Educating for Intellectual Dependability

The previous chapters have been devoted to articulating the ideal of the intellectually dependable person and to identifying the virtues of intellectual dependability. I have articulated the ideal of the intellectually dependable person as the sort of person on whom others can depend as a fellow member of the community of inquiry, and I have argued that central to achieving this ideal is possessing a suite of distinctively other-regarding intellectual virtues such as intellectual benevolence, intellectual transparency, communicative clarity, audience sensitivity, and epistemic guidance. In this chapter, I turn to the topic of educating for intellectual dependability. More specifically, my topic is educating with the aim of enabling learners to more closely approximate ideal possession of the virtues of intellectual dependability.

There are several questions about educating for intellectual dependability in this sense that are worthy of attention. One question concerns the possibility of educating for intellectual dependability. Can the virtues of intellectual dependability be taught? Another concerns the justifiability of educating for intellectual dependability. Is helping learners to grow in their possession of the virtues of intellectual dependability a justifiable educational aim? And there are also questions about how to teach for intellectual dependability. Supposing educating for intellectual dependability is at least sometimes justifiable and possible, how might it be best achieved? Are there general strategies that can be employed to help learners grow toward ideal possession of each of the virtues of intellectual dependability? Are there effective pedagogical strategies distinct to each of the several virtues of intellectual dependability?

My focus in this chapter is on the question of justification. Specifically, I aim to argue that educating for intellectual dependability is justified within the kind of formal, public education commonly provided in today’s democratic states. I have in mind specifically formal, public education systems in which provision is available from what is often called primary school through secondary school and on to higher education. The structure of my argument will be to identify several aims that are commonly adopted with reason within these educational systems, and to argue that educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward securing these aims, without being in some other way objectionable. In this way, I intend to make a broad appeal on behalf of the value of educating for intellectual dependability. Not every reader will agree that each of the aims cited is itself a justifiable aim of the kinds of educational systems I have in mind, but many readers will agree that at least some of the aims cited are justifiable aims. Thus, if the arguments I offer are cogent, then this should provide many readers with reason to think that educating for intellectual dependability is justified. While I will not discuss questions about the possibility of educating for intellectual dependability or about pedagogical strategies for educating for intellectual dependability in this chapter, I direct the interested reader to my previously published work on the topic of educating for intellectual virtues in general (Byerly 2019) and I note that I will broach the topic of educating for the several virtues of intellectual dependability in the later chapters of this book devoted specifically to these traits.

1. Intellectual Dependability and the Epistemic Aims of Education

For ease of presentation, I will divide the educational aims discussed into the categories of epistemic and social aims. I recognize from the outset, however, that there is overlap between these categories and the categories themselves may not be homogenous.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Under the heading of the epistemic, philosophers have typically included many of the potential aims of inquiry discussed in Chapter One. Thus, for example, knowledge, understanding, true belief, justified belief, rationality, and intellectual virtue have all been treated as appropriate subjects of epistemology. Among these potential epistemic aims, some have been identified as also constituting justifiable aims of education. In this Section, I will discuss four of these epistemic aims, arguing that educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward each.

1.1 Intellectual Virtue

Perhaps the most obvious and least interesting argument in favor of educating for intellectual dependability runs as follows. Educating for intellectual virtue is a justified epistemic aim of education; but educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is conducive toward educating for intellectual virtue; so, educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is justified.

The argument is relatively uninteresting because it may seem unlikely that it would be taken by anyone to provide evidence for its conclusion unless they are antecedently inclined to agree with this conclusion. The premise that educating for intellectual virtue is a justified epistemic aim of education already contains within it in a problematic way the idea that educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is justified, it seems, since part of what it is to educate for intellectual virtue is to educate for the virtues of intellectual dependability. Or, at least, once a person realizes that “intellectual virtue” in this premise must be understood so as to include the virtues of intellectual dependability, they are not likely to be any more strongly inclined to grant the truth of this premise than they are to grant the truth of the argument’s conclusion.

Nonetheless, the argument is worth discussing briefly for two reasons. First, it is worth noting that the idea that intellectual virtue is a justified aim of education has recently been the subject of significant scholarly discussion. Jason Baehr (2013, 2016, 2019), Randall Curren (2018), and Duncan Pritchard (2013) are among those who have defended the justifiability of educating for intellectual virtue. Harvey Siegel (2017), too, has expressed sympathy with the value of educating for intellectual virtue, though he also expresses concern that the justification available for educating for intellectual virtue is weaker than the justification for educating for critical thinking, and perhaps is ultimately inadequate. The fact, then, is that intellectual virtue is currently gaining currency as a justifiable educational aim. Thus, the argument above is worth attending to simply because it may well be cogent, even if relatively uninteresting.

Yet, a second reason for attending to the argument is that it may not be as uninteresting as it seems. We saw in Chapter Two that the virtues of intellectual dependability, as distinctively other-regarding intellectual virtues, have gone woefully unattended to by contemporary virtue epistemologists. We saw also that the reason for this inattention does not have to do with the fact that these virtue epistemologists would not consider these traits to not be intellectual virtues given their considered views. Indeed, given their considered views, they likely would regard these traits as intellectual virtues (and perhaps also as moral virtues). But if indeed their considered views would imply that these traits are intellectual virtues, but such traits have not been in the forefront of their thinking when they have been discussing intellectual virtues and education, then the argument presented at the outset of this section may prove somewhat illuminating for them. It may function to bring to the forefront of their thinking a suite of traits that they might otherwise have overlooked when considering the topic of educating for intellectual virtue, highlighting for them that their considered views imply that educating for these traits is justified just as is educating for the intellectual virtues that have been their focus. So, one potential epistemic aim of education that could lead at least some readers to conclude that educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is justified is the aim of intellectual virtue.

