the actions of an autonomous self will never or even rarely conform to the actions of her neighbours, friends, and colleagues. It is important to emphasize that the mark of autonomy is the degree to which one's actions have been subject to the normative force of objective or impartial reasoning, and *not* the degree to which it conforms to some external standard.

It is important to emphasize this point in order to short circuit the potential tendency of students, after having ingested the message that conformity is dangerous, to subsequently take pride in engaging in non-conforming behaviour for the sake of non-conformity *per se*—a way of thinking that seemed prevalent in many of the justificatory comments made by Antivaxxers during the recent pandemic.

Non-conformity just for the sake of non-conformity is potentially just as dangerous as conformity, particularly when it morphs into the contradictory form of non-conformists conforming to one another's non-conforming ideology.

Conforming to any non-rational force, be it the call of narcissistic desire, the seduction of being viewed as a rebel, or the safety of crowd cover, is not autonomy.

Autonomy indeed requires conformity, but conformity to the demanding force of objective or impartial reasoning.

## 2. Hierarchical education may be doing more harm than good.

Adorno argued that the premier challenge of all education must be that Auschwitz never happen again; that somehow, we must educate young humans to override their natural tendency to follow the sort of tribal dictates that might lead them down the path to barbarism.

Since the form of contemporary education is typically hierarchical, the question that we must now reflect on is whether this model helps or hinders the goal of “debarbarization”. The question that we must look at is: Is there something actually wrong with “the sage on the stage”? If a teacher has a deeper understanding than the students on any given subject, what is wrong with just trying to pass it on? And, if a teacher has an inspirational take on the issue, why not try to instill that inspiration in others? And, since *reading a text*, at least in principle, embodies the same relation and assumptions as *listening to a lecture*, i.e., that the reader/listener is an open vessel, and the text and/or lecture fills it up, would not arguing against monologic teaching likewise suggest that there is something problematic in assigning students heavy reading loads? Besides, the sage on the stage is extremely efficient: there can be one sage for literally millions of recipients—hence the efficacy of on-line courses, though, of course, of propaganda as well.

Ah, but that is the rub. Most who are dedicated to the education of our youth would be outraged at the suggestion that their work is anything like the sort of efforts undertaken by Goebbels. Still, squirm though we may, it will take more than moral outrage to get out from under the charge. For all of us in the business of education, for all of us who are parents, for all of us who try to persuade friends, relatives, or, indeed, anyone convinced of the superiority of our point of view, the question is this: if we could be as successful as Goebbels in instilling or implanting the message that we are trying to convey, would we not be elated by such success? If the answer is “yes”, or even “sort-of”, then Goebbels is our implicit idol; and to the degree that we are successful, the recipients of our efforts could be described as young Nazis dressed up in more contemporary garb. Thus, it would seem that whether victims of persuasive tactics adopt evil, benign, or laudatory points of view is largely a function, yet again, of moral luck (Nagel, 1979).

As previously mentioned, we need to educate our charges not just to ingest messages that *we* deem worthy; we need rather to educate our charges so that *they* can *manage messages* in the sense that they can evaluate their worth. Evaluating the worth of messages, in turn, requires the ability to seek out the reasons and



evidence *both* for and against any given position and to test the strength of those reasons through counterexamples (Gardner 2009). It requires that each individual recognize that it is his/her *responsibility* (not the responsibility of figures in authority) to figure out the truth, and it is education's responsibility not only to nurture that belief, but to ensure that truth-processing as a method is understood.

Engaging students so that they reflect upon and have the opportunity to evaluate reasons both for and against any viewpoint can't be done from the stage. Of course, the sage can, from the stage, list reasons for and against any viewpoint, s/he can model reflection, but this is not equivalent of inviting students to get down and dirty and throw reasons at one another that they need to evaluate, and, most importantly, to have the opportunity to change their minds even when they have something at stake.

As McDowell (2010) has argued, autonomy is a burden, it requires extraordinary strength of reasoning power. If students haven't had the opportunity to carry heavier and heavier "reasoning weights" in all their long schooling history, we cannot be surprised when they fail when faced with the seduction of their peers who are following a treacherous pied piper.

### **3. Empathy-promotion may be doing more harm than good.**

Many believe, not surprisingly, that "debarbarization" can be cultivated through nurturing empathy. If we just get more people to love one another, to treat their neighbors as they would have themselves treated, surely, we can build a kinder gentler world. This is the goal of such programs as *Roots of Empathy*,<sup>8</sup> to say nothing of the fact that it is a founding message of Christianity that nonetheless led its followers to "follow the leader" into the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Irish Troubles, and other barbaric enterprises.

Still, many may believe that even if such attempts do not always transform young minds so that they "contribute to making the world a better place for all of its inhabitants" (Singer, 1981), at worst, surely, they are ineffectively benign. This assumption is erroneous. For one thing, promulgating such sweet-sounding attributes as "caring thinking" (Sharp, 2014), or expanding the circle of care (Singer 1981) may paralyze an agent at precisely the moment when the courage to "stand against" might be the only viable ethical option (Gardner, 2009b, pp. 421–422). For

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<sup>8</sup> <https://rootsofempathy.org/>

another, if we tell students what sentiments are or are not appropriate, we are implicitly sending the message that the dictates of a perceived authority ought to determine how they feel. Such a strategy, if it works, will be a source of immediate gratification for those in authority, but it will render their charges utterly defenceless when faced with not so benign authoritative messages.

