

The Great Conversation and the Ethics of Inclusion

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Abstract

The United States Government is once again readying itself to review its immigration policies. Law and governmental policy is always a matter of determining what moral commitments the government and its people are willing to endorse and enforce. When considering governmental policies of any kind and at any level, the fact that moral issues are being weighed and evaluated cannot be ignored.

However, government policies may, as Aristotle warned, come into conflict with personal moral commitments or as we shall suggest professional moral commitments as well. When they do, members of professional communities must reflect on those moral commitments, which should be most heavily weighted when deciding how to act, what internal policies to enforce and what governmental regulations may be ignored as destructive of the profession's core purpose for existing.

We begin by assuming that the historic professions of teaching, doctoring, lawyering and preaching pre-date any nation state and moreover are generally valued by nearly all nation states that have arisen over the generations. The following argument also stipulates that all citizens have certain duties to their respective governments. However, the argument concludes by pointing out that

some ageless professions like medicine and pedagogy have special duties transcending any immediate and transient duties imposed by nationalistic affiliation. We focus specifically on the duties educators have to their students. We conclude that these duties may sometimes legitimately trump the duties the citizen/teachers have to the state. In the specific class of cases we outline, we conclude that all pedagogues are duty – bound to do nothing, which foreseeably may exclude any willing participant from participation in the Great Conversation of Humankind.

Re-introducing and Reforming a Concept

To the extent that John Dewey is aptly described as the founder of progressive education as well as the nation's leading democratic theorist at the time; it is odd that Dewey's first university home, the University of Chicago, became the driving force behind an approach to education centered on a canon of mostly Western scholarly work. Shortly after Dewey left the University of Chicago for Columbia University, Robert Hutchins ascended to the presidency of the University. Besides emphasizing graduate education as opposed to undergraduate education at the University, Hutchins set about bringing private support to the University by instituting "Great Books" discussion groups with potential large donors to the University (Dzuback, 1991). Hutchins also brought Mortimer Adler, a philosopher, to serve on the law school faculty and bring greater consciousness to the students of the tradition within which western law exists. Together, Hutchins and Adler worked hard to make the University of Chicago a place where the canon of all intellectual triumph was evident in every way (Hutchins, 1952).

For a Great Books discussion group to have credibility it seemed there must be an identifiable canon of Great Books. Certainly, Plato, Aristotle, Newton, Descartes and others can be generally recognized as scholars creating works that shaped the destiny of the world. But, what is the litmus test that should determine what books should get in and what books omitted from a collection of “The” great books? The Bible was included in the emerging canon proffered by the University but the Koran was not. If numbers of people affected by a book was considered pivotal then the omission of the Koran was a serious oversight. Certainly more people have read parts of and, been directly affected by, the Koran than anything that say, Descartes may have written. So why were Descartes and the Bible in and the Koran out? In the end was it all about Western jingoism and nothing more?

Eventually Mortimer Adler, in addition to his university duties, became editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Through that position he arranged for the publication of a series of books touted as Great Books of the Western World (Adler et.al. 1990). An exemplar of the much sought after canon was clearly on the horizon. At around the same time Will and later with his wife Ariel Durant began publishing their famed, *The Story of Civilization* (1975). This was an eleven-volume set with little more than two volumes devoted to civilizations outside the Western context. Adler, echoing Hutchins, began touting his Great Books series as *The Great Conversation* and the Durant’s history suggested that *The Great Conversation* is largely Euro-centric. We mention all of this to acknowledge how the modern term “*The Great Conversation*” came about in the twentieth century English-speaking world. There is no evidence that Hutchins, Adler or the Durants were maliciously or in any way deliberately jingoistic in their scholarly pretensions. Each seemed truly

genuine in wanting to bring more people into conversation about the big ideas that prescribe, prohibit and otherwise advance human understanding of the world we each find ourselves in. Indeed one of the authors of this paper met both the Durants and publically debated Adler in a forum about Adler's book *The Paideia Program* (1984). This author was impressed by the compassionate and sincere quest for truth and understanding exhibited by the Durants and the spirited earnest, debate skill and zeal of Adler. In the *Paideia, Program* Adler insists that there is an identifiable set of scholarship that every person with even a high school degree should grasp. Interestingly his efforts have been somewhat realized through increasingly detailed state standards and accompanying standardized high states testing. Such uniformity, a consequence of the No Child Left Behind program, may lack the substantive challenge that Adler was angling for in his *Paideia* proposal. In any case, some may find it easy to speculate that Adler lost the battle at the time only to win the war in the end. In point of fact, No Child Left Behind implies canonical thinking far more narrowly than anything Hutchins, Adler or the Durant's ever imagined.