1.2 Critical Thinking

A second potential epistemic aim of education that may provide justification for educating for intellectual dependability is the aim of critical thinking. Critical thinking of the kind in view is typically regarded as having two components: a reasons assessment component and a thinking dispositions component (for a recent authoritative treatment, see Siegel 2017). The reasons assessment component requires competence in assessing the support that candidate reasons provide for candidate conclusions. It includes, for example, skills in formal and informal logic. The thinking dispositions or critical spirit component is concerned with the learner’s disposition to apply the skills of reason assessment and to act on the basis of applying these skills. A learner who acquires the critical spirit will be disposed to assess reasons well and to act on the basis of their competent assessment of reasons.

So understood, critical thinking has enjoyed widespread support as a justified aim of education. Siegel, who uses “reason” and “rationality” as synonyms for “critical thinking,” writes that “No other proposed aim of education—knowledge, happiness, community, civic-mindedness, social solidarity, docility and obedience to authority, creativity, spiritual fulfillment, the fulfillment of potential, etc.—has enjoyed the virtually unanimous endorsement of historically important philosophers of education that reason and rationality have” (2003: 305-6) . Of course, not everyone who has endorsed critical thinking as an aim of education has conceptualized it in exactly the same way. In particular, of relevance to the current discussion is that there is some controversy about the extent to which there is overlap between the critical spirit or thinking dispositions component of critical thinking and the intellectual virtues. Some critical thinking scholars have argued that the critical spirit is best conceptualized in terms of intellectual virtues (see, e.g., Bailin and Battersby 2016), while others such as Siegel (2017) have argued that it is important to keep thinking dispositions and intellectual virtues separate, maintaining that educating for thinking dispositions is better justified than is educating for intellectual virtues.

I am personally quite sympathetic with the arguments that have been given for thinking that insofar as critical thinking and intellectual virtue are distinct aims, intellectual virtue is the superior educational aim. Jason Baehr, for example, writes:

Critical thinking, as conceived of by Siegel and others, is about the *assessment of reasons, evidence, and arguments*. As such, it addresses only one dimension of the cognitive life. While this dimension is broad and important, critical thinking thus conceived neglects other important intellectual activities—activities that are also important vis-à-vis the aims of education. In addition to wanting our students to become good reasoners, we also want them to become competent at imagining innovative solutions, entering into perspectives very different from their own, paying close attention, noticing important details, and formulating good questions. (2019: ??)

I would only hasten to add in the present context that we also want our students to become competent at communicating clearly and with sensitivity to their audiences, sharing their perspectives transparently and offering guidance to fellow inquirers when they are positioned to do so. My own sympathy, then, is to view intellectual dependability as a key ingredient of an epistemic aim of education that may well be broader and more ultimate than the aim of critical thinking, and to think that insofar as critical thinking is conceptualized as not including the virtues of intellectual dependability, it misses out on something important educationally.

Nonetheless, these contentions are not my main focus in this section. Rather than argue that the virtues of intellectual dependability are components of an educational aim that is superior to critical thinking, I wish instead to grant for sake of argument the superiority of critical thinking as an educational aim and to defend the conclusion that educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward educating for critical thinking. This conclusion may come across as somewhat surprising, given that it has often been the other-regarding dimensions of intellectual virtues in particular that have been eschewed as not being part of the ideal of critical thinking. For example, in the 1990 Delphi Report commissioned by the American Philosophical Association, it was found that the majority of experts agreed that a person could achieve the ideal of critical thinking while still “us[ing] this skill to mislead and exploit a gullible person, perpetrate a fraud, or deliberately confuse and confound, and frustrate a project” (Facione 2018: 13). In the view of the majority, it appears that being intellectually dependable is not part of being a critical thinker. Despite granting here that the virtues of intellectual dependability are not a part of the ideal of critical thinking, I nonetheless seek to maintain that educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is conducive toward educating for critical thinking.

The key idea of my argument is one that I borrow from Deweyan and feminist epistemologists (e.g., Dewey 1989: 112; Code 1991; Westlund 2012). It is the idea, roughly, that our so-called internal processes of reasoning are dependent upon our social experience with interlocutors. We learn how to represent to ourselves in our internal dialogues divergent perspectives on a topic and to bring these perspectives into epistemically fruitful interaction via our repeated interactions with distinct individuals who represent alternative perspectives on topics and bring these perspectives into epistemically fruitful interaction with one another. As Westlund argues, the “disposition to hold oneself answerable to external, critical perspectives,” which is partially constitutive of the sort of intellectual autonomy central to critical thinking, “is intimately tied to a capacity for symmetrically shared or ‘joint’ deliberation” (2012: 59). We learn how to “think for ourselves”—a favorite idiom of advocates of the educational ideal of critical thinking—by thinking *together*.

Now one way in which this idea might be thought to justify educating for intellectual dependability is that it reveals that in order to be a critical thinker, I must at least learn to be intellectually dependable toward myself within my own internal dialogues of reason. I must be motivated to promote my epistemic goods, I must practice being transparent to myself when representing to myself each side of an issue, I must communicate clearly to myself, and so on. But this way of attempting to justify educating for intellectual dependability appears not to go as far as we might like. It appears to only justify educating for being dependable toward oneself in one’s own internal dialogues of reason.

