

On Not Being at Sea About Indoctrination—A Response to Thiessen

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There is much in Elmer Thiessen's article with which I agree, though I also am rather firmly of the opinion that he does not come to grips with the really fundamental questions that emerge about indoctrination in general and religious indoctrination in particular. I further believe that his philosophical methodology is badly conceived. So that we can move with dispatch to the central issues without confusion, I shall first make clear where I agree (though I shall not give the rationale for my agreement). I shall then point to where I think the lacunae lie and try to get to the heart of the matter.

I agree that it is "unfair to single out religion as uniquely susceptible to the problem of indoctrination" though I wonder if any even remotely important thinker ever thought that. I also agree that we should be cautious in charging someone with indoctrination in any area. It is like the charge of being ideological. One must be very careful that one does not have a mote in one's own eye. Not infrequently, a would-be unmasquer is himself unwittingly wearing a masque.¹ We must learn to be very self-conscious about how we may be, unwittingly, indoctrinating or ideological. But we must not take "indoctrination" in such a wide sense that any socialization, which perforce must often use non-rational (not irrational) methods, will count as indoctrination. Thiessen is right in pointing out that the teaching of science, just as the teaching of religion, can proceed in an indoctrinating manner. Moreover, what Jurgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School have well called scientism often functions as an ideology in contemporary culture, though, again, we must not forget that science is one thing and scientism (an ideology *about* science) is another. What science, the ideology goes, cannot tell us, mankind cannot know. "Epistemology," Quine remarks, with an incredibly persuasive and implicit definition, "is concerned with the foundations of science" (1969, p. 69). Often this scientific attitude is promoted by people who are so innocent that they are not at all aware that they are involved in indoctrination. Scientism is one of the dominant ideologies of our culture, though it is seldom seen as such, and it is often indoctrinated in us in the way that religion is. But this is not a necessary feature of science. Nor is it necessarily a part of the scientific attitude. Similarly, Thiessen argues, defending religion, or even the teaching *of* religion, need not be by way of indoctrination. We cannot, where we generally speak of religion, say that it falls prey to the charge of indoctrination, let alone claim that it must do so, while science does not, though I would add, in a way Thiessen does not, that religion is more indoctrination-prone than is science.

Why then do I think that Thiessen has not got at the heart of the matter

vis-a-vis religious indoctrination and where do I think he has gone badly wrong? In spite of the influence of the pragmatist tradition of Moore, Ryle, and Wittgenstein, Thiessen makes a kind of Platonist error that is still not uncommon among philosophers, many of whom are not Platonists. It is the error of thinking that until we know the "exact meaning" of a concept, until we can so define the meaning of a term such that we can specify the properties that are common to and distinctive of all the things the term denotes, we do not properly understand the meaning of the term in question. But *if* that is our criterion for understanding what indoctrination is, we are going to have as much trouble with 'chair', 'table', or 'book' as we do with 'indoctrination'. But it would be absurd to say that we do not know what chairs, tables, or books are because we get stuck when we try to define these concepts so as to capture what (if any) properties are common to, say, a book, and only to books.

Pace Thiessen, this critique of the Platonist error has nothing to do with accepting a conception of family resemblances. Wittgenstein did argue, in a way similar to the way I have above, and he did have a theory of family resemblances. But one can readily accept my above Wittgensteinian argument and utterly reject the doctrine of family resemblances for the reasons that Thiessen gives or, more broadly, as obscure arm-waving. *Perhaps*, as Thiessen avers, the concept of indoctrination is vague and we are lost as to how to make it less vague, but *if* it is vague, it is not vague for the general reasons Thiessen adverts to, for then we would have to say that the concepts of chair, desk, and book are also vague. But that surely is a *reductio*.

