Dispositions in education: Non-entities worth talking about

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Introduction: The challenge of dispositions

People, like objects generally, do only what they are able to do. This piece of trivia underscores the importance of teaching and acquiring skills and, thereby, enabling behavior which would otherwise be beyond us. But as any teacher knows only too well, while the skill is essential to the action, the former is no guarantee of the latter. In order to act – by which I mean “intentionally or deliberately do something” (which is something that mere objects cannot do) – we must be moved so to do, which is a question of attitude, not ability (or even knowledge). Never mind that both skills and attitudes may be strengthened as a result of the doing, as much as the other way around (witness the student who is persuaded to “have a go” at something and who, in time, develops both the skill and the inclination to do it well); it remains the case that we intentionally do only that which we are moved or motivated to do. It is convenient to classify all such references to attitude, motivation, inclination and desire, under the heading of dispositions.

In discussions of teaching and learning generally, and teacher education in particular, theorists and practitioners have responded to the challenge of articulating and defending the third and most elusive member of the well known trio: knowledge, skills (or competencies), and dispositions. In a recent paper, Ana Maria Villegas makes a persuasive case for colleges of education to attend to key dispositions such as those related to social justice, citing her own School’s achievements in this area. “Attend” refers here to ensuring that education students develop a critical awareness of the
dispositions, attitudes and beliefs that they hold – particularly relating to how they would respond in the classroom to children who differ from the mainstream – and also that appropriately rigorous methods of assessment of student dispositions are developed and implemented. Still, Villegas concludes by expressing her suspicion that “even doing all of this will not satisfy our critics. As I see it, beneath the surface of the dispositions debate is an all-out war to define the goals of public education, the role of teachers, the nature of knowledge, and conceptions of learning, teaching, and learning to teach.”

I share this bleak – albeit familiar – reading of public education as a political war zone, one on which the well-being of our children may well be at stake. I also agree that dispositions is one of those concepts (constructivism is another) around which the battle lines have, in recent times, been most vigorously drawn. Like Villegas, I believe that the conflict here is probably irreconcilable – tapping deep-seated differences about the nature of a democratic society and, in particular, differences to do with freedom and authority – but I also believe that we can, and must, say more about it. Notwithstanding some vulnerable aspects of the pro-dispositions case, those on the other side of the fence – the Critics of dispositions, as I shall refer to them (“Critics” for short; upper case intended) – are pushing an insidious agenda which warrants exposure.

I said that the battle lines have been vigorously drawn, but they have not been very clearly drawn. The literature in support of dispositions in education does include a number of detailed, empirically well-grounded studies in which a broad range of dispositions – including “intellectual” and “moral” or “social” dispositions – are identified, defended and operationalized. This growing body of literature provides one eloquent and pragmatic response to the Critics: “You continue to attack and we will continue to develop, implement, assess and report on ways to nudge our students – and ourselves – toward becoming better, more thoughtful, more caring, more just, teachers.” More power to them!
It would, however, be foolish to underestimate the power and influence of the Critics.

One recent article begins thus: “The cultural left has a new tool for enforcing political conformity in schools of education. It is called dispositions theory,...”; a second is headed “Return of the Thought Police?”. The central recurring objection appears to be that educators have no right to insist that their students be “certain kinds of people”, as determined by the beliefs, values and attitudes that they hold. Labels such as “mind control”, “group-think”, and “political correctness” are invoked here. It may well be true that renewed attention to dispositions (however they are to be understood) has received the stamp of approval from such weighty bodies as The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), but – the Critics would have it – so much the worse for those bodies.

The topic of dispositions may be just one battle-ground in a wider war, but it is a pivotal and representative one, because it has to do with a person’s moral and intellectual identity. More so than what someone knows, or is able to do, what she is disposed to do goes to the heart of the kind of person that she is. Hence the notion that one’s dispositions, taken together, constitute one’s character. When we describe someone as cruel or kind, thoughtful or thoughtless, open or closed-minded, etc., we are both building on, and anticipating, the kinds of beliefs, attitudes, desires and values that they have and that, in turn, play a key role in explaining why they say what they say and do what they do.

One key question, then, is whether or not anyone has both the capacity and the right to determine what kind of person someone else is and should be. More specifically, my interest here is with teachers and students, including – as a special case – teacher educators and teacher education students. If either capacity or right is rejected (i.e. either we cannot know or we have no right to inquire), then we are left, at best, with a right (assuming the capacity) to determine – and evaluate – what someone does. None
the less, as important as behavior is – being the ultimate litmus test by which evaluations are made – it is not all that matters in education; there is also – to coin a somewhat hackneyed phrase – *the life of the mind*.

Like all those engaged in this and other morally- and socially-loaded disputes in education, I cannot pretend neutrality on this issue. I support the presence of a strong dispositional dimension in the frameworks that guide both teachers and teacher educators, although – as I shall demonstrate below – a good deal of confusion on both sides – whether intended or not – has obscured the lines of argument. When the respective battle lines are clarified – one of my aims in this paper – it will become clear that the Critics are pushing a more insidious agenda, one that seeks to position measurable behavior front and center, at the expense of the mind (and its key activity, thinking). In this paper, I provide a framework for dispositions which cannot easily be dismissed. I draw on several well-known debates in the philosophy of mind and philosophy of science to argue that the Critics’ concerns about dispositions are misplaced, and that a proper understanding of their role in explaining why people behave as they do, confirms their crucial importance in education generally, and teacher education in particular.

The Critics have figured, astutely, that the attack on dispositions (and the broader war in which this is just one front) strikes a sympathetic chord with a populace easily seduced by issues of freedom, on the one hand, and measurable accountability, on the other. “Freedom” here is construed to be an unqualified right among adult members of the population – teacher candidates, for example – as freedom from interference and, accordingly, freedom to believe, value, think and feel pretty much whatever they choose to. Measurable accountability imposes a brake on freedom; specifically, on the freedom of teachers to make their own decisions about what (and perhaps how) to teach and assess. Ironically, however, in the minds of the Critics, the imperative of
accountability implies that teachers ought to be free to do those things which cannot be accounted for (measured objectively) – including believe, value, think and feel whatever they choose to. The result of this juxtaposition is, so one might think, a happy balance of freedom of mind and attitude, on the one hand, and significant constraints on action, on the other. But matters are not so simple. Indeed this alleged balance is deeply problematic because [descriptions of] our conscious, intentional and free behavior is necessarily and intrinsically, linked to [descriptions of] what we believe, feel and value. The link here is both intuitively and conceptually grounded. Freedom of action, in contrast to both compulsion and total randomness, goes hand in hand with our freedom to choose to act, wherein our (conscious) choices are, themselves, brought about by what we believe, feel and value. Further, the concepts of intentionality and explanation are highly language-sensitive. Indeed, descriptions of our desires, beliefs, attitudes, values and – ultimately – our inclinations and dispositions, may be all that we have by way of providing a coherent explanation of why we do what we [freely choose to] do. I shall return to this important point.

Consider some familiar classroom scenarios in which the mental – what someone believes, desires, feels, etc. – and the physical – how they behave or act – appear to interact. Carmen asks a question because she wants to know how to do something; Samuel asks lots of questions because he is often puzzled (or curious, or because he believes he will get a better grade by doing so); Frank gets up from his desk, asks his teacher for a pass to the restroom, and leaves the room; Esme, a teacher, verbally encourages a range of answers because she is open-minded; Robert, her colleague next door, does not ask Chin Lee to answer questions out loud because he believes that Chinese students are reluctant to commit themselves in public; Lizzie cries out in pain when she stubs her toe.
There are several ways to classify these descriptive examples. Carmen, Frank and Lizzie behave in a specific way at a specific time, but whereas Carmen and Frank do so because (as we would intuitively say) of specific beliefs, desires and intentions – which is why we call their actions intentional – Lizzie’s response to a physical event is more primitive. She does not intend or desire to cry out; it just “happens” as a result of nerves in her stubbed toe communicating with the pain center in her brain. Samuel, Esme and Robert engage in certain types of behavior as a result of underlying mental traits or characteristics. Just how and when Samuel asks his questions is not specified; but we know he does ask questions (each of which will take place at a given time) and we know, in general terms, why he does. These more general, or higher-order actions are (again, as we would intuitively say) causally linked to the dispositional traits of curiosity, openness-mindedness, sensitivity, etc.

