

Liberal Education's Antidote to Indoctrination

Rachel Alexander Cambre, PhD

Liberal education, the best preparation for self-government, must be distinguished from indoctrination, a grave threat to democracy. Indoctrination results when certain concepts and ideas are taught dogmatically, but it can also result from peer pressure—perhaps less obvious in adulthood, but no less powerful. And while it is crucial for schools to refrain from pushing propaganda on children, American parents, citizens, and lawmakers concerned about indoctrination must also seek out an education for children that sharpens their intellects through engagement with “the best that has been thought and said in the world,” thus preparing them to think independently, pursue truth honestly, and exercise citizenship responsibly.

Are American schools overrun by indoctrination?

Many Americans think so. Parents today are rightly disturbed by upticks in racism, antisemitism, and gender confusion across K–12 campuses and blame ideological instruction for indoctrinating their children. From lesson plans forcing students to rank themselves according to their racial and gender “power and privilege” (and labeling Zionists “bullies”) to school policies encouraging students to socially transition behind their parents’ backs, the takeaway is the same: Individuals are defined by immutable “identities” that consign them to categories of “oppressor” or “oppressed.”¹ Rather than liberating students to think for themselves as education should, parents argue, these lessons indoctrinate them in a particular ideology.

At the same time, defenders of public school curriculum materials and policies contend that the alternatives championed by dissatisfied parents propagate the very “indoctrination” they claim to condemn. When classical charter schools emphasize virtues and the Western canon, for example, critics at the Network for Public Education accuse them of indoctrinating students with “Christian nationalism,” while those at Americans United for Separation of Church and State deem the inclusion of biblical literacy as an academic subject to be evidence of indoctrination and “religious coercion.”² And, in an inversion of the argument against school policies that alienate children from their parents, opponents of homeschooling charge families with indoctrinating their children by alienating them from the public school system’s secular “solidarity.”³

Curriculum disputes such as these raise questions about what it actually means to indoctrinate. Is the term simply a pejorative opponents use when they disagree over classroom content? That is, does all education necessarily “indoctrinate” pupils, with disagreements over the proper means and ends of education inevitably devolving into “a war between differing forms of indoctrination,” as an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently put it?⁴ Or does indoctrination denote a practice meaningfully distinct from the art of educating?

Since the Founding, Americans have upheld liberal education—as opposed to an education that prepares one for political, economic, or intellectual subservience—as the ideal preparation for self-government. John Adams recommended “laws for the liberal education of youth” in his 1775 essay on constitutional government in the colonies, and Thomas Jefferson argued that citizens “whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of rights and liberties of their fellow citizens.”⁵ Even the Puritans, whose sumptuary laws were by no means liberal, provided for the public education of children so that they could read original texts for themselves.⁶

In keeping with this tradition, this paper makes the case for a principled distinction between education and indoctrination. While education prepares students to engage in independent thought and inquiry in pursuit of truth, indoctrination trains them to accept and apply unquestioned ideological tenets. In practice, many K–12 schools may exist somewhere along a spectrum between these two theoretical definitions. Still, by clarifying and developing the philosophical differences between education and indoctrination, this paper aims to better equip parents, teachers, and citizens to assess the extent to which a school is engaged in one or the other.

To that end, this paper begins with a discussion of the phenomenon of indoctrination, drawing from the observations of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who experienced it firsthand in the Soviet Union, and then turns to the unique vulnerabilities to indoctrination that Alexis de Tocqueville found present in modern democratic societies like America. Far from equating education with indoctrination, thinkers such as Solzhenitsyn and Tocqueville understood the former to be the best antidote to the latter. Hence, the paper concludes with an examination of the ways in which education safeguards against indoctrination, by teaching students how to subordinate their passions to reason and introducing them to the great conversation of competing ideas that have formed—and transformed—the history of civilization.

Relieving the Need for Thought

The word “indoctrination” stems from the Latin *docere*, meaning “to teach,” but by the middle of the 20th century it had acquired a different meaning, informed, in part, by the ideological training employed by totalitarian regimes. To grasp the meaning of the term as it is used today, then, accounts of such training are helpful, and perhaps none more so than Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*. Its three volumes, which literary scholar Gary Saul Morson recently called “the masterpiece of our time,” recount Solzhenitsyn’s imprisonment in the Soviet Union labor camps.⁷ Yet, as Morson notes, the book’s power stems not only from the brutal honesty with which Solzhenitsyn describes the Soviet regime, but also from the candor with which he treats his own submission to its indoctrination. Through his reflections, Solzhenitsyn suggests three elements constitutive of indoctrination, all of which work to supplant thought—implantation, simplification, and mechanization.