While deliberate jingoistic thinking was probably absent in all the cases described above, from Hutchins and Adler to uniform state standards and No Child Left Behind, curricular jingoism has become increasingly ubiquitous. In public school classrooms the prescribed curriculum is increasingly a "My way or the highway" affair. For example, nearly all students will learn something about Thomas Jefferson in social studies but almost nothing at all about John Adams and certainly not a president such as Grover Cleveland. There are also programs like Channel One providing access to a curriculum with a single body of curriculum designers. Admittedly no high school can give students a solid economic background in Keynes, Hayek

and Marx but without such restrictive standards and foreboding about a high stakes test, instructors are likely to emphasize different scholars and trends and with the constant intermingling of students throughout the school system a wide variety of ideas is more likely to be shared among students. It is too easy for curriculum masters and test designers to find the achievements of one's collective (intellectual or cultural) "us" more meritorious than the products of some foreign "they". As psychologist David Berreby explains (2005) jingoism of every sort is the natural condition of human beings unless we strive deliberately to overcome it.

Adler, and the others mentioned above, wanted people to engage challenging ideas of epic proportions. Such engagements are best made through dialogic communion with others of truth-seeking intent. This ambition is certainly admirable. But, to the extent that such ambition is realized only through the identification of *the* single canon then the ambition is still born.

Focusing on a canon has all the problems the originators recognized early on namely, what books should get in and what should be omitted. Certainly, Descartes' analytic geometry should be included in any expansive curriculum proffering itself as representing The Great Conversation of Humankind. But what about the mathematical works of recent great Fields medalists such as Vladimir Dintell, Edward Witten or Ngo Bao Chao? While all may agree that a canonical curriculum should be based on importance of contribution and not be parceled out on the basis of ethnic diversity or cultural, political or military dominance, importance of contribution is an inherently vague notion. For example, more people have read the Upanishads than have read Darwin's Origin of the species. So which is more *important*? Is solving Fermat's

last theorem more important than developing the calculus? Who's version of the calculus should be studied, Newton's or Leibnitz's? For every inclusion in a canon there are tens of thousands of omissions. Determining that the right inclusions and omissions have been made is a never-ending task of quality control and continuous improvement. It is also itself a focal point of The Great Conversation.

Still, despite all the difficulties involved in selecting the greatest intellectual achievements of humankind the effort must bear fruit if there is ever to be a coming together of human beings in the collective and cooperative search for truth (Wagner, 1982b). The very effort to collectively and cooperatively construct such a canonical foundation can be and, should itself be part and parcel of any truly Great Conversation. In short, because The Great Conversation reflects simply and robustly the best insights that humans have mustered to get a fix on the world that means there will inevitably be a disproportionate ethnic parceling of the works to be studied. What is of greatest importance however is that all cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, and gender should be equally welcome into The Great Conversation. When Martin Luther King Jr. announces in his famous, "I have a Dream Speech", that one day all should be able to join hands in brotherhood, what else fits the bill more appropriately other than The Great Conversation of Humankind?

The Great Conversation is inclusive in all that matters most. Each person is welcomed as a worthy participant. Ideas that advance understanding universally are sought and shared. Ideas that are divisive or otherwise, as John Dewey once said, "fail to bake bread" are identified and set aside. The Nazis silenced The Great Conversation in Germany when they tried to eliminate what they clumsily called "Jewish science" from their educational

system (Wagner, 2011a). They allowed ethnicity to trump all other curricular considerations. The result was setting back the continued success of what had been one of the most accomplished educational systems in the world. Curricular inclusion, construction of a canon suitably robust for grounding The Great Conversation of Humankind, must reflect intellectual merit primarily (but not intellectual merit only). The Great Conversation succeeds only when there is a place for everyone to participate fully.