If, as seems appropriate, we separate out the unintended stubbed-toe scenario from the others, then we are conceding that our conscious mental states – beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. – play a causally explanatory role in how and why we behave. Granted, we human persons are also physical entities, subject to the same laws of science and causality as other material objects, whether animate or not. All such objects may be said to behave, in the sense of physically responding to whatever is acting upon them, in accordance with their own characteristics and “abilities” (a vase will shatter when dropped onto a concrete floor, but a plastic cup will not). However, as noted earlier, persons, uniquely among material objects, also behave in another sense, namely they are agents, whose intentions, beliefs, desires, convictions and values may also be said to cause things to happen. When referring to education, it is vitally important that we mark the distinction between behavior and agency; teachers and students are not mere objects that behave thus and so in certain situations; they are persons, whose behavior is, by and large, intentional, voluntary, and subject to moral evaluation as good or bad,
right or wrong, effective, appropriate, etc. To omit this notion of intentionality from an analysis of human behavior would be to tell a story in which education has no place. Those who believe that some form of education is both possible and desirable must also believe that both our own and our students’ minds – what we might call our inner lives – are key ingredients in this process. We don’t seek to educate rocks, flowers or butterflies. Why not? Because, in being literally mindless, they are not open to being educated in any form. Further, all but the most hard-line behaviorist is bound to concede not only that our behavior – or, at least, that part of our behavior which is deliberate or intentional – is intimately linked to what goes on in our minds, but that if successful behavior (in terms of doing well in tests, being a good citizen, getting a good job, or whatever) is our aim, then having an impact on the minds of others is both necessary and extremely desirable.

A real-life example will highlight the moral and political dimensions at play here. A presenter at a recent conference on educator dispositions described a case in which a self-confessed Nazi sympathizer was admitted to a teacher education program in a public college in the USA. Simple revulsion might have caused this person to have been rejected out of hand, except that his views (including his associated attitudes and beliefs about race, Jews, homosexuals, etc.) did not become clear until well into his course of study. Given that he was doing good work in all his required courses, assignments and field-work, the issue of how to respond to his own admissions and displays of Nazism was, understandably, a difficult one. The candidate argued, in defense of being allowed to stay in the program, that his own “personal” convictions were irrelevant to his capacity to teach. On the assumption that the knowledge, skills and behavior used to assess this capacity are objectively determined, taught and assessed, why not just stick to these dimensions, and rule that the rest is of a piece with matters of taste and personal preference: distasteful at worst, but irrelevant to the task at hand?
Similar – if less extreme – scenarios have played out in a number of campuses – and courtrooms – around the country in recent times. The common thread, as it has usually been reported by dispositional Critics, is an intransigent school of education insisting on the acceptance of certain core values and dispositions such as a commitment to social justice, multiculturalism, and equity, on the one hand, and prospective teachers who invoke their (constitutionally-guaranteed) rights to keep to themselves their own beliefs, attitudes and values about such issues, on the other. xi At a policy level, the move, by organizations such as NCATE, to add “dispositions” to the traditional categories of “knowledge” and “skills/abilities” encouraged – some would say compelled – many Schools of Education, not only to include reference to dispositions (both generally and specifically) in their “Conceptual Frameworks”, but to develop clear formulations for the “teaching” and assessment of these conceptually elusive entities. In response, several pressure groups have attempted to reduce the influence of NCATE, particularly in relation to what they saw as the imposition of dispositions relating to social justice. xii

As I see it, the prospect of restoring dispositions to a position of prominence in education depends on finding a coherent framework for defining, identifying and describing dispositions which:

- avoids the extremes of a murky subjectivism, on the one hand, and a crude behaviorism, on the other
- acknowledges that the behavior in which we are interested is the result of decisions and choices freely and intentionally made
- leaves room for a robust dialogue about which specific dispositions and values are appropriate to specific contexts.

Back to first principles: Defining dispositions: What they are and what they are not

When we speak of dispositions, of what, precisely, do we speak? Both our intuitive understanding and recent literature locate the term “disposition” in a family of like terms
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including “tendency”, “pattern”, “motivation”, “inclination”, “temperament”, “trend”, “nature”, “potential”, “power”, “passion”, “commitment”, “ability”, “skill”, “habit” “habit of mind”, “trait”, “characteristic”, “character”, “belief”, “knowledge”, “attitude”, “desire”, “passion”, “drive”, “value”, “ethics”, “sensibility”, “sensitivity”, “virtue”, “vice”. The crucial question of definition – exactly what dispositions are or, as I prefer to put it (for reasons to be explained below), what we mean when we use the term “dispositions”, or refer to specific dispositions – is often glossed over by deferring to one of the terms in this vocabulary. Thus, dispositions are defined as “ongoing tendencies that guide intellectual behavior”; “people’s tendencies to put their capabilities into action”; “tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs”; “characteristics that animate, motivate and direct our abilities toward good and productive thinking and are recognized in the patterns of our frequently exhibited, voluntary behavior”; “the values, commitments and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, …guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values…”, “habits that render our action (conduct) intelligent”; “an attributed characteristic of a teacher, one that summarizes the trend of a teacher’s actions in particular contexts”; “summary of actions observed”; “the professional virtues, qualities, and habits of mind and behavior held and developed by teachers…”; “pattern of behavior exhibited frequently and in the absence of coercion, and constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control, and that is intentional and oriented to broad goals”; “intellectual and emotional investments in events, situations, and people”. Regardless of whether we think such paraphrases are correct or not, they are not, by themselves, conceptually very helpful, being semantic variations on defining dispositions as whatever it is that disposes us to action! Might we not hope for something more illuminating? Yes and no, as it turns out.
Where some discussions in the education literature focus on the question of definition, others move rather quickly to a defense of specific dispositions (such as a commitment to social justice), their cultivation and assessment. Irrespective of the merits of this move, it can be – and has been – seen as both politically inflammatory and morally dubious. It opens the door for the Critics to jump in with accusations of liberal bias, brainwashing, and so on. They are surely right to criticize instructors who insist that their students accept morally contentious commitments simply because their school or college has embraced them. Since this paper is, in the final analysis, a defense of dispositions in the context of teacher education, I shall return to this point to explain how instructors might proceed more judiciously here.

**Dispositions: physical, mental, or ?**

It is a commonplace that we human beings have both physical and mental (psychological) traits/characteristics. We say of one and the same person that she is tall, blonde, overweight, creative, curious, patient, kind, etc. If, as seems innocuous enough, we view such traits as properties of existing objects of some kind, it is tempting to infer that the physical properties “belong to” a physical entity – the body (and/or the brain) – while the mental ones belong to a mental entity – the mind. Naïve dualism remains the *de facto* intuitive view of persons. The problem, philosophically, is that such intuition does not stand up to rigorous conceptual analysis, and there is no better vantage point from which to view where things have gone amiss, than dispositions themselves.