There is a paragraph in Thiessen that would naturally be taken as a response to the above argument, though it seems to me to be a thoroughly ineffectual response. Thiessen writes:

One might further argue that a concept can have meaning even though philosophers (and laymen) are unable to define it. Surely, we can use the word "indoctrination" correctly and yet be unable to give a satisfactory conceptual analysis of its meaning. However, we need to take more seriously the failure to provide an unproblematic and generally accepted analysis of principles governing the use of the concept of indoctrination. I contend that this failure is simply another indication of the confusion that exists with regard to the proper application of the concept in ordinary language. (1984, pp. 29–30)

The last two sentences in that quotation are simply evasions. If we can give, as we can, paradigm cases—clear, unequivocal cases—of indoctrination, including religious indoctrination, then that will be sufficient, as I shall argue below, to give us a way to specify with reasonable clarity what is involved in religious indoctrination, quite without having the kind of traditional definition of indoctrination that Thiessen requires, or perhaps without any definition at all. There will, of course, be borderline cases and problematic instances, but this does not mean that we cannot say a lot (and to the appropriate normative point) without these definitions, just as we can quite definitely spot most bald people without having any kind of belief that to be bald a person must have *x* number of hairs on his head. The kind of definition that Thiessen wants, if it comes at all, comes at the end of an analysis and it is notorious that analyses never come to anything more than proximate ends. We have, and can have, as Wittgenstein powerfully argues, no complete picture of clarity. But we man-

age to learn and to make cogent arguments, including normative arguments, for all of that.

Thiessen's claim in the passage I have quoted above would only have a point if we could *not* give unequivocal instances of religious indoctrination. The kind of moral majority radical fundamentalism so loved—or apparently so loved—by Reagan and Moslem fundamentalists involves clear cases of belief-systems that extensively engage in religious indoctrination. Much that occurs on Christian television stations in the United States and on Iran Television (if the accounts I have read are to be trusted) are paradigmatic instances of religious indoctrination. Such indoctrination stands in firm contrast to the teachings of Karl Barth or Cardinal Newman where we have teachings which should not be described as indoctrination. And indeed some of the characteristic practices, though by no means all, of the mainline Protestant Churches and of the Catholic Church should also not be described as indoctrination.

We can say why this is so even if we have not defined "indoctrination" or given a satisfactory conceptual analysis of the term. In the same way, without having a satisfactory definition of religion, one can say a lot about Christianity or Hinduism. Christian and Hindu philosophers and theologians can say a lot to the point about their respective religions, and arguments about faith can be made. Such arguments, discussions, and inquiries do not totter while we await a satisfactory definition of religion. Both religion and science may very well be essentially contested concepts for which no useful definition can be given while it still remains the case that many useful claims can be made about them without such a definition. Attempts to define science and religion have not been very successful, but claims in or about science and religion have, for all of that, often been made by both scientists and defenders of faith.

To say why Christian or Moslem fundamentalism is an indoctrinating sect, in Thiessen's pejorative sense of that term, I would have to trot out a lot of empirical detail. I think people who are reasonably informed have a good idea of what the details are, but as a short cut, let me describe a *hypothetical* case of a Christian sect such that if any *actual* sects behaved in any way tolerably close to that hypothetical one of my own construction, then we would have to say of those actual sects that they are indoctrinating systems. If the shoe fits, wear it. This we can quite properly say even though we do not have an adequate analysis of "indoctrination." Remember, we can perfectly well operate *with* terms that we cannot operate *upon*. It is bad Platonism to think otherwise (Ryle, 1971, pp. 407-414).

My concocted case of an indoctrinating sect is the following: Suppose we have a sect—a sect in 20th century North America—that utterly, unquestioningly, and intolerantly affirms that the King James Bible is the infallible, revealed word of God. No question of interpretation arises. God, they tell us, revealed in English *the* Truth and *the* Way to man. Moreover, they maintain, this version of scripture is not just a version of scripture, but *The* Scripture: the Word of God. Every belief in it is literally true, just as it is stated in the text. The world was literally made in seven days and seven nights by God at a particular point in time and it shall be destroyed soon. Any person who questions in any way any of this should not be listened to for that person is of

the Devil. Readings from the Scripture are selected, and children, adults, and near-adults are simply drilled, catechism-like, to repeat and affirm the doctrines in those readings. Usually, there is no chance to question them, and where there is a chance to question them, they are given stock replies and not at all encouraged to think, question, or reflect further in any kind of critical spirit. Where we have such activity we surely have indoctrination. A belief-system with that content in a society such as ours and taught in that way would, if anything, be a system of indoctrination. I do not know if any of the Neanderthal sects that have come to abound in North America are quite that crude, but some appear, at least, to come close to it. If they are close to it, then they are surely belief-systems that indoctrinate and they are pernicious.