Adorno makes a similar case when he says: “Understand me correctly. I do not want to preach love. I consider it futile to preach it; no one has the right to preach it” (Adorno, 1966, p. 9). “I consider it an illusion to think that the appeal to bonds—let alone the demand that everyone should again embrace social ties so that things will look up for the world and for people—would help in any serious way” (p. 3). But worse, these “so-called bonds easily become either a ready badge of shared convictions—one enters into them to prove oneself a good citizen—or they produce spiteful resentment, psychologically the opposite of the purpose for which they were drummed up” (p. 3). It is for this reason that the advocacy of bonds is so fatal. People who adopt them more or less voluntarily are placed under a kind of permanent compulsion to obey orders (p. 4).

All of which is echoed by Darwall (2006) who argues that sympathy is condescending. A more dignified alternative is engaging in the sort of reasonable exchange that presupposes mutual respect (p. 47), to say nothing of Kant having said long ago that we cannot have a duty to experience a feeling (1967).

Paul Bloom argues at length more specifically *against empathy* (in a book by that title, 2016) by saying that moral decisions that are shaped by the force of empathy often make the world worse because empathy leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind to the suffering of those we do not and cannot empathize with (p. 9). As Bloom notes “empathy is like a spotlight directing attention to where it is needed. But spotlights have a narrow focus” (p. 31). Since you cannot empathize with more than one or two people at any one time (p. 33), empathy can sway us toward one over the many (p. 34) —like a doctor trying to push her patient to the top of a transplant waitlist while ignoring the harm done to others who might have been on the waitlist much longer (p. 86).

Ultimately Bloom argues in line with the message presented here that it is much better to use reason and cost-benefit analysis, drawing on more distanced compassion and kindness, than to rely on empathy (p. 39); *that we do our best when we do what there are the best reasons for doing* (p. 52); that a reasoned, even counter-empathetic analysis of moral obligations and likely consequences is a better guide to planning for the future than the gut wrench of empathy (p. 127).

## CONCLUSION

Our biases are here to stay. Because of our coalitional nature, we are programmed to forever favor our Us over Them (Bloom, 2013, p. 127). Thus, human barbarity is percolating near the surface always and everywhere, and unless there is a concerted, forceful, and widespread effort to curtail this natural tendency, “inhumanity has a great future” (Adorno, 1966, quoting French Philosophy Paul Valery, p.7).

Yet despite our understanding of this human predisposition, and despite witnessing the horror of its flourishing in an otherwise highly cultured extremely educated populace, we nonetheless sleepwalk into the future, utterly ignoring the demands of Auschwitz. Of this nonchalance, Adorno says:

I cannot understand why it has been given so little concern until now. To justify it would be monstrous in the face of the monstrosity that took place. Yet the fact that one is so barely conscious of this demand and the questions it raises shows that the monstrosity has not penetrated people’s minds deeply, itself a symptom of the continuing potential for its recurrence as far as peoples’ conscious and unconscious is concerned. (Adorno, 1966, p. 1)

Though Adorno made a plea to the world to “wake up” more than ½ a century ago, we have not heeded his call and, despite barbarity erupting all around, we continue to dreamily assume, that, on the back of “education as usual”, we are marching toward a future of peace, prosperity, and good governance.

Surely, we can do better.

But how?

A suggested answer is encrypted in a comment made by French philosopher Paul Valery some time ago when he said that “The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up”.<sup>9</sup>

This, then, is the spirit of the argument presented here: that it serve as a gong from a gigantic alarm clock. We need to wake up to the fact that all humans come programed into the world with barbaric tendencies, and that these tendencies need to be neutralized through an education that chronically exposes individuals to facilitated *Communal Inquiries* with others, of the sort practiced in *Philosophy for*

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/141425.Paul\\_Val\\_ry](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/141425.Paul_Val_ry)

*Children*, that focus on topics of genuine relevance, so that they gain extended experience in creating “open” dialogical relationships by engaging in “truth-seeking” as opposed to “adversarial” dialogue, while using their critical thinking skills to enhance rather than diminish *reasoned* opposition.

The happy side effect of this reasoning, dialogical, *truth*-seeking experience is that autonomy, i.e., self-growth, will thereby be nourished. Since the self or self-consciousness emerges with the capacity to imagine oneself from the perspective of others (Mead, 1934; Gallup, 1977), and since increasing one’s capacity for perspective-taking results in self-growth (Piaget, in Ginsberg and Opper, 1969; Gardner, 1981), and since truth-seeking requires that one attempt to access as many perspectives as possible in order to estimate the adequacy of one’s own position, it follows that educative strategies that focus on the pursuit of truth, in the very same process, enhance autonomy.

This then should be the goal. To amplify autonomous reasoning in individuals and to multiply those with this capacity and proclivity, so that we decrease the fodder for the forces of groupthink, as well as fortify the kinds of “thinking barricades” that may help deter humanity from travelling yet again and again and again down the path to the unthinkable.

This may be a distant and seemingly unobtainable goal, however, as Allport (1955/1983) reminds us, it is only this sort of “growth motive” that ultimately distinguishes humans from animals and adults from infants (p. 68).

It is time, then, for educators to wake up and grow up.

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