Naïve dualism would posit dispositions as either physical or mental entities of some kind. If the former, then two types of candidate present themselves: those which are the objects of scientific theorizing (neurons, genes, atoms,…), and those macroscopic events with which all dispositions are necessarily connected, viz. observable behavior. Pinning one’s hopes on the former is a form of reductionism, according to which such terms as “solubility”, “open-mindedness” and “kindness” are place-holders for micro-level
causal sequences which may or may not be known. But apart from the fact that it is
difficult to envisage how such knowledge – were it to exist – could be helpful to
educators trying to inculcate, identify or understand their own and their students’
intellectual and moral dispositions, such a reductionist thesis relies on the existence of
law-like (nomological) or causal regularities that correlate surface-level descriptions of
dispositions with micro-level descriptions of particles. As we shall see, any faith that we
might uncover the existence of such regularities in the case of persons and their
dispositions is misplaced.

The idea that dispositions are to be understood in terms of – i.e. are reducible to – actual
behavior, however tempting, should also be resisted. I say that this idea is tempting
because I agree with Ritchhart and others who insist that personal dispositions – in
contrast to the dispositional abilities of inanimate substances like sugar and glass – must
be manifested, at least some of the time, in appropriate behavior or action. The
fragile vase may never shatter, but the intellectually curious student must, at least
sometimes, ask questions, look puzzled, persist after others have given up, etc. I shall
shortly explain this difference in terms of the different roles that ability and dispositional
ascriptions play in causal explanations, but in any case, dispositional and behavioral
ascriptions are not equivalent because such an equivalence would eliminate all
reference to agency and intentionality, the very subjective characteristics (among others)
that render human persons different from mere objects. Dispositional Critics
notwithstanding, this difference must be preserved in the context of education, at least.
Those who defend dispositions as having an important place in teacher education (in
initial registration interviews and accreditation, for example) should argue for both less
and more than the display of appropriate behaviors. Less, because they may well need
to make judgments about the dispositions of candidates in anticipation of that behavior
(in a pre-admission interview, for example); more, because they will be looking for
evidence that candidates have a real understanding of dispositions (in general and in particular), their place in effective teaching, and the importance of such concepts as intentionality (both in themselves and in their own, future, students). Still, the importance of the interview scenario serves to remind us that the behavior of candidates in an interview – particularly what they say – can and should also be taken into account. I shall return to this point.

I have argued against construing dispositions as physical entities. The case against construing dispositions as mental entities is a consequence of the following thesis: that there are no mental entities at all. Beliefs, desires, hopes, fears – and dispositions – qua types or categories in the world of objects, do not exist. Ontologically speaking, the scientists are right: the physical world is all there is.\textsuperscript{xxix}

The thesis to which I subscribe is not physicalism or materialism \textit{per se}, but what has been termed “non reductive physicalism” or “\textit{Anomalous Monism}” (AM). Famously propounded by Donald Davidson, AM makes two key claims: that there are not two kinds of entity – physical and mental – but only one (the physical kind) – this is the physicalist or “monism” part – and that there are no “law-like” connections or regularities between kinds or types of mental states and events (belief, desire, intention, …), and the kinds or types of physical events and states that we like to associate with them – this is the non reductive or “anomalous” part.\textsuperscript{xxx} The easiest way to see how these two claims work together is by virtue of two distinctions: between “type” (higher level, abstract) and “token” (first level, concrete) events, and between things in the world and the language we use to describe or refer to them. My desire to get up right now and stretch could be called a token event because it is a one-off event that occurs at a particular time. But my general desire to eat when I am hungry and, \textit{a fortiori}, desire itself, are type events (or states) which are abstractions from the tokens (compare the chair I am sitting on right now with what we mean by “chair”). AM asserts that mental tokens are actually
(equivalent to) physical ones – since all existing tokens are physical ones. When I attribute a specific token event such as my desire to stretch, as (part of) the cause of a token physical event (my getting up and stretching), it follows that such causality takes place within the physical (or extensional) realm – which is just as well, since (according to the materialist) there is no other realm in which causality could operate. The token desire, then, must be a token physical event (no doubt involving the brain) and the relevant causal story will be one that connects such events to physical action (via neural pathways, nerves and muscles, etc.). However, the language of causal explanation is not thereby reducible to purely physical terms, which is another way of saying that where actual objects and events exist extensionally (in the actual, physical world), explanations and the meanings of mental terms such as “desire” are intensional: as type-level terms, they do not refer to or describe actual entities outside of language.

Where, then, does this leave dispositions, ontologically speaking? The answer, as for all mental or subjective states and entities, is: “nowhere”. Open mindedness, curiosity and intellectual persistence are neither mental entities nor physical events which play some kind of mysterious causal role in our intentional behavior. Indeed, irrespective of the causal mechanisms involved in specific sequences of events and actions, the way we understand intentionality – including the impact of dispositions on our mental and physical lives (i.e. on our beliefs and desires, and on our behavior) is, fundamentally, semantic or linguistic. This gives discourse a special place in the articulation of dispositions: a point of the utmost importance in education.

Accordingly, we need to distinguish between the questions “What are dispositions?” and “How are we to understand or explain dispositional terms or attributions?” If, as I hold, there is no class of entities to serve as answer to the former, the latter takes prominence as an issue of semantics or conceptual analysis, rather than one of extension or reference. We can, and should, restrict our investigation to the question of what we
mean when we ascribe dispositions to persons as intentional agents. Of course it does not follow that we cannot speak of dispositions, but note the emphasis on speak here. Like many linguistic terms and phrases, including metaphors and fictional nouns such as “unicorn”, how we understand dispositional attributions does not reduce to the existential question of what dispositions actually are.

An important corollary of AM emerges when we consider that terms for mental states can neither have referent power in their own right, nor be reducible to other terms – physical, for example – which have such power. This gives rise to the thesis known as Holism of the Mental (HM), also articulated by Davidson, according to which our best characterizations of mental states and events – including dispositions – will be in terms of like states and events. Consider, for example, the disposition of open-mindedness which characterizes some thinkers but not others. Upon investigation, it may turn out that these two groups are divided by certain core beliefs and desires (that genuine truth cannot be claimed unless multiple perspectives are considered, etc.), or by such tendencies as having a propensity to take more than one perspective into account. But in either case, we are bound to go on using such terms as belief, desire, tendency to…, in explicating what we mean by open-mindedness. Accepting HM strengthens the claim that our understanding of dispositions is intrinsically tied up with the language we use to explicate them.

Dispositions, beliefs, desires and values.

What, precisely, is the connection between dispositions and mental states/events such as beliefs and desires? Describing someone as intellectually curious tells us very little about her mental state at any given moment, other than implying that in certain kinds of situations, she is likely to be moved to ask questions, express puzzlement, etc. “Being moved” here means roughly: “to have desires, beliefs and intentions to act in certain ways”. It is only when we refer to these mental states and actions – or, rather, to the
token states and actions which are the true referents of mental terms – that we can even begin to talk about a causal chain resulting in certain actions.

One way to distinguish deep-seated states (including dispositions) from those that function, at specific times, to bring about specific behaviors, is to note that the former are not manifested in single behavioral acts. I agree with McKnight that such acts might be reflective of no particular disposition, or even of a disposition that would normally induce a quite different response: “If I get upset with my child for knocking over the orange juice, when normally I would not, then the emotion and frame of mind is [sic!] not connected to any disposition.” xxxiv McKnight claims that dispositional states have to be recurring, although I would prefer to say that they are enduring over time (albeit not necessarily for all time!), and that a disposition such as kindness toward one’s children or intellectual curiosity is associated with emotional and cognitive triggers that are recurring. In any case, as I remarked earlier, however abstract (because non physical) our conceptions of specific intentional states (such as beliefs and desires that occur at a particular time) may be, dispositions operate at a still-higher level of abstraction.