There is, however, another way in which the foregoing observations provide justification for educating for the broader sort of intellectual dependability that is in view here. For, if we wish to aid learners to become critical thinkers, what the foregoing observations indicate is that it will be conducive toward this purpose if we populate their learning environments with interlocutors who are intellectually dependable. Students will learn better to how to think for themselves if they are surrounded by instructors and peers who model intellectual dependability for them. They will learn better how to represent for themselves diverse perspectives on topics of importance if they experience those who hold such diverse perspectives representing their perspectives well, aiming to promote the epistemic goods of their hearers, to share their perspectives transparently, to communicate their ideas clearly and with sensitivity to their audiences, and so on. It is the intellectual behaviors of the thought that is done together that they will learn to repeat in their thought that occurs in isolation (cf. Lipman 2003; Grandy 2007). Accordingly, if we wish to train up a critical thinker, we are well-served by training their peers to be intellectually dependable. Even if the ultimate epistemic aim of education is to train learners to think for themselves, teaching them to be intellectually dependable is conducive toward achieving this aim.

1.3 Apprenticeship

Whereas intellectual virtue and critical thinking are more individualistic aims of education, the third and fourth aims I will discuss are more social. A third aim identified by some philosophers of education pertains to apprenticeship. Especially at higher levels of education, educators aim to train learners to be their apprentices—to become their peers, doing well what they themselves do (Robertson 2009: 12). This apprenticeship may involve a more research-oriented training or a more teaching-oriented training, if not both.

Regarding research-oriented training, philosophers of education have long emphasized the way in which education serves as an initiation for students into social practices of inquiry within particular domains of knowledge (see, e.g., Peters 2007). As Luntley explains this idea of initiation, “the pupil’s education involves a gradual joining-in in the enterprise of managing our shared inheritance, not just an absorption of it” (2010: 42). As such, it is justifiable for students to learn how to become competent contributors to the furtherance of knowledge, particularly within domains in which they acquire a specialism. It is appropriate to educate such students so that they are able to contribute well to coordinated attempts to enhance collective human understanding.

Regarding teaching-oriented training, it must be granted that it is surely a justifiable aim of education to ensure its own self-perpetuation. As such, it is justifiable for teachers to teach students to become competent teachers. After all, the justifications available for educating in general do not tend to be time-sensitive, as if they would justify educating students of one generation but not another merely because they are members of different generations. In the absence of radical social change, we can assume that if educating is justified as all, then educating for the continued practice of education is justified.

Yet, educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward achieving both of these apprenticeship aims. Educating students to be intellectually dependable is conducive toward enabling them to make the kinds of contributions we would want them to make as researchers. A researcher who is concerned with advancing others’ epistemic goods, who is disposed to communicate their research perspective transparently and clearly, with sensitivity to their audience and with the ability to guide their audience in the territory of their expertise is more capable of making excellent contributions to research than a researcher who lacks these features. Elgin (2011) has recently stressed the centrality of such education to science education in particular, given its robustly collaborative aim to achieve collective understanding of nature. She writes:

In publishing her research, a scientist issues an open invitation to the scientific community to accept her results. She gives its members her assurance that they can count on her; anyone is welcome to depend on her findings and, she intimates, can do so with confidence. (2011: 253)

In making these intimation—in issuing this invitation for the trust of her fellow scientists and others—the scientist takes on an obligation to exhibit intellectual dependability in the conduct of her research. As such, science education ought to inculcate such dependability. Elgin writes, “Learning to do scientific research is learning to do honest, truthful, careful research. It is not learning to do research, with honesty, truthfulness, and conscientiousness tacked on as afterthoughts” (259). Whether in the sciences or in other academic areas, doing good research involves doing research in an intellectually dependable way.

Of course, we can imagine researchers who receive accolades for their research but who lack some or many of the features of intellectual dependability, or who indeed epitomize quite opposed traits. Perhaps they are not so much concerned if the conclusions of their research are false and mislead readers. Perhaps they hide aspects of their perspectives so as to avoid having to deal with objections that they know threaten their views. Perhaps they leave crucial aspects of their arguments intentionally ambiguous in an effort to “get by” reviewers. Perhaps they capitalize on known vulnerabilities in their peers’ judgments about research quality in order to get their work published or promoted or funded, rather than addressing and helping to correct such vulnerabilities.

Yet, even if research conducted in such a manner receives accolades, we can equally maintain that it is not the sort of research that we want(or should want) our apprentices to produce. This is part of the reason for the disappointment among academics regarding the discovery of widespread “sloppy” or fraudulent science (Harris 2017). When we aim for our students to become competent contributors to the furtherance of knowledge in our domains of inquiry, these are not the kinds of contributions we aim for them to make. Rather, we aim for them to contribute to the furtherance of knowledge in a manner reflective of intellectual dependability.

This is true not only of research accomplishments that will likely be regarded primarily as “theirs”, but also more broadly of their contributions to collective inquiry, however little acclaim might attach to these. We want them, as our peers and fellow academics, to display intellectual dependability toward us, so that our individual research will be improved and so that the fields in which we work may be epistemically enhanced. We want them to be the sorts of fellow inquirers on whom we can depend in our inquiries as individual researchers and as an academic community. As such, educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward achieving the research-oriented apprenticeship aims of education.