Nobel laureate and economist, Amartya Sen (2009), points out the number of extraordinary writers in democratic and political theory from the Indian subcontinent. In the Far East, Confucius was certainly a giant figure similar in his thinking to Plato. Presumably, neither Confucius nor Plato should dominate the ongoing great conversation of humankind at the expense of the other. The more intellectually potent the more attention an idea should be accorded within the context of the Great Conversation.

Following the massive social revolutions of the 1960's, students became increasingly concerned that genuine education (something approaching the ideal of The Great Conversation as sketched above) must become broader in scope than what had previously been allowed. For example, students at Stanford University famously protested against the University's Eurocentric curriculums by chanting during mass protests, "Hey, hey. Ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go." Not surprisingly, the students' protest overshot the mark that presumably and rightfully aroused their interest, namely a Euro-exclusive curriculum. The intellectual giants of the Western World are truly intellectual giants and deserve study and respect. The point that rightfully needed addressing is that the intellectual

giants from around the world needed to be studied as well if there is ever to be a truly great conversation of humankind. In addition, following the 1960's revolutions, it became increasingly evident that historically, the range of voices had been delimited on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and race as well as culture. Indeed even those mesmerized by the accomplishments of the Western tradition should have noticed both in the Bible and the old servant woman in Plato's Symposium that there is great wisdom among women as well as ethnicities outside the mainstream. But those examples seemed to go largely unappreciated. To the extent that the accomplishments of many might be excluded from The Conversation on social or cultural grounds alone made the idea a great conversation ring hollow. This brings us to the conclusion of the first and most critical step in our argument.

The term "The Great Conversation of Humankind" must be re-formed away from any Euro – centric focus or cultural jingoism **of any kind**. Instead, the concept of The Great Conversation of Humankind must embrace the achievements of all, regardless of gender, culture, ethnicity, race or any other distinguishing feature irrelevant to the production of intellectual insight. Given this central commitment, the re-formed concept of The Great Conversation of Humankind that we propose is rich in both professional prescriptions and professional prohibitions for educators. In terms of prescriptions for professional practice among educators the idea of The Great Conversation of Humankind dictates that educators must welcome participation by all earnest truth seekers. The Great Conversation of Humankind should never be confused with some massive effort at therapy encouraging endless listing of people's personal wants and grievances. Understanding the wants and grievances of people from all around the world matters of course but there is so much

more to The Great Conversation. The Great Conversation's focus should be intellectually inclusive. The Conversation should engage people in thoughts about how the world is and reflections of how the world can be and, perhaps, how it ought to be now. Narcissistic rambling about local cultural achievements is no substitute for collective reflection and soul-searching for truth as a community of humankind (Sen, 2006; 2009; Wagner, 1986). The rubric for any baseline canon of The Great Conversation should be nothing less than elements necessary for a steadfast and earnest search for truth; truth in every area of life, the arts and the sciences. Truth is the ideal upon which the vision of The Great Conversation should settle. Admittedly, one might even reasonably insist that this is an ideal that may never be reached (Wagner, 1983). Nonetheless, *pursuit of truth* should beckon forward all those into The Conversation. The shared and cooperative search for truth is after all what makes the conversation great.

An impediment in our shared search for truth has been the authoritarianism of tyrants on one side and the authoritarianism of the masses on the other (Wagner, 2011b). Political correctness has made many people timid about using some very ordinary words. Words such as truth, God, and many terms used in moral and aesthetic reflection have become more distracting than illuminating in many public sectors. Yet to professional educators, everything that reflects the sincere and shared search for truth ought to be protected by those willing to honor their professional allegiance to The Great Conversation.

The concept of truth does not fly into the face of any theses regarding cultural relativism, skepticism, cognitive reductionism or any other ism. The path for truth is simply that which leads away from error (Wagner, 1983c). Genuine truth-seekers, that is to say genuine

participants in the Great Conversation are willing to follow the path openly with *all* others in whatever direction that path may take.

