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Heyting, F.

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Beware of Ideals in Education

FRIEDA HEYTING

In reaction to Doret De Ruyter's recent defence of the importance of ideals in education, I advocate cautiousness in three respects. First, I explain the importance of distinguishing ideals more sharply from goals by demonstrating the problems of considering ideals even approximately realisable. Second, I substantiate my doubts about their indispensability in human motivation, and question the desirability of encouraging the motivational use of ideals. Third, I question whether ideals could or should be 'passed on' in education, drawing attention to their non-objective, personally created nature.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of *Journal of Philosophy and Education*, Doret De Ruyter has argued with evident conviction for the importance of ideals in education (De Ruyter, 2003). She paints such a picture as to suggest that commitment to ideals is currently 'overshadowed by the language of achievable goals'. It is against this background that she discusses the meaning, importance and place of ideals in education. While it seems obvious that education could not do without ideals, the position De Ruyter takes regarding each of these three issues seems highly debatable. Inspired mainly by the writings of Isaiah Berlin (1990, 1999), I shall discuss in turn my objections to her position in relation to each of them.

IDEALS: IMAGES OF EXCELLENCES THAT ARE NOT YET REALISED?

'There are two relatively uncontested characteristics of ideals. Ideals are images of excellences that are not yet realised and they are aims or goals we deeply desire to realise' (De Ruyter, 2003, p. 468). In De Ruyter's definition of ideals here, the concept is internally connected to the concept of 'realisation' in a twofold way: not only are ideals 'not yet' realised; their adherents 'deeply desire' to realise them as well. Both these alleged points of connection between ideals and realisation can, however, be doubted.

To begin with, some authors do not mention the issue of realisation in their definition of ideals, as De Ruyter does. For example, in the *Routledge*

Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Connie Rosati does indeed define ideals as 'models of excellence' but, instead of emphasising their imagined realisation, she stresses their function as models or criteria 'against which things in a relevant class can be assessed' (Rosati, 2000). Though this does not directly *exclude* the possibility that ideals may be (un)realised, it raises the question whether the presupposition that ideals are the sort of thing that could, in principle or in practice, be realised is an unproblematic one. After all, as a rule we do not *realise* criteria but we use them to judge what ends we *do* realise. Consequently, the question is whether ideals, defined as images of excellence, are to be understood more as criteria for assessing our achievements or more as goals for determining our next actions.

To start with, it is questionable whether it is unproblematic to consider ideals 'unrealised', because that implies that they *could* be realised. Berlin strongly objects against 'the notion of the perfect state as the proper goal of our endeavours' (Berlin, 1990, p. 14). His major objection results from his belief that we cannot take it for granted that different values would smoothly integrate to constitute one perfect state. He doubts this for two reasons: he sees no reason to assume either that the things different rational people pursue are necessarily mutually compatible, or that the values that are a part of any ideal—perfect state or image of excellence—can harmoniously coexist. Though presuppositions like these have been highly influential throughout the history of philosophy, Berlin judges them highly implausible. Obvious examples to illustrate this are easily found. Berlin mentions the tensions between the value of freedom and the value of equality to show the improbability of an image of excellence that encompassed both.

Of course, one might object to this that most ideals in daily life, including in education, are less ambitious in scope. I suspect, however, that the dimensions of the intended image of excellence will not make a fundamental difference to the issue. Let us take a more down-to-earth subject that for many is the repository of ideals to which many are devoted: let us consider cars. The image of an excellent car will almost inevitably include features such as high speed, safety, low fuel consumption and the like, which can hardly be expected to unite without complications. Consequently, we can hardly expect the image of an excellent car to be realisable, but even if it was, this image would collide with other ideals such as that of a clean environment, not to mention questions of cost. Even something as simple as the image of an excellent blue colour cannot be realised just like that—if only because its existence in reality would require its integration into an environment, with almost inevitable complications or conflicts of an aesthetic kind.

At first sight, De Ruyter seems to recognise the problem of considering ideals realisable where she distinguishes between 'ultimate' and 'normal' ideals (De Ruyter, 2003, p. 470). Whereas ultimate ideals are necessarily flawless and *unattainable*, normal ideals take 'possible imperfections of an imagined excellence into account' and, what's more, can be attained. Why she still defines *all* ideals as 'not yet realised' remains unclear. In addition, this distinction hides a major problem from view. It suggests that ideals

may not be realisable in their pure form, but at least may be approximated in a slightly adapted form. In other words, she does not seem to take her distinction as seriously as she might, and this may also cast light on her general definition of ideals. I doubt, however, whether we can reasonably consider the *realisable* car an approximation to the *ideal* car. I think this representation of things omits the most characteristic problem of deciding on realisable goals: that is, balancing pros and cons, and making choices.