It is also conducive toward achieving the teaching-oriented apprenticeship aims of education. Perhaps nowhere is the need for intellectual dependability more visible than in the role of teacher. We expect teachers to be concerned to promote the intellectual well-being of students. We expect them to discriminate between the value of students coming to hold true beliefs on a subject of instruction and their coming to hold true and justified beliefs on that subject, preferring the latter (Roberts 2009: 18). We expect them to have a sensitive understanding of students’ abilities and interests, modifying their teaching in order to accommodate these features of learners (Noddings 2007: 50-51). We expect them to submit themselves to the tribunal of their students’ reason, transparently explaining when appropriate the reasons why they hold the views they are teaching students (Siegel 2017). We expect them to guide students in the ways of inquiry, to help them avoid mistakes and to help them achieve successes (Curren 2017: 21). We expect them to accessibly model excellence in inquiry.

In all of this—which is, to acknowledge what is often not sufficiently appreciated, extremely demanding—teacher apprentices will be well-served if they are taught to be intellectually dependable. To a certain extent, much as the intellectual virtues that have received the lion’s share of attention from contemporary virtue epistemologists may be thought of as the “character traits of a good thinker or learner” (Baehr 2016: 117), the virtues of intellectual dependability may be thought of as the virtues of the good teacher. Recent scholarship by philosophers of education has sought to draw attention to the idea that there may very well be virtues that are especially important for teachers to possess (cf. Cooke and Carr 2014; Sockett 2012). The present argument suggests that among these virtues are the virtues of intellectual dependability.

I began this section by noting that the apprenticeship aim of education is one that takes on increasing importance the higher up we go in educational levels. One might worry that, given this fact, the arguments given in this section will only provide justification for educating for intellectual dependability at higher levels of education, particularly in settings in which students are being educated to become researchers or teachers. While I think the arguments may provide special justification for educating for intellectual dependability in these settings, it would be a mistake to think that they do not provide justification for educating for intellectual dependability in earlier and less specialized educational settings. For, we must recognize that it would be unrealistic to expect learners who have received no previous education for intellectual dependability to effectively acquire it *de novo* at these higher and more specialized levels of education. When we talk about educating for intellectual dependability, we are talking about shaping a person’s character. If we wait until they have reached the highest and most specialized levels of education before we start trying to do this shaping, we have waited too long. While it is not my primary purpose here to comment on the pedagogical questions of the extent to which education for intellectual dependability should be sought at each level of education and how it might best be achieved across these levels, I take it that if educating for intellectual dependability is justified by the apprenticeship aims of education, then educating for intellectual dependability is not justified only at the highest and most specialized educational levels, but is justified to some extent at lower and less specialized levels as well.

1.4 Intellectual Cooperation

The previous sub-section indirectly highlighted the value of certain kinds of intellectual cooperation: cooperation between students and teachers aimed at student learning, and cooperation within the research community aimed at furthering human knowledge or understanding. These phenomena are but two examples of the more widespread good of intellectual cooperation. Some philosophers of education have thought that a justifiable epistemic aim of education is to enable students to be intellectually cooperative, whether within academia or outside of it (e.g., Kotzee 2013: 163). Many of the activities of our daily lives, from our work to our home life to our hobbies, involve cooperative application of our intellectual powers in the pursuit of goods for ourselves and others. Those who have been taught to be intellectually cooperative are better positioned to flourish in these activities than those who are not.

So pervasive and significant is the need for good intellectual cooperatives, in fact, that Edward Craig (1999) has developed an account of knowledge based upon the existence of this need. He notes, “Human beings need true beliefs about their environment, beliefs that can serve to guide their actions to a successful outcome. That being so, they need sources of information that will lead them to believe truths” (11). What we look for in a good informant, writes Craig, is “someone who has the following property: if he tells us that p, we shall thereupon believe that p” (13). The concept of knowledge, he proposes, “is used to flag approved sources of information” of this sort (11). Those who know are the ones we can believe when they tell us something.

Whether we are inclined to agree with Craig’s account of knowledge or not, we cannot dispute his recognition of the significance of the need for intellectual cooperatives. Only, I might stress here that our needs for intellectual cooperation extend beyond needs for people we can rely upon as sources of testimony for target propositions of inquiry. Our needs for others’ intellectual cooperation include fulfilling all of those roles we identified in Chapter One when discussing the myriad ways in which we depend on fellow inquirers. We need others who will share their perspectives transparently with us, who will help us to review our processes of reasoning, who will support our development as inquirers, and so on.

My proposal here is that educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward educating for intellectual cooperativeness. Part of what it is to be intellectually cooperative is to be intellectually dependable. A person who is not concerned to promote others’ epistemic goods, who does not tend to share their perspective transparently, who does not communicate with others clearly and with sensitivity to their distinctive intellectual features, and who does not help others navigate epistemic risks is not likely to cooperate very well with others in intellectual endeavors. By contrast, the person who is concerned to promote others’ epistemic goods, who does share their perspective transparently, who communicates with clarity and sensitivity to their audience and who helps their audience navigate epistemic risks is precisely the sort of person with whom we want to cooperate intellectually.

Of course, we can imagine many “successes” of life coming to a person who, in their intellectual interactions with others does not display the virtues of intellectual dependability, much as we can imagine a researcher achieving accolades for their research without manifesting these traits. For example, there are those who make money and scale the career ladder by lying, defrauding, deceiving, misrepresenting themselves or others, ducking questions, manipulating, and so on. But again this is not what we want from those with whom we must engage in intellectual cooperation in our life’s endeavors. If we are justified in educating students to become good intellectual cooperatives, we are justified in educating students to manifest the virtues of intellectual dependability.

2. Social Aims of Education

In discussing epistemic aims of education, I have moved from more individualistic epistemic aims to more social epistemic aims. I now continue discussing social aims of education, focusing on aims that are often distinguished from epistemic aims of education, despite recognizable overlap with these.