An educator moves away from The Great Conversation when the educator reflexively insists on absolutism of any sort. An educator moves away from The Great Conversation when he or she promotes jingoistic thinking to the exclusion of others' reflective contributions. Finally, an educator moves away from The Great Conversation when he or she countenances favoring errant conclusions for personal or social gain. For example, educators who collaborated with Nazi domination moved away from The Great Conversation and abandoned their duty to welcome all participants in the shared and collaborative search for truth.

Any effort to excuse educators' collaboration with the Nazis on grounds that in the end, truth is unknowable is disingenuous. There is a big difference between moving away from error as is intended through participation in The Great Conversation on the one hand and, simply moving from one error to another on the other hand. To move from one error to another is to fail to move away from error. To disavow the earth is flat but conclude instead that it is a triangle on no other grounds than that flatness had become politically incorrect in some sense is an example of moving from error to error. Disavowing the flatness thesis and embracing instead the roundness of the earth based on ships sailing into the horizon and so on, is a step away from error even if further steps were needed to ultimately reach an increasingly more accurate configuration of the nearly round earth. Consequently, as this bit of common sense suggests the *vision* of The Conversation should be easy to sustain. Clearly truth, whatever it may turn out to be, or reasonably appear to be at the moment, lies on the horizon

of any path from which hubris and other error are cleared away. This clearing away is the process of The Conversation.

There is an abundance of literature making clear that richly textured language abilities advanced our evolutionary resiliency far beyond that of any mammalian relatives (Joyce, 2006). The language acquisition device(s), Noam Chomsky and others insist is a biological fact of human nature (Chomsky, 2006; Wagner, 2011c). This biological trait of the human species has made shared reflection across the species possible into abstractions of truth such as mathematical infinities, natural origins, social artifacts and so on. Obviously, a species-wide language acquisition device is a necessary pre-condition for participation in conversation generally and essential for the abstractions and reflective, empirical observations of The Great Conversation.

Summing up, The Great Conversation of Humankind as defined here, is comprised of the following:

1. *A focus on the pursuit of truth.* That truth exists is taken as evident to the extent that removing error from assessment and plans leads to more error free approximations of how the world is.
2. With such focus in mind, entry into The Great Conversation of Humankind begins *not* with an initiation into some sort of canon but rather with the recognition that *appropriate epistemic skills and attitudes* (which themselves are always open to further modification) reflect a self – conscious and conscientious vision of one’s duties in the shared search for the closest approximations of truth

participants are able to secure with substantial grounds for general agreement (Wagner, 2012b).

3. *Moral Commitment to inclusion.* The Great Conversation must remain open to all. To exclude any participant would risk losing an invaluable insight beneficial to the process.
4. *Respect for the individual.* While the search for truth in The Great Conversation is for the purpose of sharing, each intellectual initiative begins with a single voice. Respect for the truth requires respect for the sources of stated truth.
5. *Pedagogues are guardians of The Conversation.* As guardians, pedagogues are charged with preserving the openness of The Conversation and for welcoming each new or potential participant.
6. *Pedagogues are to guide new initiates.* To effectively participate new initiates need to learn the epistemic and moral commitments necessary to keep The Great Conversation robust. These need to be explained to new initiates as well as modeled for them. This, and not instruction in some canon is primary in the guardians responsibility.

This criteria for The Great Conversation as a process of a very specific and normative kind illuminates much about teacher duties. If teachers adhere to criteria above, it will place them at odds with some localized schooling directives and jingoistic, socialization practices. This definition calls for a global appreciation of all other humans and the generalized human search of truth. Teachers like other historic professionals such as preachers, doctors and lawyers have at times found their professional duties set them apart from with their nationalistic

commitments as citizens of a given state. When this occurs it has generally been the judgment of history that professionals should side with their professional duty over and above the transient duties they may have within a given political body. To illustrate the consequence of such commitments consider the challenge educators currently face in the United States as their professional commitments appear to clash with the state's interests regarding teaching those on the door step of The Great Conversation and turning away those same potential participants because of the State's interest in securing its borders and the financial and other matters of well-being for its established citizenry.