In detailing his time in prison, Solzhenitsyn recalls an encounter with a Jewish fellow prisoner who challenged his “world outlook,” an episode Morson highlights as a turning point in the book. The confrontation began when Solzhenitsyn made what he then considered to be a benign, “self-evident” remark, dismissing a prayer of U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as “hypocrisy.”⁸ In response, the prisoner questioned him with feeling: “Why do you not admit the possibility that a political leader might sincerely believe in God?”⁹ This provocation stopped Solzhenitsyn in his tracks, so rare was it in the Soviet Union to come across such genuine independence of thought. By contrast, he reflected, “it dawned upon me that I had not spoken out of conviction but because the idea had been implanted in

me from outside.”¹⁰ That is, Solzhenitsyn professed Soviet ideas of atheism and materialism not because he had thought through them and found them to be true, but because they had been successfully imposed.¹¹ In this first aspect of indoctrination, one can already glimpse its distinction from education, which, as Roosevelt Montás reminds readers in his book *Rescuing Socrates*, means “to draw out.”¹² Whereas education draws out, indoctrination imports in.

This is not to say that education need not concern itself with teaching facts and skills, of course. In early grades, classroom techniques may even appear to “implant” new facts and skills. Yet Solzhenitsyn’s observation clarifies that the acquisition of knowledge occurs not by way of the teacher’s implantation, but by the active exercise of the student’s reason. It is not by accepting the fact that nine times five is forty-five that a child learns to multiply, for example. A child learns to multiply by activating his or her potential to mentally multiply. Similarly, a student may not fully grasp that the Civil War was fought primarily over slavery until he or she reads a primary text from the time—such as the Lincoln–Douglas debates or Alexander Stephens’s Cornerstone speech—and concludes that this was a war over the meaning of the human person. Education is an active enterprise rather than a matter of passive implantation.

Solzhenitsyn’s epiphany raises further questions, however. For how can ideas be implanted from the outside? The Soviets certainly used force, both in military training and, ultimately, through the prisons. Yet, violence need not compel the mind, as Solzhenitsyn’s own eventual dissidence demonstrated. Why, then, did he initially let the ideas take root? What makes propaganda so alluring? Solzhenitsyn reveals another powerful component to indoctrination when he describes the “happiness of simplification” he experienced upon graduating from officer candidate school, “the happiness of forgetting some of the spiritual subtleties inculcated since childhood.”¹³ In a world full of nuances and subtleties, indoctrination can provide relief by offering a monolithic set of ideas that simplify things. This relief consists not in the prudence of making concrete distinctions, such as those between body and soul, man and woman, or good and evil, but in the pleasure of reduction—reducing an individual’s identity to his or her race, sex, or self-declared gender, for example, and treating him or her accordingly.

The appeal of this simplification, moreover, extends beyond reducing reality and the number of ideas one has to consider. As Solzhenitsyn explains, the resulting happiness consists in “not having to think things through” at all.¹⁴ Instead of “admitting any new fact or evaluating any new opinion,” his implanted world outlook permitted—nay, required—him

simply to reach for the “already available stock” of labels, reducing alternative arguments or perspectives to the “hesitant duplicity of the petty bourgeoisie,” or the “militant nihilism of the déclassé intelligentsia.”¹⁵ It had primed him to regurgitate ideas mechanically when he might otherwise reflect, reconsider, contemplate—when he might otherwise think. In this way, indoctrination not only distorts reality, but distorts the mind, as well, leaving it incapable of deliberate thought.

Tyranny of the Majority

Given its association with totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, indoctrination may seem to pose little threat to modern democracies, with their legal protections for free speech, exercise of religion, and independence of the press. Alexis de Tocqueville encountered its presence in 19th-century America, nonetheless, exerting all the more power because its influence was unsuspected. To better understand how indoctrination might be at work today, then, Tocqueville’s insights into democracy and modernity are helpful, illustrating the ways in which Americans were then and remain now susceptible to ideas “implanted from outside”—ideas that oversimplify by relieving one of the need to think things through.