The relationship between dispositions and values depends very much on how we construe the latter. Values, like dispositions, bridge the cognitive/affective divide: a point worth keeping in mind throughout this discussion. To have a value, I suggest, is to care to the point of commitment, but to do so mindfully and reflectively (which includes a readiness to change one’s mind for appropriately sound reasons). On this account, the person who insists that as long as he feels strongly about something, it counts as a value irrespective of his capacity – or desire – to justify or review it – is confusing values with dogmas, biases and other more primitive traits.xxxv Furthermore, values have a dispositional component: it would seem arbitrary to declare that freedom and justice are values in the absence of a commitment to act thus and so in appropriate circumstances (although we do not say that freedom and justice are, themselves, personal dispositions).
Conversely, dispositions are value-laden. I am thinking here, not just of such moral dispositions as courage, kindness and the like, but of those which would normally be described as intellectual or cognitive, such as curiosity, perseverance, open-mindedness, etc. Notwithstanding Ritchhart’s deliberate attempt to restrict his treatment of dispositions to the latter – perhaps hoping to avoid some of the more heated reactions from those who would argue that schools have no business in values education per se – he would, presumably, defend such intellectual habits of mind as (morally) worthy of being cultivated and exemplified. In any case, the literature on teacher educator dispositions includes some forceful calls for construing their development as "a process of moral education", in the words of one author.

Dispositions and habits

Further distinguishing marks of dispositions become clear when we consider the relationship between dispositions and habits, a connection which, as previously noted, goes back to Aristotle. Granted, there is something habitual about our dispositions – the familiar phrase “habits of mind” suggests mental drivers that operate just below the level of ordinary consciousness – but if ordinary language is a reliable guide, habitual behavior is typically conditioned and unintended, and not accompanied by the kinds of beliefs and desires that signify dispositional behavior. There are what we refer to as “blind habits” but there are no blind dispositions. Consider two examples which bring out this difference. I might have a tendency toward falling asleep in class, and another tendency toward irritability. If the latter deserves to be classified as dispositional but the former does not, is it not because my irritable behavior is under my conscious control in a way that my falling asleep is not? The issue here is, in part, terminological. Ritchhart, while more focused on teacher practice than theory, concurs with the distinction between dispositions and habits, describing the latter in terms of a "mindless and automatic response that is not readily
controllable...[while] dispositions represent a consciously controllable response rather than a completely unconscious or automatic response". bulky Further, Ritchhart and Freeman point out that while habits are typically associated with specific and isolated behaviors (falling asleep in class, biting one’s nails, shaking hands when being introduced to someone,…), dispositions are broader in terms of the behaviors they manifest. This seems right, reflecting the notion that dispositional ascriptions are more abstract and deep-seated than ascriptions for habits, beliefs and desires. bulky

Dispositions and abilities

Ritchhart, along with fellow Harvard colleagues David Perkins et al, have proposed that we treat thinking – in the context of pedagogy – in terms of several related, but distinct dispositional components (four in the case of Ritchhart, three for Perkins). The original theory referred to three components: ability (so that we have the skills and capacities to think in particular ways – reason, question, hypothesize, wonder, etc.), inclination (so that we are moved to think – this was the strictly dispositional component), and sensitivity (awareness or alertness to context, so that we apply skills appropriate to the occasion). In his later work, Ritchhart provided his own modification of this account by splitting inclination into two dispositional sub-components: inclination (understood, broadly, in the original sense) and motivation (the more specific factors which trigger a response in particular situations). Highlighting the difference between ability and inclination/motivation is both conceptually and pragmatically helpful although writers appear often to have overlooked it.

Tishman et al offer a simple but revealing illustration of the distinction between abilities and dispositions by citing the following questions: “Can he swim?” and “Does he swim?” While the first question focuses on ability, it is the second question that signals the disposition or inclination to swim, intuitively captured by responding “Yes, he is a
swimmer”. Still, the disposition alone will not result in the act, and this is where the first question becomes important: he will swim only if he is both disposed and able to.\textsuperscript{xlvii}

Notwithstanding the inclusion of “ability” in the general vocabulary of dispositions, there is a chasm between the ability and the action, and the disposition – or lack thereof – is the crucial part of the bridge between them.

In philosophical treatments of dispositions, psychological dispositions have, by and large, been subsumed under the more general classification of physical dispositions such as solubility and fragility. However, it is my contention that dispositions such as intellectual curiosity and fairmindedness are different in kind from solubility, fragility and the like. The reason is that the latter are abilities, strictly speaking. In this sense inanimate objects do not have dispositions – or, if you prefer, their dispositions are their abilities simpliciter.

Sugar and vases do not have inclinations or motivations. No matter how hard it tries, a vase cannot believe it will shatter, cannot learn to fall off my desk, nor be motivated to do so.\textsuperscript{xlvii}

Given the predominant philosophical focus on dispositions, which elides the distinction between abilities and dispositions proper, it is worth examining this focus in a little more detail to see what, if anything, can be drawn from it in the present context. Much of the philosophical literature on dispositions has focused on the tell-tale conditional component that properties such as solubility have. Consider such simple statements as “Sugar is soluble” and “This vase is fragile”. I take it that these statements are not semantically equivalent either to statements about the (chemical or physical) structure of the objects involved, or to simple behavioral ascriptions such as “The sugar dissolves” and “The vase shatters”.\textsuperscript{xlviii} What seems undeniable, however, is that when we make a “dispositional” claim, we have in mind a conditional statement (roughly) of the form “If/when the object in question is (or were to be) subject to condition C (placed in water, dropped to the floor), it will (would) behave thus and so (dissolve or shatter), thereby
Stephen Mumford has offered the most comprehensive philosophical analysis of (so called) dispositions and dispositional statements. Mumford concedes that dispositional statements are underpinned, in some sense, by conditionals, but has proposed a number of refinements necessitated by problems with that view. He argues that the essential core of their meaning is captured in functionalist terms, as follows: To say that something has a dispositional property (solubility or fragility, for example) is to say that in certain circumstances, that thing will behave in characteristic ways (dissolve or shatter) when an appropriate trigger event occurs (placing sugar in water, dropping the vase from a suitable height). Notice that in this formulation, we are not particularly interested in the structure of the object which is said to possess the dispositional property in question. No doubt for any known substance, science can give a causal-explanatory account of its solubility or fragility (or lack thereof) by appealing to structural features of that substance, but these structural features are less significant to our understanding of the dispositional concept, than the idea that under appropriate conditions, a dissolving or shattering event will occur. Literally any substance that dissolves or shatters in such circumstances, can be described as soluble or fragile, irrespective of its structure. When it comes to making sense of such “dispositional” ascriptions, the details of the underlying causality recede into the background.

The conditionality of ability

Where “C” stands for appropriate background conditions (environment or context), “T” for the causal trigger, and “B” for the resultant behavior, substance dispositions (that is, dispositional ascriptions or, more accurately, ability ascriptions) such as solubility and fragility are grounded in terms of the following formula:
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(A) $C \rightarrow (T \rightarrow B)$, where "→" represents the appropriate form of causal/subjunctive implication. Informally, (A) asserts that under certain background conditions, were (e.g.) the vase to be dropped, then it would shatter. Notice that there are actually two conditionals operating here, representing the fact that the dispositional behavior $B$ depends upon both the trigger event $T$ (dropping the vase) and appropriate background conditions. Both $T$ and $C$ are necessary conditions of $B$: the vase that is not dropped will not shatter, and the vase that is dropped on the moon or into water won’t either (ceteris paribus).

Persons: their abilities and dispositions

How does the analysis reflected in (A) work in the realm of personal dispositions such as intellectual curiosity? The answer to this question is in two parts. First, (A) captures the conditionality that is inherent in our understanding of the abilities and skills behind specific actions. Secondly, (A) shows us how dispositional and other mental ascriptions figure in that understanding, namely, as the psychological triggers of intentional behavior.