The Challenge

Many a pundit has said that morality is about right and wrong and everybody has his or her own morality. These days such witless assertions are far from uncommon on television and in academic settings as well. Such assertions are akin to saying physics is all about matter and energy and everyone has his or her own matter and energy.

In the most trivial of senses both assertions are true. Each person does own his or her own moral commitments. But, some moral commitments are more morally conscientious than others (Wagner, 1983a). And, while every person is surely constituted of matter and energy, there are many ways human thinking can go wrong or go well when considering matters of physics. As Bernard Gert (2004) observes, there is a near universality of moral disgust that arises when one person maliciously murders another person to make some existential point as was the case with Sartre's protagonist in his play *Dirty Hands* (1989). The Sartrean existentialist eschews external moral meaning as nothing more than as Nietzsche claimed,

simply that which the weak create to protect them from the strong (Nietzsche, 1967). Still, contrary to Sartre and Nietzsche, Gert, reflecting empirical evidence in favor of some universal prohibitions, concludes that there are acts that are universally regarded as morally atrocious. Moreover, in a book endorsed by the American Psychological Association as a handbook for classification analogous to APA sanctioned handbooks for clinical diagnosis (DSM V), Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman note (2003) that empirical research has shown certain virtues and character strengths too are nearly universally admired and evidently contribute to human flourishing. Finally from economics and biology both, there is an increasing amount research into the possible evolutionary grounds, for many putatively universal moral characteristics (Sober & Wilson, 1998).

In education there is much talk of social justice (Wagner & Simpson, 2009; Wagner, 1980) and utilization of public goods generally. As law professors Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel (2002) in a small book titled, *The Myth of Ownership: Taxes and Justice*, demonstrated, even property, taxes and the law governing each, are awash with moral considerations defining the public good. To address matters of social justice, the public good or, education inevitably brings thinkers into direct confrontation with the challenge of getting things morally right. Trying to sort through such matters should bring entice people into participation is The Great Conversation. This public good of sorting through such matters thoroughly can only occur if professional educators are successful at preserving and protecting The Great Conversation.

Public Goods, Public Duties and the “Undocumented”

The public has a need for security. Security is a public good. And, undertakings that contribute to the public's security constitute *prima facie* public duties. The public in this sense is the public defined by a community's law, geography or some other putatively obvious distinctions. In public schools for example, it is obvious that the communities to be protected are inside the walls of schools. The duty to secure that protection is differentially distributed among administrators, teachers and staff and even to some degree, among the students themselves. Such protective duties constitute much of what we shall call *schooling practices*. Schooling practices include all logistical protocols, security and other nurturing matters and responsiveness to the public's need for schools that contribute to the public good and shared social values. But what happens when the community's borders are opaque, ill defined or simply too large for making important distinctions? What happens if the community one has in mind consists of all potential participants in The Great Conversation of Humankind?

Professional educators are duty bound by their profession to bring all potential learners into The Great Conversation (Wagner, 2012a). That means that no teacher is authorized to deny participation in The Great Conversation to anyone. So here emerges a potential conflict of duty for educators who may have to choose at times between duty to the community and its public good on the one hand and their duty to the profession on the other. Another way of saying this is that there are times when educators' duties to locally imposed schooling practices and historically imposed professional practices may conflict.

The *tradition* of educational professionals is very nearly ageless and unfettered by geographic borders. And, there exists an increasingly general recognition on the public's part to respect, to care and to share with other community members (albeit non-citizens), the beneficence the community as a whole enjoys. This is an emerging focus of public morality. In short, professional educators and members of a civic community seem to be converging on the idea that education should be extended to everyone present without regard to other considerations (Wagner & Dede, 1983).

Still, public morality is not yet in equilibrium at least in its convergence towards inclusive participation in the The Great Conversation. For example, controversy continues to surround the question of educators' obligation to report students who are either themselves undocumented or who live with family members who are undocumented. Clearly if schools report such cases then students will not attend school and be shut out from their most obvious entry into The Great Conversation. This moral disequilibrium prompts conflict for educators between their civic moral duty and their professional moral duty. To sort through this conflict educators should begin by prioritizing the principles that govern duty to profession and principles that govern their duty to state noting first their truest identity as either educator first or citizen first (Notice the distinct absence of any reference to things like "duty to self", something oddly irrelevant to those in the traditional professions (Wagner, 1983a).