A “sincere friend of America and liberty,” as he once called himself, Tocqueville took pains to warn Americans of dangers to their liberty that he perceived among them, foremost of which were those posed to free and independent thought.¹⁶ In part because the democratic principle of equality demands majority rule—even if through representatives rather than direct democracy, in most ways—the majority holds “immense power” in America, not just in the public square, but over the realm of thought itself, Tocqueville observed.¹⁷ The egalitarian pride that ensures that no one is inferior to anyone else gives way to a diffidence such that no one is superior to anyone else. If all are equal, the majority must be right. This mistaken intellectual, rather than political, power of the majority reigns in subtle ways, not by imposing legal mandates, but by applying social pressure through citizens’ shared equality of conditions.

That is, equal individuals may seem able to think for themselves, but they paradoxically submit to the many who are equal to them. Moreover, where there are no fixed classes or ranks, and anyone can rise or fall, as Tocqueville analyzes democracy, all are thrown into a frenzy of activity, seeking to maintain or to surpass themselves. Such restlessness leaves little time for deep thought, making the intellectual authority of the majority—and the “experts” that rule in its name—especially enticing.¹⁸ In this context, social

pressure makes the prospect of opposing the opinions of the majority all the more daunting. Indeed, anyone who dares to speak out once the majority has “irrevocably pronounced” on a question faces an ostracism that can feel “worse than death,” Tocqueville remarked.¹⁹ “The public therefore has a singular power among democratic peoples,” he concluded. “It does not persuade [one] of its beliefs, it imposes them and makes them penetrate souls by a sort of immense pressure of the minds of all on the intellect of each.”²⁰ In this way, the modern democratic citizen can find himself in a position similar to Solzhenitsyn’s, speaking not out of conviction, but because ideas have been implanted from outside, imposed by the majority through social pressure.

These circumstances not only make individuals more prone to submit to the intellectual authority of the majority, Tocqueville argued, but also make the majority more prone to simplification, to embrace what he dubbed “general ideas,” in turn. Defining general ideas as those “enclosing a very great number of analogous objects under the same form so as to think about them more conveniently,” Tocqueville granted their necessity for human beings, since they allow the limited human mind to comprehend a vast number of particulars.²¹ Nevertheless, he saw potential for abuse should they become substitutes for careful thought instead of grounds for it. And he perceived temptation to such abuse to be heightened among modern men and women, for the same reasons Solzhenitsyn himself was tempted to embrace Soviet ideology. Tocqueville writes,

Men of democratic centuries like general ideas because they exempt them from studying particular cases; they contain, if I can express myself so, many things in a small volume and give out a large product in a little time. When, therefore, after an inattentive and brief examination, they believe they perceive a common relation among certain objects, they do not push their research further, and without examining in detail how these various objects resemble each other or differ, they hasten to arrange them under the same formula in order to get past them.²²

Busy Americans can use or abuse intellectual shortcuts. Tocqueville recognized, then, that even in a nation as rooted in principles of liberty as America, indoctrination could take root, promising the same appeal of thoughtless simplification that Solzhenitsyn encountered across the globe a century later.

Tocqueville’s insights into Americans’ intellectual habits suggest that indoctrination can happen without conspiracy or intent to indoctrinate on

the part of teachers, administrators, or lawmakers. Instead, social pressures to conform can short-circuit independent thought. As a result, indoctrination often proceeds more from a lack of thought, deliberation, and inquiry than from a concerted effort to censor. In other words, it results from a failure to educate.

Hence, for both Solzhenitsyn and Tocqueville, the safeguard against indoctrination is education. Solzhenitsyn identified schools as “the key to the future of Russia,” as political scientist Daniel Mahoney, an expert on Solzhenitsyn’s thought, has observed.²³ And Tocqueville, for his part, recommended the study of Greek and Latin literature, sufficiently far from readers’ own cultural context to “counterbalance our particular defects.”²⁴ It is therefore to education that we turn at last, investigating to what extent it differs from—and guards against—the practice of indoctrination.