In my view, transforming ideals into realisable goals not only—not even mainly—implies determining in what guise the features of ideals could exist in reality. In recognition of the fact that the variety of values involved may not be compatible, we have to decide which of them should prevail at the cost of which others—measuring such choices against other values and ideals. Unlike ideals, goals, which are realisable in principle, are characterised by choices and compromises. In addition, goals are characterised by guesses. Because part of the determination of a goal involves weighing up the possible consequences of its realisation, and because those consequences (as well as the consequences of those consequences, and so on) are impossible to predict, we cannot but make a guess at them (cf. Berlin, 1990, p. 14). This is a familiar picture to every experienced educator, just as it is widely accepted that an image of ‘the ideal child’—playful, inquisitive, innocent and wise at the same time—may stimulate the imagination, but it is not meant for realisation.

To summarise, ideals should, I think, be considered either images of excellence, in which case they will not be realisable, or realisable, in which case they will not represent excellence without distortion. In my view, a sharper distinction between ideals and goals will solve the problem. In the light of such a distinction, the realisation of ideals will remain conceptually incoherent, while goals will remain conceptually ‘non-ideal’ results of choices, compromises and guesses, which do not deserve to be called ‘excellent’ or even ‘excellent in a flawed way’. Consequently, my first reason to be wary of ideals in education is that they tend to be confused with attainable goals. How dangerous that might be is illustrated in the next section.

IDEALS: ESSENTIAL SOURCES OF MOTIVATION?

De Ruyter’s definition of ideals entails a second reference to realisation as well: apart from being ‘not yet’ realised, their adherents also ‘deeply desire’ to realise them. This ‘deep desire’ deserves separate attention, because my objection to considering ideals realisable still leaves the *wish* to further its realisation by one’s own actions unaffected. According to De Ruyter it is inconsistent not to will that ‘one’s actions lead or contribute to the achievement of the ideal’ (De Ruyter, 2003, p. 471). Of course, no one with even the least familiarity with twentieth-century history can ignore the tragedies caused by people wanting to realise their ideals, and De Ruyter does not ignore them either. It is for that reason that she suggests criteria for evaluating a person’s actions to achieve her ideals: those

actions should meet moral criteria and ideals, and actors should rationally and normatively reflect on their ideals (p. 472).

Apart from the fact that the potential incompatibility of ideals and values once again presents problems, I doubt whether such reflection could, as long as the 'deep desire' to realise one's ideals survives, prevent disasters from happening. For those who think that realising a 'better' situation may justify drastic action, what price would be too high for bringing an image of excellence within reach (cf. Berlin, 1990, p. 15)? Would not restricting one's wishes to realising goals—instead of ideals—constitute a more sound basis for reflection? At least that would make one face the imperfect state of reality that would result from *any* course of action, and open up to the complex of choices, priorities, interests and uncertainties that should constitute the context of any decision. 'The search for perfection', as Berlin puts it, 'does seem to me a recipe for bloodshed, no better even if it is demanded by the sincerest of idealists, the purest of heart' (Berlin, 1990, p. 18).

De Ruyter considers the *wish* to realise ideals by one's own actions important not only for conceptual reasons. She also emphasises the importance of this wish because of its motivational role. If people did not want to act in order to realise their ideals, why would they want to act at all? Apparently thinking along these lines, De Ruyter cites the example of John Stuart Mill, who, at the thought that he might have no ideals left to act upon, seemed to lose all interest in life. The context is Mill's pondering of, and negative response to, the question of whether an instant realisation of all his ideals would make him happy (J. S. Mill, cited in De Ruyter, 2003, p. 475). I am not so sure, however, whether this is the only plausible interpretation of Mill's remark. After realising this, Mill does indeed report that he went into a depression, but he subsequently describes how he put himself on his feet again by slowly but surely developing a new attitude towards life, less dominated by pursuing ideals, and more appreciative of the delights of music, poetry and good company. What is more important, he explicitly mentions how this new attitude did not make him abandon his political activities, though he now came to see them in a new light (cf. Mill, 1969, p. 85ff.).

Considering all this, might Mill's message not rather be that our motivation should *not* depend on the wish to realise ideals? If this is not Mill's opinion, it is at least the position that the Dutch philosopher Jaap van Heerden (1990) takes. He explicitly questions the assumption that, in the absence of realisable ideals, any initiative to organise life in a better way would be nipped in the bud, and that, for lack of moral ideals, we would lose our moral motivation and go from bad to worse. In a manner similar to that of Berlin, he directs attention to the importance of situationally embedded choices and compromises, and to reviving the awareness that we could always be *wrong*. Of course, against this one might object that making considered choices still implies appealing to ideals, even if this is only implicit. But this would be to exaggerate the importance of abstract ideals to the neglect of factors in the actual situation and the particular circumstances of those involved in it. In

philosophy of education, moreover, the idea that justifying choices requires the an appeal to abstract overarching principles (ideals) has also been increasingly abandoned (cf. Van Goor, Heyting and Vreeke, forthcoming). The avoidance of the worst suffering, rather than the realisation of an ideal, also seems to be Berlin's overriding concern. Because, then, it seems possible and even advisable to omit ideals as sources of motivation, my second reason to be wary of ideals in education is that one may be tempted to act upon them to further their realisation.

IDEALS: TO BE TRANSMITTED IN EDUCATION?