To see this, we need, first, to be clear about what count as referents for "C", "T" and "B" in cases of intentional behavior. The last of these is relatively straightforward: it is the actual observed behavior or action that we associate with the disposition in question: a student raises his hand to ask questions (and then asks them), has a thoughtful or puzzled expression during class discussions, asserts that he has changed his mind because of what another student said, produces a counter-example, insists and persists (verbally or otherwise) when other students have given up, etc. Notice that even here, the language employed to describe such behavior is often strongly intentional. As Strawson points out, many of the behavioral predicates we ascribe to persons – including the concept of person itself – make sense only within a conceptual framework from which non-persons are excluded (a kind of “holism of persons”). Accordingly, these predicates cannot be understood in purely physical or materialistic terms.
Regarding “C”, while conceding that we probably cannot identify or list all the relevant background features, we do know about some fairly important ones: a context in which problems and puzzles arise (rather than one in which everything is presented as straightforward); a teacher who exhibits and encourages curiosity and open-minded behavior; peers who welcome and support such behavior (as opposed to those who label anyone a “nerd” or “geek” if they dare to ask a question or come up with something original); time and space to dwell on intriguing issues and “dig deeper”, etc. For now, let’s agree that “C” pick up all such conditions and features as are relevant in a particular case.

Finally, then, what of “T”, the causal trigger; the psychological analogue of pushing the vase off the desk or immersing sugar in water? Here, I maintain, “T” is a place-holder for the relevant “mental (ultimately, physical) state(s)” of the agent (i.e. whatever makes the conditional true,). “T” captures those values, attitudes, traits, beliefs, needs, interests, desires and intentions whose descriptions are an essential component of the explanation of the action in question. I want to ask a question (and am not afraid to do so), so I raise my hand (perhaps because I believe that this is the proper thing to do); I am provoked by an earlier comment to object, so I speak up, and so on. Taken together, and comprising a network of inter-related concepts and descriptions, these elements come to be summarized as one or more dispositions.

As in the case of inanimate substances, the conditional formula underpinning dispositional behavior still holds for intentional action, because it represents what is, after all, the common element in all such situations, namely, the requisite ability. Here is the proper explanation of the apparent discrepancy between abilities and dispositions which was noted earlier: abilities – represented by conditionals (so I am assuming) – do not, by themselves, lead to behavior or action, unless the antecedent – i.e. the combination of appropriate background conditions and trigger – is, independently,
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satisfied. Just as the fragile vase may never shatter, so too the student who knows how to ask questions, may never actually do so. By contrast, claim Ritchhart and several other writers, psychological dispositions must, at least some of the time, be accompanied by appropriate behavior. The reason, I suggest, is that when our attention is focused on dispositions, we tend to take the requisite abilities for granted -- the latter being both more conceptually transparent and more amenable to being taught or cultivated, than the former. The semantic distinction here might also be made by pointing out that where abilities are linked directly to one or more conditionals, conceptually speaking -- and, hence, to behavior only as the potential consequent of the conditional -- dispositions are linked directly to behavior, conceptually speaking (i.e. in terms of how we understand dispositional terms and vocabulary). Nevertheless, this asymmetry should not obscure the practical reality that both abilities and dispositions are necessary (and, assuming the relevant background conditions, jointly sufficient) conditions for action.

I have argued that our conceptual understanding of dispositional terms and ascriptions involves a categorical shift away from ontology and the "realm of the mental", toward a semantic or linguistic framework in which discourse about dispositions -- and, perhaps, psychological elements generally -- must necessarily be (1) irreducibly mentalistic or psychological, (2) value-laden, and (3) inclusive of descriptions of those actions which constitute dispositional behavior. As we switch back to the context of education, the question before us is: "What are the implications of this more nuanced conceptual account of dispositions for pedagogy in general, and for teacher education in particular?"

"Teaching" dispositions

The task of cultivating dispositions in one's students is as familiar as it is both challenging and controversial. Underlying the practical issues associated with motivation and promoting such specific qualities as honesty, open-mindedness, and a commitment
to fairness, in students – issues which I shall not address in any detail here – is a deeper challenge which must be faced: how is it even possible to impact directly on the “inner lives” of others? I believe that an appropriate response to this conceptual, epistemological challenge will lead to a better understanding of practice, as well as to a more forceful response to the dispositional Critics.

To take seriously the non-behaviorist form of materialism known as Anomalous Monism (or non-reductive physicalism) is to accept that the terms and descriptions we naturally use to “refer to” our mental lives cannot be interpreted as literally referential. All such talk might be considered as part of a Wittgensteinian “language game”, rich with metaphors and analogies, but nevertheless an activity which invites – indeed, demands – careful analysis and reflection. Paraphrasing a point made earlier, while (token) reference to the (physical) world underpins our psychological assertions, it is meaning (intension) rather than reference (extension) which gives them coherence. This is good news for educators who hold, as I do, that the goal of enhancing meaningfulness and understanding is more important (from the perspective of both students and teachers) than that of learning ever-increasing amounts of content wrapped up under the term “knowledge”. In this context, we are not called upon to abandon the idea of the inner life even though there is no such subjective entity, literally speaking. Instead, the question becomes “How might a semantic or conceptual interpretation of the inner life impact on teaching and learning?”

In my analysis of the concept disposition, the key elements of behavior and language are central, with the latter providing an essential framework, both for describing – indeed referring to – the former, and for linking it to our so-called mental states and attitudes. The significance of this semantic framework for dispositions in education may be summarized as follows:
• The central place of dispositions as the triggers of our intentional and relatively stable behavior is preserved by and represented in the language we use to describe/refer to (1) the relevant behavior, (2) the mental/emotional elements which trigger the behavior, and (3) the underlying conditionals in which the triggers – along with appropriate background conditions – function as antecedent and the behavior functions as consequent. Becoming familiar with these linguistic descriptors is one step that students (including teacher candidates) can take toward asserting control over their intentional behavior.

• The distinction between what someone is able to do and what someone is moved to do is also well-captured by this linguistic framework. Students can undertake the often-complex task of determining the reasons behind a lack of action in a given situation, e.g. they may not know how to act, they may not want to act, they may not see the point of acting or realize the opportunity to act, etc. A common strategy here will be to “work backward” from behavior (whether actual or imagined, their own or that of others) to uncover the underlying triggers.

• The language employed in thinking about and reflecting on our dispositional behavior (or its absence) is prescriptive or evaluative, since we need to make judgments about the adequacy, suitability and relevance of both what we do and why we (should or should not) do it.

• In practice, teachers need to invite students to participate in ongoing, conceptually-rich, and deeply reflective conversations (i.e. dialogue) about all these elements and their inter-connections. 5 year olds, 15 year olds and student teachers can and should discuss – albeit in contextually appropriate ways – why they should be honest, or open-minded, or consistent in their views, and so on. Further, the last-mentioned group, who are learning to be effective teachers, can and should discuss the challenge of motivation in the classroom (and, more generally, how to identify
and cultivate in students the dispositions, values and commitments that they deem to be important), and their obligations and commitments as professionals vis-à-vis such broad social principles as social justice and freedom.

- Having argued for many years that classrooms should be reconstructed as *inquiring communities* in which *dialogue* among and between students is seen as a public, collaborative form of *thinking*, I want now to claim, in addition, that the topic of dispositions and the conceptual framework which accompanies it (and which I have tried to articulate in this paper) should become a key topic in the conversational repertoire of all classrooms, but particularly in those engaged in teacher preparation.\textsuperscript{ix}

- Dialogue is both reflective and productive of our inner lives. We use it to articulate our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires, intentions, hopes, dreams, etc., but, in turn, dialogue also shapes these elements in often unpredictable ways. In stressing this interdependence, I am rejecting the traditional view that dialogue and conversation, as expressions of literacy, function solely as external communicators of (inner, private, subjective) thought.\textsuperscript{vi} To engage in dialogue is to *listen* (and *read*) as much as it is to speak (or write, dramatize, etc.). Changing one’s own mind (also called “self-corrective thinking”) is an important indicator of dialogical involvement, one with a strongly dispositional element of its own.