To sketch a principled solution begin by stipulating something of a Rawlsian strategy (Rawls, 1972) A Rawlsian strategy seems least likely among all major moral theories to offend the moral intuitions of most people at least at first glance. This doesn't make the Rawlsian

position right-minded. It does however provide a bootstrap lifting the immediacy of the practical decision at hand into a relatively secure and popularly accommodating action policy (Wagner, 1982a). Rawls advises a boot-strapping tactic for constructing any theory of moral prescriptions. He asks the moral agent to imagine a veil of ignorance preventing the agent from knowing where the reader might be in each imaginable scenario as things play out. This strategy is meant to ensure that no person will propose something especially dangerous or patently disadvantageous to another person. In the case at hand the moral commitment of professional educators to teach all willing students trumps any public duty to aggressively ferret out those who might represent a remote and distant threat to civic society. The “remote and distant” condition is critical because it makes clear that balancing the risks against the reward for all others – again seen through an imaginary veil of ignorance – makes the right decision palpable in this case presumably, even those standing outside the education profession itself.

Necessary Distinctions

Clearly schooling interests represent a public good. Schooling entails all matters of classroom management, development of patriotism, protocols for sustaining facilities, logistical matters and other schedules. Socializing and enculturation expectations make up the schooling process favored by those holding sovereignty in a sponsoring society. Education is something a bit different. Education is based on an inclusively open and shared search for truth. Both the motivation for education and its periodic benchmarks of success are measured in terms of the acquisition and discovery of new ways to avoid error in human thinking (Wagner, 1980). In short, education,

properly speaking, is not in service to any specific local cause as is the case with schooling (Wagner & Benevente-McEnery, 2006). Instead education is an end in itself (Peters, 1983). It is beholding to no one society and to no one culture.

Education as Evolutionary Excellence

As Aristotle famously observed in *The Politics* (1951), we are social animals and it is simply in our nature to engage in such sharing. The sharing that consists in the collaborative pursuit of truth should not be confused with affiliated concepts such as learning, acquired behavior or disposition to act (Kvanvig, 2003). Education certainly develops specific attitudes, behavior and dispositions in those who are educated but no one specific attitude; behavior or attitude is itself education.

Education aims for excellence of shared understanding (Wagner, 2011a). Excellence comes with no ready-made or contrived rubric but represents instead an ideal. Education as an ideal is always beckoning participants to extend their reach ever further to understand yet a bit more. Participation in the Great Conversation of Humankind is where excellence of shared understanding is laid bare (Wagner, 2011a).

The details of educational practice flow across cultures. These details include truths embraced, critical thinking, deliberation, semantic analysis, an ever present insistence that claims to know are epistemically supported to the highest standards imaginable and so on (Wagner, 1990). Certainly, political, economic and religious conceptual architectures are imagined, built, dismantled and rebuilt once again within the deliberative context of The Conversation. Each time the proposed architectures are

abandoned in favor of another it is because there are reasons for moving forward in a different prescribed manner. In short, even when debating social constructs, participation in The Great Conversation aims at moving away from errors encountered now or in the past. Obviously, in practice a myriad of economic and social forces may influence the actual selection of architectures as implemented.

Policy makers and administrative practitioners are the moral architects who craft schooling policy (Wagner & Simpson, 2009; Wagner, 2011b). In education, it is practicing teachers who lead others into moments of engagement with the Great Conversation. Teachers, when educating students, bring them into the enduring reality of The Conversation. The defining vision of teachers should always be to bring others forward into the light of some relevant truth. Policy makers and administrators, who count themselves among the ranks of professional educators, are responsible for ensuring teachers a secure ambience for bringing into being the practice of The Great Conversation.

Generally duties to community and profession can both be managed in the day to day affairs of classroom practice. There have been times throughout history when conflicts arise between civic and professional duty. At those times, all things being equal, the professional educator, for reasons alluded to above, has an a priori and prima facie duty to elevate commitment to the profession over any commitment to civic community. An obvious example of how this conflict of duties has played out in the past is the trial of Socrates. His example has no doubt in one way or another, been replicated throughout history by other equally committed teachers.