Ordering the Soul

Montás’s definition of education remains a good starting point. Drawing from the word’s literal meaning, “to draw out,” Montás explains that to educate means “to educe from the student something that is already there and whose successful cultivation represents the fulfillment of the highest human good.”²⁵ For the ancients, that “something” was the intellect, the soul’s capacity for thought, and the task of the educator was to assist in its development. So far, in fact, is the classical notion of education from indoctrination’s implantation that Socrates likened the teacher to a midwife.

But what of young children, whose minds are immature, rendering them unable to think for themselves? Must not they, at least, be indoctrinated? Here, it is helpful to invoke Aristotle’s appeal to habituation in education in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, what one might call his treatise on education.²⁶ Identifying the task of education with the perfection of the soul’s capacities—or, in other words, the cultivation of virtue—Aristotle proposed a division of the human virtues into two categories, corresponding, roughly, to the constitution of the soul.²⁷ The moral virtues perfect character, while the intellectual virtues perfect intellect. Yet because the human soul is not ultimately dualistic but a whole, an education of the intellect cannot neglect character. For reason to reign, the passions must be tamed from a young age and throughout life.

Hence, Aristotle spends the first half of the *Ethics* on the cultivation of moral virtue, which occurs by way of habituation.²⁸ This part of a child’s education is “sub-rational,” in a sense. A child is not freely exercising his reason when following admonitions to share toys or to tell the truth. Having

acquired specific habits, however, and eventually a good moral character, students become able to exercise prudence, to deliberate and choose. Unlike the implantation of ideas poised to replace individual discernment, habituation in virtue orients students *toward* the exercise of prudential judgment. By disciplining them not to act on the impulse of their passions, character formation prepares students instead to think before acting, and to pursue truth with sincerity. Only later in life will they reopen and rethink whether such basic moral principles are indeed right, because they will have become both able and encouraged to do so.

Aristotle's examples of particular moral virtues effectively illustrate their relationship to thought. Consider the virtue of truthfulness, or honesty, which entails a frankness regarding one's own speech, actions, and qualities.²⁹ The truthful person will not boast about what he has done or what he is capable of but will straightforwardly represent himself; he is a kind of "plain dealer," as Aristotle puts it. Like the other moral virtues, truthfulness concerns the passions, moderating the common human desire to appear better than we are. Habituating a child to truthfulness about himself as he develops will also cultivate a broader love of truth in him, thereby preparing him for the intellectual pursuit. When this love of truth inevitably runs into additional competing passions, moreover, the other moral virtues offer support. Should the pursuit of truth require standing against the majority, for example, courage may be necessary, while taking seriously opposing arguments and differing perspectives calls for generosity and humility.

Even the most controversial virtue of our day—piety—aids the full development of the intellect.³⁰ Entailing deep respect or honor for one's parents, patria, and providence, piety requires an awareness of and gratitude for the many blessings one has received and not earned. American schools have traditionally sought to cultivate the virtue of piety in a variety of ways, from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to celebrating Grandparents' Day. Yet, today, piety incurs charges of indoctrination, with critics claiming that patriotic practices like these produce chauvinists blindly ignorant of the flaws of their country, religious creed, and kin.

What such critics overlook, however, is just how crucial the humility and gratitude of piety are to the lifelong pursuit of truth—including truths about errors of the past and present alike—which demands a willingness to learn from sources beyond one's immediate milieu. In a democracy, that milieu consists of the ideas and arguments of the present age. To educate an intellect free from subservience to that limited horizon, then, recourse to thinkers from past ages—one's ancestors and predecessors—is essential.

Educating for Independent Thought

Indeed, when the 20th-century American political philosopher Leo Strauss distinguished liberal education from indoctrination, he did so by defining the former as “studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind.”³¹ Education differs from indoctrination in its openness to the best arguments, regardless of whence they come. Nor is its openness another form of relativism—the “facile delusion,” as Strauss called it, whereby modern readers entertain ancient thinkers’ perspectives as “right from [each writer’s] point of view but not, as [each] claims, simply right.”³² Rather, Strauss contended that a genuinely liberal education demands both the “modesty” and the “boldness” to take each of the greatest minds seriously, even and especially when they contradict modern sentiments.³³

Study of the great books enriches the pursuit of truth not just by transcending the horizon of majority opinion, but by providing competing arguments when it comes to the most important questions. “The community of the greatest minds is rent by discord and even by various kinds of discord,” Strauss explained. “Whatever further consequences this may entail, it certainly entails the consequence that liberal education cannot be simply indoctrination.”³⁴ Where indoctrination implants a monolithic outlook, education invites us to join the discord, or conversation.