2.1 Fulfilling Needs for Relationship

Some philosophers of education have maintained that among the justifiable aims of education is the aim of enabling students to satisfy their needs for relationship. That there is a fundamental psychological need to experience mutually affirming relationships is thoroughly attested in the psychological literature. A relatively early statement of this need was offered by Baumeister and Leary, who defined the need to belong as a “pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” in which “frequent, affectively pleasant interactions” take place in a context of a “temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other’s welfare” (1995: 497). An example of more recent research that incorporates the need for relatedness and that is often cited in literature on education is research on self-determination theory. In this research, the need for relatedness is identified alongside needs for competence and self-determination as one of three basic psychological needs the fulfillment of which is required for subjective well-being (Ryan and Deci 2017). Philosopher Kimberly Brownlee has argued that so strong is the human need for achieving personal relationship goods that humans are best thought of as having a right to adequate interpersonal contact, since in the absence of adequate social connections “we tend to break down mentally, emotionally, and physically” (2016: 55).

There are different ways in which one might argue that enabling learners to fulfill their need for relatedness is a justifiable aim of education. Randall Curren exemplifies two such routes in his work. One approach is to argue that the overarching aim of education is to enable the flourishing of students. In general, Curren proposes that the aims of any cooperatively formed institutions will be to “collectively provide the necessities for living well that individuals cannot provide themselves.” In the specific case of educational institutions, their purpose must be “promoting forms of personal development that are essential to living well” (2018: 474-5). Thus, if education can enable students to fulfill their needs for relatedness beyond their capacities for fulfilling this need without education, then educating students in this way is justified because of its contribution to promoting the flourishing of students.

Another route to defending the justification of educating for relational fulfillment is based on the instrumental value of ensuring the satisfaction of students’ basic needs. Curren (2017) maintains that there is significant instrumental value in ensuring that education is provided in a needs-supportive environment; for, if an educational environment is not needs-supportive then it is unlikely that any other aims of education will be achieved. When students (or anyone else’s) basic needs are not satisfied, this will serve as an obstacle to achieving much of anything with them—including developing their characters, which is Curren’s focus. Thus, educating with the aim of fulfilling students’ needs for relationship is justified instrumentally because this is necessary for achieving whatever other educational aims we might have.

I propose here that educating students to be intellectually dependable is conducive toward enabling them to fulfill their needs for relationship. Curren in some places expresses his commitment to the value of educating students to fulfill their need for relatedness in terms of schools having an obligation to “nurture friendships” among students (2017: 28). But part of what is involved in being a good friend, I suggest, is being intellectually dependable. What we want in a friend is someone who (among other things) genuinely cares about our intellectual well-being, is capable of sharing themselves transparently with us, communicates with us clearly and with sensitivity to our distinctive interests and abilities, and is capable and disposed to offer us guidance when we are trying to figure things out. These ideas are confirmed in the philosophical literature on friendship. In good friendships, friends exhibit concern for one another’s well-being for its own sake (Helm 2017, Sect. 1.1), disclose themselves to one another (Thomas 2013), play an active role in shaping each other (Cocking and Kennett 1998), and share in practical deliberation (Sherman 1987). In all of this, the friendship is enhanced by each party’s being intellectually dependable.

Curren, citing several recent works, writes that “The ethical prerequisites for fulfilling social potential well and satisfying one’s relational need imply that human beings are not able to experience psychological well-being or live happy lives unless they care about other people and exhibit basic social virtues” (2017: 20). My suggestion here is that among these basic social virtues are the virtues of intellectual dependability. Educating students to acquire the social—as well as intellectual—virtues of intellectual dependability is conducive toward enabling them to satisfy their needs for relationship, and in this way may be justified as an aim of education.

2.2 Effective Contributions to Cooperative Society

Another commonly recognized aim of education is enabling learners to make effective contributions to our cooperative societies. Most frequently, perhaps, the kinds of effective contributions in view are contributions made through the learner’s participation in our cooperative economies through their paid work. Certainly it has become an increasingly pressing expectation of educational institutions that they will prepare graduates to excel in their careers—particularly in societies in which education is not fully subsidized by the state. But, as Harry Brighthouse notes, there are “numerous contributions to the flourishing of the community as a whole that garner little public recognition in a capitalist economy, but are no less important for that fact.” He concludes, “An education system is obliged to equip children to contribute to society in these and other ways, not only because the activities are valuable for others but also because those who engage in them derive a sense of self-worth from making such contributions” (2009: 38-9). On Brighthouse’s view, children have a right for parents and teachers to enable them to make effective contributions to cooperative society both through their paid work and through voluntary activities such as minding their neighbors’ children or coaching a kids’ soccer team.

Brighthouse emphasizes that in preparing learners to make such contributions we are preparing them to make contributions to cooperative activity. He writes, “Even capitalist economies are essentially cooperative; nobody makes a contribution that would be worth the income he derives from it if others were not also contributing in other valuable ways” (37-38). In order to contribute to such cooperative activity, learners will have to depend on others, and they themselves will be depended on by others. To contribute well, they will need to be prepared to depend well on others, and they will need to be prepared to function well when depended upon.