When challenged with the choice between bringing students forward into full participation in The Great Conversation or through his acquiescence, subjecting them as well as himself, to self-defeating principles of socialization, Socrates, chose the vision of the Great Conversation. For professional educators, the vision of the Great Conversation is an inclusive and far ranging vision extending far beyond the obsessions with local chauvinisms.

Communities come and go. But the profession of teaching crosses geographic borders and even entire historical epochs. Teaching has at times been thwarted in its mission by civil societies co-opting the educational mission of teaching in favor of schooling goals. Yet, there has probably never been a time when the vision of the historic mission of teaching became so distorted that the shared search for truth disappeared.

A. The Public Good of Security

Thomas Hobbes (2003) in 16th century England wrote that the first duty of the state is to protect its citizens from outside threat. That makes great sense. School shootings, mass attacks such as 9-11, threaten everyone in a community one way or another. A state's citizens surely should be protected by the state and its various resources. If the membrane of protective security surrounding a community is porous, everyone within the community is in danger and everyone within the community is likely to endorse efforts to protect the community from intrusion. And, in a Hobbesian worldview, the desire for security is the principle cause giving rise to social contracts bringing communities into existence (Hobbes, 2003). In short, any

state exists first and foremost to protect its citizens from predation.

Obviously, one way of identifying intruders with hostile intent is to closely review those entering the community stealthily and by unlawful means... Of course, only a few who enter the community by such extraordinary means are a threat. Nonetheless, (9-11 documented that it takes only a few to do great harm). Investigating the undocumented for the benefit of those to whom the state or organization already have a duty is arguably an inescapable public moral good. Yet, even if one stipulates that there is a public good to be achieved by investigating people illegally entering the country, questions pertaining to the range and depth of such investigations remain to be answered.

Schools are being considered as one place that civic authorities can track those who have entered the country illegally. However, requiring educators to help ferret out the undocumented by identifying them or their children as taking part in educational offerings puts educators in conflict with their traditional duties as educators.

Surely teachers, as well as all other residents, are rightfully obligated to report stowaways and illegal border crossings when they see them. That is all to the public good and all members of the public are surely obligated to ensure the active pursuit of the public good. But, having acknowledged as much, does not establish a public duty on teachers *as teachers*, to report those undocumented students that may be present in the teachers' classrooms.

The tradition of professional education is much older than Hobbesian social contract morality. What may make sense in light of Hobbesian social theory does not

extend *carte blanche* to limitations on the exercise of teachers' professional duties. If educators cooperate in identifying students who are undocumented residents or the children of undocumented residents it is unlikely those students will come to school. Surely keeping the undocumented out of public school does little if anything to advance the public good. Preventing the undocumented from attending public school leads to a resentful sub-class of residents many of who are likely to live their entire lives within the borders of their adopted country. In addition, the love the young undocumented may have developed for their new country may be thwarted by policies that force them out and away from the community's institutions fostering *The Great Conversation*. Resentment can be expected to accumulate in the minds and hearts of some otherwise civic-minded (undocumented) residents. Such resentment if allowed to fester among the community's subclass of perennial outsiders can lead to hostilities arising among an increasing number of resident malcontents. Most likely, the public good is best ensured by accepting educator's traditional duty to extend inclusively to all an invitation to participate in the *Conversation*. This invitation to the undocumented should be presented as an expression of public morality. The consequence of such an inclusive and unthreatening accommodation is more likely to secure public safety than any search within the schools for the undocumented hostiles.

B. The Argument from Professional Ethics

The defining traditions of the four oldest professions extend back more than two millennia and cross all geographic borders. Through those millennia educators have had a moral duty to educate that is to say to bring

everyone into the Great Conversation of Humankind. The word “educate” comes from the Greek *educare* meaning “to lead out”. We take it that *to lead out* in this context means to lead people out of ignorance which is equivalent to leading them into The Great Conversation.