This means that while piety and patriotism have a place in American schools, love of God and country must never turn classrooms into mere echo chambers, or else they may devolve into incubators of indoctrination rather than education. To keep the spirit of inquiry, debate, and independent judgment alive in an institution committed to the cultivation of piety, teachers must convey the complexity of the American and Western traditions, praising and blaming as accurately as they can, while leaving final judgment to each student.

Taking the American tradition as an example, students should learn about both the brilliance of the U.S. Constitution and the arguments the Anti-Federalists made against it; both the righteousness of the Declaration of Independence’s ideals and the wars fought over them; and both the wealth and general prosperity created by America’s free-market economy and the case for regulations made by the likes of Theodore Roosevelt. The best sources of each position in these debates, of course, are primary texts, whether political, economic, philosophical, or literary. Educators must further teach students how to approach great thinkers and texts with humility and charity, seeking to understand them as they understood themselves,

rather than reading to dismiss them. An education that refuses to caricature the American and Western traditions as either irreproachable or irredeemable charts a course between blind acceptance and simple-minded rejection, and in doing so prepares students for responsible citizenship.

By inviting students into the conversations that have shaped these traditions and helping them to engage the best arguments about the most important questions human beings face, the teacher can succeed in “drawing out” of each student both moral and intellectual flourishing. This requires not implantation or simplification, but education—discipline in virtuous habits and practice in independent thinking along with others—which prepares students for deep thought and sustains them in their pursuit of truth. As pressures to politicize curricula continue to mount, the need for such a disciplining education is more urgent than ever.

Practical Considerations

Although education and indoctrination are distinct, it may be difficult in practice to detect where the former ends and the latter begins without sitting in a classroom. Still, signposts exist. Foremost among them is the degree to which a school understands the pursuit of truth to govern its mission. A school indifferent or hostile to such a pursuit, or to the notion that truth exists and can be sought, will likely produce students uninterested in and incapable of honest inquiry. For example, wherever students are counseled or encouraged to lie or withhold information from their parents—as a matter of policy, outside of exceptional circumstances—a form of indoctrination may be at work. Such policies teach students to prioritize their passions over the truth and to ignore those who disagree with them, instead of engaging alternative viewpoints.

Similarly, indoctrination may be underway if a school lacks opportunities for open inquiry and honest debate. If certain questions, arguments, and lines of thought are prohibited or discouraged (rather than merely postponed until a student has the maturity to address them), students will learn that success requires submission to unquestioned dogma, rather than the continued pursuit of truth. Discussion-based seminars and debates, on the other hand, in which students are encouraged to ask questions, advance arguments, and receive logic-based critiques of their arguments, will teach students to become lifelong learners.

Lastly, if the majority of course texts and materials are contemporary—published within the past few decades—rather than encompassing texts from throughout American and human history, then indoctrination may be

occurring. This intellectual myopia is all too common in courses at American colleges.³⁵ Learning from thinkers across different times and places challenges students to think through contemporary premises and values that they and those around them take for granted. Twelve or 16 years of education limited to contemporary sources, on the other hand, may instead aid and abet indoctrination into an unexamined worldview shaped by Tocqueville’s “tyranny of the majority.”

Indoctrination can result from schools intent on teaching certain concepts and ideas dogmatically, rewarding students’ uncritical acceptance and eager application of those ideas without question. But it can also result from sheer peer pressure—more obvious, perhaps, during one’s schooldays, but no less powerful in adulthood. Hence, American parents, citizens, and lawmakers concerned about indoctrination must not rest content with having schools that refrain from pushing propaganda on children. Rather, we must seek an *education* for them, one that sharpens the intellect through engagement with “the best that has been thought and said in the world,” thus preparing them to think independently, pursue truth honestly, and exercise citizenship responsibly.³⁶

Rachel Alexander Cambre, PhD, is a Visiting Fellow in the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies and the Center for Education Policy at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

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