The importance of being prepared to function well when depending on others and when being depended upon by them is confirmed by the kinds of skills and abilities that employers claim to be seeking in graduates. Among the most desired qualities identified by employers are excellence in leadership and teamwork, both of which require excellent functioning in contexts of mutual dependence. Also highly valued are communication skills, which again facilitate one’s ability to depend on and be depended upon by others.[[2]](#footnote-2) The increasing value placed on abilities to contribute well to collaborative work in these ways is likely reflective of a cultural shift toward a more service-driven economy in which personal and social skills have rapidly become dramatically more important for determining relative life chances. In the UK, there has been cross-party recognition of the importance of providing children with “adult-led team-building activities that teach cooperation, self-discipline and the like” in order to close what is recognized across the political spectrum as a social mobility gap (Curren 2017: 8).

My proposal here is that educating learners to be intellectually dependable is conducive toward enabling them to function excellently in contexts in which they are expected to effectively contribute to collaborative work. Unsurprisingly, the idea is that being intellectually dependable helps one function well when depended upon by others as a contributor to cooperative activity. Concern for fellow team-members’ intellectual well-being, a disposition to share one’s perspective transparently with fellow team-members, to communicate with them clearly and with sensitivity to their abilities and interests, and to offer guidance when well-placed to do so are all highly desirable qualities of a teammate. This is especially so when the team is tasked with intellectually demanding labor, as is often the case in the kinds of cooperative activities that learners will participate in as contributors to their economies and communities as adults.

One somewhat formal way of making this argument appeals to the idea of process gains as conceptualized by social psychologists. Process gains are gains in effectiveness that result when a group rather than an individual works on a task. One kind of process gain is process gain in ability, which may result if group members’ abilities to perform a task are enhanced by working with their fellow group members. For example, we might imagine a group that is completing a brain-storming task that performs better at this task than the individuals do when performing the task alone because the individuals are able to help one another brainstorm better than they would in isolation. What is important for us to notice here is that when teams are composed of intellectually dependable team members, this helps to maximize such process gains in ability. After all, enhancing the quality of others’ inquiries is a hallmark of the intellectually dependable person. Thus, especially in cases where a team is working on a task that involves collective inquiry or intellectual labor of some sort, team members will function better as team members if they are intellectually dependable. By educating students for intellectual dependability, we enhance their capacity to contribute well to cooperative society.

2.3 Democratic Citizenship

A final commonly recognized aim of education in democratic states is to prepare students to participate in democratic citizenship. The kind of participation envisioned may differ from one theorist to another, and may also differ based on the exact structure of the democracy. Whereas Amy Gutmann (1987) emphasizes educating students to exercise critical deliberation among good lives, William Galston (1989) emphasizes educating students to hold their elected representatives accountable. Yet, whether we see the participation in democratic citizenship at which education aims as requiring a more direct engagement in deliberating about policies and institutions or a less direct engagement in evaluating and electing representatives, it will remain true that participating in democratic citizenship will involve exercising capacities to collectively shape the society in which one lives. Basic to democratic education, as Gutmann puts it, is that “all citizens should be educated so as to . . . share in self-consciously shaping the structure of their society” (2003: 408).

Democratic citizens’ capacity to shape society, as already suggested, is a capacity they most effectively exercise together. One person thinking through publicly debated issues for themselves and casting a vote on the basis of their reasoned deliberation makes only one vote’s difference. What makes much greater difference is when individuals exercise their capacities for democratic citizenship within social networks. As the political scientist Robert Putnam puts it, “civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (2000: 19). Education for democratic citizenship, then, is largely a matter of enabling learners to function well within a collectively deliberating society whose members can learn from one another and influence one another in making decisions together that make a difference.

While there is great power to bring about positive change through exercising civic virtue within social networks, the dependence of democratic citizens on one another in such networks also reveals a vulnerability of democracies that has recently been exploited for much ill. In their book *Computational Propaganda*, Samuel Woolley and Philip Howard document a disturbing and growing worldwide phenomenon involving the “use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks” (2018: 4) such as Facebook and Twitter. These social networks characteristically enable the rapid spread of information, and this ability has been harnessed by bad political actors in order to quickly mislead public opinion and misguide civic action in such headline cases as the 2016 presidential election in the United States. The spread of misinformation is facilitated by “bots”—highly automated accounts on these social media platforms, often created for the purpose of spreading misleading information and designed to mimic human users. Bots are becoming increasingly sophisticated and difficult to distinguish from genuine users. Some estimates have found that nearly half of all we traffic is generated by bots (Zeifman 2015).

But bots and bad political actors are not the only problem. Human users are themselves prone to (un)wittingly spread the misinformation they are fed on social media to those within their networks. In a recent study during the 2018 US mid-term elections, it was found that social media users in fact shared more “junk” news than professional news overall, and that the amount of “junk” news shared had increased since the 2016 presidential election (Marchal et al 2018). The problem is getting worse, and individual citizens are not making it better.

It is generally thought that the solution to this problem must lie in significant part with reforming social media platforms. Part of the reason for this, as Regina Rini (2017) explains, is that believing the misinformation one sees in one’s social media feeds may often be perfectly rational. Social media users who are duped by this misinformation may well be duped through no significant fault of their own. She writes:

The model is like this: I read a story on social media, shared by one or two of my co-partisan friends. The story is shocking, and I am vaguely aware that my friends’ communicative intentions are ambiguous. Maybe they aren’t really putting their imprimatur on this story. But I know that these friends share my partisan affiliation, hence many of my normative values. They wouldn’t lie to me, right? They would exercise reasonable judgment about balancing confidence in important information, right? They wouldn’t be confused about the relevance of this information to assessing a candidate’s character, right?