Schools are places where educators perform their historic function of leading potential learners –all potential learners - out of ignorance and into The Great Conversation (Wagner, 2012a). Informing authorities of undocumented students or educator suspicions of their parents’ legal status is in effect an exclusionary practice destined to drive some from active participation in The Conversation. Professional educators must never become complicit in any effort to deny educational access to willing students anymore than doctors should acquiesce in any prohibition calling upon them to withhold their professional services from the deathly ill or injured.

As noted above, the government may well have a legitimate public good in mind in seeking to investigate people illegally entering the country but that doesn’t license every avenue of investigation as equally serving the public good. Specifically, requiring teachers to sacrifice their traditional moral commitment to inclusion of all potential learners in order to assist governmental investigations of the undocumented is too high a price to pay. Forcing educators or, any member of the four historic professions, to sacrifice professional moral commitments for transient social values of a localized community, subordinates those professions to the mere whims and capriciousness of historic accident. To be responsible *as educators*, teachers must always prize most highly their responsibility for engaging ever wider audiences in The Great Conversation of Humankind.

In passing it is worth noting that the government has many other venues for identifying undocumented residents. To employ a nation's schools as one of those venues and to sacrifice its teachers' sense of professionalism in the process makes little sense to a nation committed to the Aristotelian principle of developing as many of its citizens as possible into self-actualized individuals (1951). Seemingly the United States has taken on this Aristotelian mission via Thomas Jefferson through to the present day.

Teachers do indeed have schooling obligations in addition to educational ones (Rich, 1984). But, educational duties trump schooling duties in *prima facie* manner whenever and wherever the two potentially conflict. Wherein there are to be exceptions the burden of proof is on those who want teachers to stand down from their professional duties as educators. Those advocating that such a drastic step is warranted with regards to ferretting out the undocumented populations' participation in public schools have not made their case.

C. A Nation Morally Committed to Multicultural Engagement

There is a growing moral ethos within the United States that encourages commitment on the part of individual Americans to honor inclusiveness in as many ways as is reasonable. This inclusiveness demands respect and care for all with whom fellow residents "break bread." Consider this, would anyone seriously deny access to public water fountains to those who are undocumented?

It may be reasonable to deny certain privileges to those who are undocumented. But, access to public

drinking fountains and toilets, education and emergency medical care are surely not among the class of such privileges. Admittedly, there may be privileges that can be reserved for legal citizens only such as the right to purchase a firearm, run for elected office and so on. But there is surely an important distinction to be made between privileges and basic obligations we each have to those we live in close proximity to – documented or not.

The nation cannot be all things to all people. But making education and emergency health care available to those who work in the nation's cities and farms regardless of how they came to be there is a far cry of trying to be all things to all people. Providing minimal healthcare and access to education to those who have become neighbors is hardly an excessive burden. Moreover, when considering the public good, residents who are uneducated and ill living side by side with other residents who are reasonably well-cared for, makes any claim to compassion hypocritical. One may reasonably object to porous borders, one may even endorse the identification and investigation of the undocumented but actions to remove them from all public services need not and must not be considered part and parcel of the same commitments (Murphy, 2000). Note too that the undocumented are expected to abide by obligations of public morality. So herein no one is talking about a wholly free-ride mentality. The undocumented are expected to call 911 when observing someone in need. In addition they are held to the same legal and moral prohibitions as all citizens such as failure to render aide following an automotive accident. Consequently, in return, public morality should acknowledge a duty to extend to them the most basic of shared public goods (Wagner & Benavente-McEnery, 2008; Wagner & Dede, 1983). In short, public morality, including its interest in protecting the traditional professionalism of educators, favors in unabated fashion,

excluding schools and hospitals as collection points for identifying and further investigating the undocumented.

A final note is in order. To say that educators are professionally prohibited from engaging in any practice likely to deny any resident an education (Wagner & Benavente-McEnery, 2006) is not the same as saying that educators qua educators have specific duties to engage the government as political activists. Such arguments are beyond the range of the current analysis. Our arguments are limited to the professional duty educators have to protect their professional commitment to recognize every willing learner's right to participate in The Great Conversation of Humankind. Denying that educators have a duty to cooperate with civic practices excluding learners from public education, is not the same as advocating for a more general political activism on the part of teachers as educators. Any argument for more general political activism on the part of teachers as professional educators must be left for another time.

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