Even if motivation does not require ideals, it may be that they can still enrich human existence and deserve attention in education. According to De Ruyter, ideals are existentially important, not only because they provide reasons for actions (which I dealt with above), but also for intrinsic reasons: they give meaning to people's lives, thus contributing to their sense of identity. It is for this reason that she emphasises their importance in education, attributing to them a twofold role: 'as educational ideals and as ideals in education' (De Ruyter, 2003, p. 476). (It should be noted that it continues to be unclear what kind of ideals she has in mind, ultimate or normal—the distinction does not seem to play a role at all in her argumentation.) My reservations towards educational ideals are implied in the previous two sections: one should not consider them realisable, and one should refrain from attempts to realise them nevertheless. In what follows I shall confine my argument to ideals *in* education—that is, according to De Ruyter, to 'ideals that educators offer to children' (p. 476).

This operationalisation of the role of ideals *in* education raises a number of questions. In what sense does an educator 'offer' ideals to a child? Or, to put the matter the other way around, do we in fact acquire ideals by taking them over from others who offer them to us? Does this account not deny the highly personal nature of ideals? De Ruyter seems to be ambivalent about this issue. Though she emphasises the existential importance of ideals for personal life (p. 475), she denies that they have the parochial nature that is emphasised by Nicholas Rescher. De Ruyter rejects Rescher's claim that 'ideals . . . are relative to the particular values to which an agent subscribes . . . they are not inherent in his status as a rational agent per se' with an argument she borrows from Harvey Siegel. In De Ruyter's reworking of this it is argued that there are transculturally or universally applicable ideals, because even multiculturalists—who deny the existence of such ideals—do also implicitly appeal to the universal applicability of one particular ideal, namely that all cultures should respect the legitimacy of all other cultures (p. 473). However, the logic of this argument escapes me. It would imply that any expression of personal *commitment*—for example with regard to mutual respect—should ultimately be understood as a claim to universal *validity*,

as a claim to verifiable knowledge. If we do not associate ideals with knowledge claims, we cannot transmit them like knowledge.

Another possible interpretation of the 'offering' of ideals would be to see it as a matter of setting an example to children, as De Ruyter suggests (p. 477), and no doubt a lot of educational content reaches its destination in this way; practically all socialisation is based on this process. I, however, would classify the results of such processes as 'habits' rather than as 'ideals'. As long as we understand ideals as images of excellence with an existential import to personal life—which De Ruyter does, and which I endorse—they seem to me more closely related to the agent's own mental activity than habits are. Though De Ruyter does not deny this connection altogether, she does not relate it to the development of ideals in children, but to their abilities to *test* ideals, for example with respect to their authenticity (p. 478) or feasibility (p. 479).

In De Ruyter's argument, the abiding image of the way in which children develop ideals remains one of their passively taking them from those their educators have on offer—which, in my view, makes ideals quasi-objective, and robs them of the personal commitment that is properly associated with them. I am aware that my view easily evokes the objection of relativism. Emphasising the personal nature of ideals, however, does not make them arbitrary and does not preclude their being tested. In fact, we test them all the time—if not against our own sense of values, against those of others. What I deny, however, is the possibility of *proving* their legitimacy, even if only approximately—as if we could ever decrease their inherent uncertainty. Consequently, I think that the imagination not only plays its part in testing them but is at the forefront in their *creation*. What I am saying is this: offering ideals *to* children does not make them ideals *for* children. Doing so may affect their beliefs, or their habits, or even confront them with the possibility of having ideals in the first place, but the most important characteristic of ideals—their existential import to personal life—is still left out. In that sense, 'offering ideals to children' seems an inadequate description of the role of ideals in education. In order to become an ideal *for* a child, she needs to develop a personal, existential, commitment to it; she needs to *(re)create* the ideal as such. Making sure she feels free and stimulated to do so, then, seems the overriding aim with respect to the role of ideals *in* education. Too much attention to the substantive ideals that educators prefer—however thoroughly tested—may even hinder children from creating their own, if only for fear of disappointing their educators.

While ideals that are 'offered' can be rejected at any time (just as adolescents may reject the faith of their parents when that becomes an issue to them), personally created ideals are part of the personality. That does not immunise them from influence, but it does make them subject to recreation rather than rejection. Berlin puts this as follows:

what seems to me a crucial note in the history of human thought, namely that ideals, ends, objectives, are not to be discovered by intuition, by scientific means, by reading sacred texts, by listening to experts or to

authoritative persons; that ideals are not to be discovered at all, they are to be invented; not to be found but to be generated, generated as art is generated (Berlin, 1999, p. 87).

Jerome Bruner (1996) takes the obvious step from this view to education, which results in taking much more seriously children's own agency with respect to developing ideals. He rejects the view that we should first transmit our own values to new generations—though, of course, we will show our commitment to them—before they can be trusted to think for themselves. From this I derive my third reason to beware of ideals in education: educators might become tempted to impose them upon their pupils, instead of stimulating them to invent their own.

Correspondence: Frieda Heyting, Department of Philosophy and History of Education, Universiteit van Amsterdam, PO Box 94208, 1090 GE Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Email: g.f.heyting@uva.nl

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