Not always right, of course. But right often enough that trusting my co-partisans is reasonable. Hence, despite some qualms over the bent ambiguity of their testimony, I find myself starting to believe the stories they transmit. (54)

And in so believing, Rini contends, she and the many, many other social media users in such situations would be epistemically reasonable. “Fake news,” she concludes, “is a bad side effect of an individually reasonable epistemic practice” (ibid). Since individuals are not at epistemic fault, the solution to the problem must be more social in nature: it must involve reforming social media platforms themselves.

While I am sympathetic both with Rini’s suggestion that believing misinformation in one’s social media feed may often not be unreasonable and with her recommendation that the solution to the problem of fake news proliferation on social media is in significant part social, I think there is an individual component of the solution as well that her arguments overlook. Rini tends to focus on evaluating the epistemic practices of *recipients* of fake news on social media, asking what is reasonable for them to believe about the reports they receive. But individuals also engage in significant epistemic practices when they *distribute* or “share” stories via social media, including fake news stories. As Rini’s article very helpfully points out, sharing in its various guises—including the notoriously ambiguous “retweet”—presents a significant interpretation problem for its recipients. Moreover, the phenomenon I have been describing regarding the proliferation of fake news via social media is also now well-known. Thus, we may very well expect that an intellectually dependable epistemic agent on social media would exercise significant care in their social media sharing practices—more care than would a person who is not intellectually dependable. Having a tendency to resolve ambiguities in their communications so as to promote others’ epistemic goods, they will be alert to the ambiguities that social media sharing presents and will attempt to resolve ambiguities in their sharing. Being aware of the vast amount of fake news circulating over social media and concerned to promote and not injure the epistemic well-being of others, they will be very careful in the selection of stories they redistribute. Being sensitive to the distinctive predicament in which recipients of information shared on social media are placed, they will regulate their sharing and commenting practices so as to accommodate the unique vulnerabilities of those dependent upon them on social media. An intellectually dependable person is precisely the sort of person we all need more of within our social media networks. If more social media users—including the bad political actors who originate fake news stories in the first place—were more intellectually dependable, this would help to reduce the threat to democracy currently plaguing social media platforms.

An intellectually dependable person is a significant civic asset to those social networks to which they belong—whether these networks exist largely virtually on social media or not. To borrow an idea from the previous sub-section, an intellectually dependable person is well-positioned to contribute to process gains in democratic citizenship ability and to reduce process losses in democratic citizenship ability within these networks. An intellectually dependable person is precisely the sort of person needed on a democratic “team”. As such, states and their citizens have a significant interest in educating students to become intellectually dependable people.

3. Intellectual Dependability and Autonomy

In this chapter, I have argued that educating for intellectual dependability is justified because doing so is conducive toward achieving a wide variety of other commonly recognized aims of education. Educating students for intellectual dependability better enables them to exhibit intellectual virtue, to become critical thinkers, to become teacher or researcher apprentices in the traditions of inquiry, and to engage in intellectual cooperation; it better enables them to satisfy their needs for relationship, to contribute effectively to their cooperative societies via paid work and volunteering, and to contribute well to their democracies as citizens. By arguing this way, I am following a pattern of argument that one often encounters in the philosophical literature on the aims of education. Seigel, for example, defends critical thinking as a justifiable aim of education on the basis of its conduciveness toward treating students with respect as persons, enabling them to be self-sufficient adults, preparing them to participate in the traditions of inquiry, and enabling them to engage well in democratic deliberation (2003: 307-8).

Before concluding, however, I should pause to respond to an objection that latches on to this very pattern of argument. The objection is that educating for something is not justified just because it is conducive toward achieving some other justified educational aims if educating for it is in some other way problematic. The ends may not justify the means if there is something problematic with the means apart from their being conducive toward achieving the particular good ends in view. To be specific to the topic in view here, the objection is that educating for intellectual dependability may not be justified, despite its conduciveness toward securing the varied justified aims of education discussed in this chapter, if educating for intellectual dependability is in some other way objectionable.

Of course, an immediate question about this objection in the present case is: what would be otherwise problematic with educating for intellectual dependability? Perhaps the most obvious way that a means to a justifiable end may be problematic is if the means is sufficiently bad in itself. If helping someone become intellectually dependable were bad in itself, then we might reasonably object to it as a justifiable means to the educational aims outlined above. But helping someone become an intellectually dependable person is not bad in itself; indeed, it is quite plausibly good in itself. That is, it is good for its own sake, even apart from its conduciveness toward ends such as those identified in this chapter, to help someone become an intellectually dependable person. The virtues of intellectual dependability are, after all, virtues.

How else, then, might educating for intellectual dependability be problematic? Perhaps the most compelling thought is not that helping someone become intellectually dependable is bad in itself, but that educating for intellectual dependability within formal educational systems wrongs students, even if it makes them better off. The best way to develop this objection of which I am aware involves a certain kind of prioritizing of the treatment of students as autonomous within educational systems. Education is not for educators to govern students, shaping them into certain desirable kinds of people, but it is for liberating students to govern themselves.

One does find authors in philosophy of education who appear to endorse this sort of self-governance ideal for education, and even authors who use this conception of the ideal of education to argue against educating for intellectual virtue generally, despite recognizing the value of the latter. Siegel has argued for the superiority of critical thinking to intellectual virtue on precisely these grounds. He writes,

An education guided by the ideal of CT [critical thinking] is the only one that . . . strives to foster [students’] autonomy, independent judgment, and right to question, challenge, and demand reasons for what is taught (including CT itself). . . if we are serious about treating students with respect, then what they become and what dispositions and virtues they value, possess, and manifest is importantly *up to them*. (2017: 102-3)

Likewise, it could be argued, if we educate students for the virtues of intellectual dependability, we do not sufficiently leave it up to them whether they become intellectually dependable. We infringe rather than foster their autonomy, hindering them from being able to rule themselves.