- The central role of dialogue in the process of working out *who we are* (as persons, but also as professionals, as learners, etc.) is a common thread through many ages, cultures and traditions.\textsuperscript{xii} This life-long project, which intertwines the life of each individual with the lives of those around her, is also a search for *meaning*, not in the sense of hoping for some kind of holy grail (*the* meaning of life) but, rather, in the sense of (striving for) *connectedness* and *wholeness* (i.e. *integrity*). Here, then, is a crucial link back to the concept of *dispositions* which, as remarked earlier, may be
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seen as the hallmarks of the kind of person each of us is. Embedding our
dispositions within the socio-linguistic framework of dialogue supports a relational
and integrated view of character formation which offers a timely alternative to the
“disconnectedness” that pervades so much of our lives.iii

- The controversy over the inclusion of dispositions in teacher educator frameworks
(e.g. NCATE) may now be viewed in sharper terms than those suggested at the
start of the paper. For one thing, while the Critics’ rejection of dispositions
represents one side here, several influential voices on the pro-dispositions side are
opposed to treating dispositions as “add-ons” to knowledge and skills, as mandated
by NCATE. As Sockett explains, accepting that dispositions have a place in teacher
education requires a major shift in focus from the “list of outcomes/competencies”
approach; it compels us to put front and centre the teacher as person and to place
being a certain kind of person at the very heart of what it is that society demands of
its educators.iv

I return now to this important and revealing socio-political controversy where, I claim, a
way forward may be found by embedding consideration of educator and personal
dispositions within a dialogical framework.

Dispositions and dialogue in teacher education: Treating teachers as professionals

It is a common-place that novices to a profession bring with them an entrenched and
complex network of beliefs, attitudes, interests, commitments, skills and abilities,
background knowledge, dispositions and – some would add – values.v Some aspects of
this network relate specifically to the profession itself. After all, we hope that aspiring
teachers hold positive attitudes with respect to these aspirations (that good teaching
makes a difference, that all children are capable of learning, etc.). Other components,
regardless of their general significance beyond the classroom, might be less relevant to
their professional calling, being either redundant or characteristics of all “decent”
persons. In any case, the Critics of dispositions would deem all such personal characteristics as "off-limits" to those charged with training and evaluating teacher candidates, and insist that only (objective, measurable) behavior – written work, supervised practice, etc. – be open to scrutiny.
I have argued that this view is conceptually incoherent because it fails to distinguish action (which is intentional, purposeful and – one hopes – the outcomes of one’s professional judgment) from mere behavior. It reflects a deeply conservative mindset of teachers as mere technicians whose work can be summed up by the old battle-cry: lxvi
Their not to make reply
Their not to reason why
Their but to do and die lxvii
How, then, to respond to the real-life cases cited at the beginning of the paper, in which – so the portrayal goes – seemingly intransigent colleges and schools of education are pitted against a small but vocal minority of teacher candidates who object to being instructed that they must be committed to (i.e. acquire dispositions related to) such morally and politically loaded ideals as social justice? That there is something important missing from the framework of this debate may be inferred from the realization that both sides are at fault for what is, ironically, the same reason. The Critics who side with these maverick candidates are guilty of denying the role of intentionality and severing behavior from its cognitive and affective drivers, by relying upon a simplistic and ultimately empty notion of freedom; their opponents are guilty of an authoritarian approach to contentious moral and social questions. The common thread here is the absence of thought – the notion that teachers, as professionals, should be required to think deeply about their values and dispositions including, I need hardly add, the implications of these deeply-embedded traits for how they might behave as teachers.
According to the conceptual analysis of dispositions proposed in this paper, reference to the cognitive elements of thought and deep thinking do not need to – indeed, cannot – take us down the subjective path of private thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, a path which invites ambush by the Critics who see it as an unjustified violation of individual freedom. Instead, such reference takes us into language, and the public, rule-governed domain of *dialogue* – that form of reflective behavior which comes closest to thinking – where we might hope to find, in a teacher education classroom, a conversation like the following:

Course instructor: As professionals seeking teacher certification, you will be asked to think carefully about how you would respond to certain sensitive situations – for example, an African-American student refuses to speak “White English”; a fellow teacher at your school wants to offer classes for adolescents on teenage pregnancy, contraception, abortion and sexuality; a parent complains that you are undermining his child’s sense of patriotism by taking a “warts and all” approach to the teaching of American history, whereas a Native American student protests that her history text book is biased in favor of White settlers; a child with same-sex parents is being bullied by other students who, in turn, are punished for their “heterosexism”;….What do you think?

Student 1: You mean, what do we think about these issues, or about the whole idea of having to think about them?

CI: Fair question. You decide.

S1: Well, I come from a fairly conservative tradition and I don’t see what my moral beliefs and values have to do with being a good teacher.

S2: Right. I happen to believe that kids should have a mother and a father; what’s wrong with that?
(*)CI: OK, let's consider S2's comment more closely. I am interested to know what other students think about this, but even more importantly, I want to ask if his viewpoint is – or might be – relevant in a classroom or teaching situation?

S2: I plan to teach math and science, so I don’t see the relevance actually. (Several nods of agreement, including from S1, but also puzzled expressions on several students' faces; CI prompts one from the latter group to speak up):

S3: But, say you have this kid in your math class who does have two moms, or two dads. Won’t he feel bad that you don’t approve of his family?

S1: But S2’s point is that whatever he feels about it is not going to come up in his classroom because it has nothing to do with math.

S3: Maybe it won’t come up in the actual classroom but S2 will probably know about that kid because we are supposed to know about stuff like family situations. So that might lead to some kind of discrimination when he is grading an assignment or something.

S2: That wouldn’t happen because I am a professional teacher, so I know how to keep my own feelings and values separate from my job.

S4: Well, maybe in math you can get away with that, but how about in English or Social Studies? Could you still keep your prejudices separate there?

CI (sensing a rise in the emotional temperature): Let’s be careful how we use words like “prejudice”, although S4’s question seems a fair one to ask, maybe with some rephrasing. But before getting back to that, let me draw something to your attention: as a matter of government policy, public school teachers are required to treat all students equally in terms of their family backgrounds.

S1: Yeah, but isn’t it also a policy of this College that different opinions should be respected? I don’t see how I’m being respected in this situation.
S3: Hey, we are respecting each other, at least in this class. Anyway, my worry about
that kid with same-sex parents has nothing to do with government policy; I just
think that he should be respected too! And I don’t think it’s possible to disconnect
our deeply-held convictions or values about families, society, culture, etc. from
what we say and do in our classrooms.

CI: OK, let’s take a step back and review what’s going on here….

Notice that quite early in this discussion – indeed, as a way of cutting it off at the knees –
the course instructor at (*) above might simply have asserted: “Well, I’m sorry, but your
(S2’s) view is not consistent with college policy on this issue; you will need to change it
or, at the very least, make sure that it does not surface in any of your assignments or
field work.” In this alternative scenario, the choices offered by the instructor happen to
reflect the authoritarian and Critics’ perspectives, respectively, but they are both, and
equally, inadequate. I am not saying that the above dialogue represents the only viable
option, but by opening up the issue in the college classroom, the instructor demonstrates
that she intends to treat her students as professionals able, indeed required, to think for
themselves. Of course, much depends here on the affective and social dynamics
generated by such a discussion. Genuine dialogue is compromised, if not sabotaged,
when those involved dig their heels in and refuse to rethink their view points. But it is not
too hard to imagine that in the classroom depicted here, the instructor’s modeling of care
and respect for her students, coupled with her implicit request that they behave likewise,
might create enough “affective space” for someone to say: “I never thought about it like
that before; maybe I need to reconsider…”.