Ordinary definitional procedures, in a sense that a dictionary might use, yield more or less adequate descriptions, which, though not the kind of philosophical definition Thiessen seeks, when applied to "indoctrination," provide a generalization of the above which helps bring out why we say what we say. John Passmore (1967), for example, defines indoctrination as "a special form of drilling in which the pupil is drilled—e.g., by way of a catechism—in doctrines and in stock replies to stock objections to doctrine." Passmore goes on to remark, specifying more fully the territory, that pupils so taught will not be encouraged or helped to think for themselves. Indeed, they will, in one way or another, be discouraged from doing so. This characterization will not catch all the cases of indoctrination (as Thiessen in effect points out), but it will capture a lot and we can build from such a characterization to a fuller and more adequate characterization of indoctrination. Since "indoctrination" is surely not a natural kind of term, we will probably never get a characterization that will give us the essence of indoctrination, but for all of that, we can very often recognize it and make useful generalizations about it.

In education, there will be an initiation into some subject matter, into some tradition, into some set of skills and facts, but one is an indoctrinator, indeed a kind of propagandist, not an educator, if in such an initiation, one inculcates rigid habits and fixed beliefs and makes no attempt to help students to think for themselves, to become reflective and critical individuals. And do not say we do not have any understanding of what it is to be critical, that "critical" is merely an emotive term. Being critical is a kind of character trait and we, as educators, help bring it into being where we encourage originality, show that we are not afraid of criticism, are non-authoritarian in our teaching and in our relating to people, and are alert to the possibility that the established norms *perhaps* should be rejected, that the rules *might* rightly be changed, that the criteria for judging performances ought to be modified, and that for many rules and many practices, it is not infrequently the case that it is not without point to ask for their point. We will, if we want to help students to become critical, autonomous persons, inculcate in our teaching practices the give and take of critical discussion, while downplaying the concern for developing forensic skills or (the philosophers' foible) the penchant for being clever sillies. In educating, as distinct from indoctrinating, we will, as John Passmore puts it, seek to help students become critical persons, that is, persons who "must possess initiative, independence, courage, imagination" (1967, p. 215). And we will seek to exemplify these virtues ourselves. These all

are—or at least should be—commonplaces or truisms, but, for all of that, they are true.

The above will not catch all the stretches of education. It may be a very poor model for teaching languages, at least at the beginning. But an education system that did not bring out these virtues would hardly be worthy of the name and a belief-system or set of practices that repressed or discouraged them would be a system of indoctrination.

Without definitions, we can say enough about indoctrination to distinguish it from education and to pick out, at least in the plain cases, when it is that a religious sect, or political party, or indeed any other belief-system is an indoctrinating system and when it is not. This is enough to tell us how to proceed with our more pressing worries about indoctrination. But, it might be claimed, since I just qualified my remarks with “at least in the plain cases,” that we, after all, do need the kind of definition and tight characterization that Thiessen says we need but do not have. Doesn’t the need for qualification plainly point to that? I do not think so. In talking about religious indoctrination or, for that matter, about political indoctrination, there will be a lot of difficult cases where reflective and informed persons—persons committed to being impartial even where they are passionately involved in the issue—will disagree. I, for example, think that a person who has read, and taken to heart, a lot of J. S. Mill and John Dewey is likely to be more tolerant and less susceptible to indoctrination than a person similarly nurtured on St. Augustine and Jean Calvin. That plainly is a tendentious remark of mine that may very well be false. But it is not untestable, though we may not now have anything but the barest impressionistic grounds for believing it. What we need in coming to test it is careful characterizations of the actual beliefs of these thinkers and their methods of reasoning and some knowledge of the likely effect of soaking oneself in their thought and taking it to heart. We then should compare this with the clear cases of indoctrination. It is doing things like this rather than going in search of Platonic definitions that will help us understand indoctrination. I say this, first, because we are very unlikely to come up with such definitions, to find, that is, a general characterization that will apply to all the cases, real and hypothetical, that reflective people would confidently call cases of indoctrination. Going, after that, for a key non-mathematical concept is like going after the Holy Grail. Second, even if we were to get such a characterization, it would still be subject to various interpretations such that intractable dispute would break out about its application. But we are not at sea about indoctrination for all of that. Platonism among philosophers dies hard.

Note

1. For an acute awareness here, see Taylor (1983) and Cavell (1964).

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