I am broadly sympathetic with the response to Siegel that Jason Baehr has given. He writes:

It is no more (or less) plausible to think that students should be left to decide which traits of intellectual character are worth cultivating than it is which forms of reasoning are worth engaging in. Just as there may be a time and place for students to question the objectivity or efficacy of critical thinking, so might there be a time and place for them to question the merits of curiosity, intellectual honesty, carefulness, thoroughness, tenacity—even intellectual autonomy. However, in the same way that it would be a mistake to make it ‘optional’ whether students leave our courses disposed to employ *modus ponens* rather than “affirm the consequent,” we should hardly be indifferent about whether they depart disposed to think or reason in ways that are honest vs. dishonest, careful vs. sloppy, open-minded vs. closed-minded, and so on. (2019: ??)

By way of application to the virtues of intellectual dependability in particular, the idea is that aiming to foster in students any desirable sort of autonomy is not in tension with educating for these virtues; the only sort of autonomy that would be threatened by educating for such virtues is a sort of autonomy this is undesirable as an educational outcome.

To extend this point somewhat further in the present context, I wish to draw attention to a certain ambiguity in conceptualizing the ideal of self-governance that is not always recognized. The ambiguity is between an individualistic reading of self-governance and a collectivistic reading of self-governance. It is natural, and I think correct, to interpret Siegel’s concern with student autonomy as a concern with students’ ability to govern themselves as individuals. More specifically, it is concerned with students being “able to determine for themselves the worthiness of candidate beliefs, judgments, values, and actions” (2003: 312). Expressed in terms of governance, Siegel’s concern is with individualistic self-governance; indeed, he grants the individualistic orientation of the critical thinking ideal explicitly.

Yet, there is also a collectivistic reading of the ideal of self-governance, according to which our aim should be to enable students as a group to govern themselves as the next generation of human persons. Our concern is not only to enable them each as individuals to competently assess and act on reasons; we also aim to enable them to collectively assess and act on reasons together. Many of the aims of education surveyed in this chapter are ones that involve the exercise of such collective self-governance. When we educate students to contribute as researchers to communities of inquiry, to contribute effectively as team members through paid or voluntary work, or to exercise their citizenship responsibilities in shaping society, we educate them to participate in processes of collective self-governance. When appropriately conceptualized as an educational ideal, autonomy should be understood to include these collective dimensions. But, if it is, then educating for intellectual dependability is educating for autonomy. Specifically, educating for intellectual dependability enables students to contribute well to those aspects of life in which collective self-rule is exhibited.

On final analysis, Siegel and others who advocate individualistic educational ideals may be willing to conceive of these ideals in expansive ways so that they include being well-oriented to contribute to such processes of collective self-rule. Siegel does seem to make a comparable move when confronted with an objection to the individualism of the critical thinking ideal from the opposite direction of epistemic dependence. Some would argue that thinking for oneself cannot be the fundamental epistemic aim of education because people are pervasively dependent on others; they need to be taught to manage their dependence on others well (cf. e.g., Robertson 2009). Siegel (2003: 313) seems to grant that students do need to be educated to manage this dependence well, but he contends that managing one’s dependence on others well is itself an exercise of the sort of rationality that is characteristic of critical thinking. In a similar vein, he might contend that managing well others’ epistemic dependence on oneself is likewise an exercise of critical thinking. Being a critical thinker on such a conception may include being well-disposed to contribute to processes of collective self-rule.

If Siegel or others wish to depart from the majority view of the Dephi Report and conceive of their favored individualistic educational ideals in broad terms so that they include dispositions to exercise an expansive sort of rationality in managing one’s dependence on others and others’ dependence on oneself, I will not vociferously object. The point I wish to make here is only that educating for this more expansive sort of ideal will involve educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability. We should not suppose that by teaching students the techniques or values of reason assessment alone we will somehow thereby have taught them to be intellectually dependable. Just as there are distinctive aspects of excellence in depending well on others intellectually that students must be taught, there are distinctive aspects of being dependable for others intellectually that students must be taught. These include the virtues of intellectual dependability. By teaching these we not only promote the various aims surveyed in this chapter, but we also foster in students the sorts of autonomy we should want to foster in them rather than hindering these. Most distinctively, we foster their ability to contribute to their generation’s collective intellectual autonomy.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has presented an argument for thinking that educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is justified. The argument should have broad appeal, because it aims to show that educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is conducive toward fulfilling a wide variety of commonly accepted educational aims. Moreover, I have sought to show that educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward achieving these aims without also being problematic in some other way. Specifically, I have sought to rebut a challenge to the justification of educating for intellectual dependability which maintains that educating for intellectual dependability violates students’ intellectual autonomy. Quite to the contrary, I have maintained that educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward fostering students’ autonomy—specifically, their collective autonomy—in addition to being conducive toward achieving the varied aims of education surveyed throughout this chapter. Many readers should therefore take educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability to be a justified aim of education.

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1. Against the homogeneity of epistemic aims, see (Cohen 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Surveys of what employers claim to be seeking from graduates tend to be reported at regular intervals in venues such as *Forbes.com* and *Insidehighered.com*, and recent examples of these confirm the claims made here. Another source confirming these claims comes from the National Association of Colleges and Employers survey on “career readiness”, which identifies all of the qualities listed here as among the top qualities sought by employers. The results of this survey are available at <https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)