In sum, my response to the Critics is not to retreat behind the closed-minded barriers of
government or school policy when it comes to dispositions and other value-laded
commitments, still less to declare that such specific dispositions as those relating to
social justice must be accepted by teacher candidates (though I happen to think that
they should). But I would require, *ceteris paribus*, that as professional educators, they (be disposed to) participate in an ongoing dialogue about any and all matters relating to their profession, including the pivotal question of how their own values and dispositions (will) influence their behavior as teachers. In anticipation of the retort that this requirement is just another manifestation of an unjustified intrusion on personal freedom – particularly the freedom to have and to cherish one’s own thoughts, attitudes, values, etc. – I make two points (at the risk of repetition): first, that the domain of thought is conceptually linked to the expression of thought (and, in particular, our personal dispositions are semantically embedded in our linguistic frameworks); secondly, that the requirement in question is tantamount to expecting teachers to *think* (which includes *thinking about their thinking*, as well as how their thinking is connected to their actions).

In the face of opposing forces whose power is both considerable and daunting, we could do worse than advocate for a new “Charge of the Light Brigade”: *Ours is to make reply, ours is to question why.*

I began this paper with a somewhat gloomy reference to the ongoing culture war in education. It is naïve in the extreme to hope that a conceptually-based argument, which draws on several contentious philosophical theories along the way, will move the Critics and other hard-liners to reconsider their positions. But this was never my intention. What I have attempted here is to embed the treatment of dispositions – particularly those dispositions which function as triggers to deeper, and better, thinking – in a semantic, dialogical framework which allows us to reflect on what moves us to action without becoming hopelessly bogged down in the murky and questionable realm of subjectivity. At a time when – incredibly – the imperative of thinking excellence is still a matter of controversy, this paper may offer some support, both theoretical and practical, to those for whom it is not.

ii Villegas, “Dispositions in Teacher Education”, 378


Lilian G. Katz and James D. Raths, “Dispositions as Goals for Teacher Education”, *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1, no. 4 (1985): 301-7, is generally regarded as the first text to articulate the nature and role of dispositions in teacher education, although Larry Freeman, “An Overview of Dispositions in Teacher Education”, in *Dispositions in Teacher Education*, eds. Diez and Raths, 7, credits Donald Arnstine’s work in the 1960’s with this honor. Since 2002, Northern Kentucky University has conducted an annual symposium on educator dispositions.

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http://msnbc.msn.com/id/10753446/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098; William Damon, “Personality Test: The Dispositional Dispute in Teacher Preparation Today, and What to Do about it”, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, September 8, 2005,
http://www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/publication.cfm?id=343.

National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Professional Standards for Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education (Washington, DC: NCATE, 2002); National Association of Scholars, “NAS Calls Upon U.S. Department of Education to Deny NCATE Accrediting Authority”, NAS Press Release, June 5, 2006,
http://www.nas.org/print/pressreleases/hqnas/releas_05Jun06.htm, 2002, NAS 2006; see also Dale Norris, “Teachers’ Dispositions: Supporting Democracy or Forcing Indoctrination”, (2008),

This idea can be traced back to Aristotle; see McKnight, “An Inquiry of NCATE’s Move”; also Hugh Sockett, “Character, Rules, and Relations,” in Teacher Dispositions, ed. Sockett; Sally Z. Hare, “We Teach Who We Are: The Intersection of Teacher Formation and Educator Dispositions”, in Dispositions in Teacher Education, eds. Diez and Raths, 139-49; M. Mark Wasicsko, “The Perceptual Approach to Teacher Dispositions: The Effective Teacher as an Effective Person”, in Dispositions in Teacher Education, eds. Diez and Raths, 53-89.

One motive for such a strategy is fairly obvious: behavior is more easily controlled and held accountable; true freedom has its source in how and what we think (and feel), and it is the prospect of critically examining what we and others think which terrifies the Critics.

The inclusion of “adult” here is significant; freedom of action is often taken to embrace the freedom to do more or less whatever one likes to and with one’s children when it comes to education. Children, on the other hand, are correspondingly less free as a result. See George Lackoff, Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision (New York: Farrar,
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Straus and Giroux, 2006), on how the American Right has "re-framed" the concept of freedom to promote its own agenda.

\(^{ix}\) I use the term "persons" in the sense familiar in analytic philosophy, although its precise meaning should not be taken for granted. I should also note that in this paper I am ignoring some distinctions concerning the notion of agency that would, in other contexts, be important. See, for example, Donald Davidson, "Agency", in *Agent, Action, and Reason*, eds. Robert Binkley, Richard Bronaugh, and Ausonia Marras (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

\(^{x}\) It has been argued that some non human animals can be educated (they can certainly be trained, which is a much more specific activity: we always train *for or toward* a specific end). If so, then they are, to that extent, persons.

\(^{xi}\) See references at n. iv. That most of these authors are writing in the tabloid press may lead some to downplay their intellectual status, but when it comes to education, the broader socio-cultural impact must also be considered. For a more even-handed discussion of actual cases, see Jacob Gershman, “‘Disposition’ Emerges as an Issue at Brooklyn College” (2005), http://www.nysun.com/article/14604.

\(^{xii}\) National Association of Scholars “NAS Calls Upon U.S. Department of Education to Deny NCATE Accrediting Authority”. In 2000-02, in response to NCATE, the Hunter College School of Education devised a "conceptual framework" in which reference to dispositions, both generic and specific, was a strong – if somewhat problematic – feature. In 2007, under the new Dean, this framework was replaced by one from which all such references were excised.

\(^{xiii}\) Tishman, Jay and Perkins, “Teaching Thinking Dispositions”, 2.


\(^{xv}\) Villegas, “Dispositions in Teacher Education”, 373.


\(^{xvii}\) NCATE, *Professional Standards for Accreditation*, 53.


Sackett, “Character, Rules, and Relations,” 23.


Lee Breese and Rita Nawrocki-Chabin, “The Social Cognitive Perspective in Dispositional Development”, in *Dispositions in Teacher Education*, eds. Diez and Raths, 33. Emphasis is added in all these quotations. Norris, “Teachers’ Dispositions”, cites additional definitions, including: “prevailing tendency, mood or inclination”, “habitual frames of mind”, “trends in actions that are intentional on the part of the actor”, “values, beliefs and intentions that are discovered in consistent patterns of behavior”. Taken together, the definitions cited range across the domains of thinking and action, both intellectual and ethical.

Freeman, “An Overview of Dispositions”, 18, citing Malikail, points to the Latin and Greek roots of the term “disposition”, which have to do with putting things into a certain order, as in “the current disposition of the Fleet”. As Freeman notes, order also suggests putting parts together to form a whole which, both morally and aesthetically, has to do with integrity. I discuss this connection below.

See, for example, Villegas, “Dispositions in Teacher Education”; Mary E. Diez, “The Role of Coaching in Working with Dispositions”, in Diez and Raths, *Dispositions in Teacher Education*, 203-18; NCATE, *Professional Standards for Accreditation*. Larry Freeman, “Teacher Dispositions in Context”, in Diez and Raths, *Dispositions in Teacher Education*, 117-38, spells out some of the dangers inherent in moving too quickly here. It is understandable that educators, frustrated by a tradition of avoidance in the area of dispositions, are pushing for real change, and that such change must ultimately affect actual teaching and assessment practices. No one wants to get
“bogged down” in an endless discussion about definitions and terminology. The litmus test for such conceptual and semantic proposals that I offer in this paper will be their potential to effect real change in practice.

xxvi The account which follows owes much to Strawson’s famous treatment of “Mental” and “Physical” predicates, in which he insists that the former are underpinned by our ordinary understanding of what a person is, where person is conceptually primitive in relation to such secondary concepts as mind and body. Peter F. Strawson, Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics (London: Methuen, 1959).

xxvii Of the examples cited, only solubility has the kind of known “categorical base” which functions at the appropriate micro-level. But even in the inanimate world, the relationship between dispositions and their bases has been a matter of contention in the philosophy of science. See, for example, Stephen Mumford, Dispositions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and many other pieces by, and cited by, him. The debate continues, but there is no space to reference it further here. In any case, the theses which I embrace, particularly that of Anomalous Monism, entail that the search for the categorical bases of personal dispositions is conceptually wrong-headed.

xxviii Ritchhart, Intellectual Character, 20; Wilkerson and Lang, Assessing Teacher Dispositions.

xxix Gilbert Ryle’s famous rejection of mind as entity is noted by several writers on dispositions, due chiefly to Ryle’s proposal that talk about the mind is really just talk about behavior or, rather, the disposition to behave (see Freeman, “An Overview of Dispositions”, 19). This is an example of the kind of semantic or translational reductionism which I reject. Further, in using dispositions to account for mind, we simply jump from the frying pan into the fire. For a more detailed discussion of Ryle on dispositions, see Mumford, Dispositions, 26ff.

of AM is that it is both ontologically economical – no non-physical entities to worry about – and intuitive with regard to beliefs about the mind – notably, our mental states do cause us to say and do things in ways that cannot be explained in purely physical terms.

Davidson's work in this area produced a sea-change in thinking about the so-called mind body problem (in addition to confirming for many the suspicion that psychology could never attain the status of a true science in nomological terms). Familiar phrases such as “a given mental event” or “mind-body identity” had now to be unpacked much more carefully, being ambiguous as to token or type status (hence, as to whether they referred to real entities or not!). Other writers have offered variations on Davidson’s original thesis; McGinn defends AM and the conceptual impossibility of “psycho-physical” laws via the thesis that mental terms do not instantiate natural kinds (Colin McGinn and James Hopkins, “Mental States, Natural Kinds and Psychophysical Laws”, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes 52 (1978): 195-236). A recent review article on “multiple realizability”, (which asserts that a single mental kind (property, state, event) can be realized by many distinct physical kinds) ends with these words, which underscore both the ongoing power of the AM thesis and the philosopher’s preparedness to rethink even the most central and widely-held claims:

At present, non reductive physicalism is (probably still) the dominant position in Anglo-American philosophy of mind. Its proponents appeal to the multiple realizability argument to challenge all versions of psychophysical reductionism and identity theory. Ernest LePore and Barry Loewer (1989) have even called the nonidentity of mental content with any physical properties “practically received wisdom” among philosophers of mind. They cite multiple realizability as one of the principal arguments for this conclusion. At the same time, the literature now contains challenges to the validity of multiple realizability arguments against reductionism and identity theory. It contains assaults on the multiple realizability premise itself. At the time of this present writing, many of these criticisms are recent—interest in multiple realizability took an upturn at the turn of the 21st century—so published replies are only beginning to appear. It is reasonable to expect that renewed interest in the realization relation more generally will yield new insights into these challenges. The fate of nothing less than one
of the most influential arguments in late-20th century analytic philosophy hangs in the balance.

John W. Bickle, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006,


xxxii Reifying even the most abstract of nouns is a common but risky practice. Young children still learn that nouns are “thing” words, even though there may be no thing there. Neither unicorns nor nine-headed dragons exist even though we can “speak about” them. More pertinently, just because “dispositions” is a noun, it by no means follows that there is any thing which each and every disposition actually is. Numerous philosophers have pointed this out, e.g. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), and Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960). Quine’s notion of *semantic ascent* – climbing into the meta-language – allows us to speak about such entities as minds, dispositions and concepts without literally referring to them.

xxxiii The anti-reductionism captured by AM and HM does not automatically license the unfettered use of physical metaphors and analogies when speaking about the mind. When someone asks “where” thoughts, ideas, or concepts reside, we are entitled to know what he means by such a question.

xxxiv McKnight, “An Inquiry of NCATE’s Move”, 221.

xxxv In my teaching, I refer to the “heirloom” view of values, according to which values are precious, even fragile items handed down from generation to generation, along with a stern admonition not to examine them too carefully lest they fall apart. Such an ossified, inert conception of values is both popular in the public mind and worthless in educational terms.

xxxvi Ritchhart, *Intellectual Character*, 23. Freeman, “Teacher Dispositions in Context”, 127 makes a similar point: “Values are the driving force, the aspect of a disposition that responds to the question, Why or why bother?” On the other hand Dottin, citing Dewey’s characterization of dispositions as “habits that render our action (conduct) intelligent”, maintains that “our intellectual and moral dispositions are [all] cognitive”, Dottin, “A Deweyan Approach to the Development of Moral Dispositions”, 28. In the same paper, he equates dispositions with “moral sensibilities” (37). Dottin’s general thesis – that teacher educator dispositions can be developed only within a culture
of community that attends to its own epistemological, moral and social growth – is akin to claims made on behalf of the community of inquiry, discussed below. I note that while Ritchhart focuses on the intellectual dispositions needed by students (and their teachers) generally, the emphasis – and the element of controversy – in discussions of teacher education is more skewed toward so-called moral dispositions.

xxxvi Sackett, “Character, Rules, and Relations,” 9; Sackett also states that if we want “to make the NCATE descriptions of dispositions less opaque, [we] must face up to the characterization and teaching of dispositions as a form of philosophical inquiry.” (27). Needless to say, I agree.

xxxvii Freeman, “An Overview of Dispositions in Teacher Education”.

xxxix Or, at least it is not until I bring it to my own attention, so to speak. We need to tread carefully here. As Freeman points out, the claim that our actions are intentional does not entail that for each and every action, there must have been a prior formed intention. Freeman, “Teacher Dispositions in Context”, 129.


xli Ritchhart, Intellectual Character, 20-21. Ritchhart also cites, twice, Dewey’s remark that “[Common sense] understands the body of habits, of active dispositions which makes a man do what he does” (2002, 19, repeated on 21). It is tempting to say, with Freeman, that Dewey preferred the term “habit” over “disposition”, but Dottin’s Deweyan analysis reminds us that interpreting what Dewey really meant is rarely straightforward, Dottin, “A Deweyan Approach to the Development of Moral Dispositions”.

xlii The complexity of the relationship between dispositions (especially psychological ones) and behavior is multi-faceted. As Mumford points out, bravery combines at least two sub-dispositions (one concerning being fearful, and one concerning a response to the fear), Mumford, Dispositions, 8. Freeman, citing Arnstine, notes that human dispositions are bound to be open-ended – we could say, even vague – with respect to their behavioral manifestations, Freeman, “An Overview of Dispositions in Teacher Education”, 19. There seems no way to specify, even in principle, the complete range of actions that would warrant describing someone as cruel, kind, etc. This
openness requires a dialogical framework in which to test out and compare specific situations and
events (real or hypothetical). I take up this point later.

Abilities and skills are not the same: the former may be genetic or innate, but the latter are
always learned.

Perkins, Jay and Tishman, “Beyond Abilities: A Dispositional Theory of Thinking,”; Ritchhart,
*Intellectual Character*. Notwithstanding a driving concern – which I share – to distinguish between
abilities and dispositions, it is noteworthy that in their 2000 paper, which includes references to
several “real world” experiments with students, Perkins *et al* suggest that a lack of sensitivity or
awareness is “the chief bottle-neck in effective intellectual performance”, more than either the
lack of ability or the lack of inclination; Perkins *et al*, “Intelligence in the Wild”, 281. But I am not
convinced that sensitivity is a genuinely separate component, particularly in the context of
Ritchhart’s distinction between inclination and (situation-specific) motivation (Ritchhart,
*Intellectual Character*, Ch. 3). Granted, we would not say of a teacher who knew how to ask good
questions, and whose values, goals and ideals about teaching render her inclined to do so, but
who did not know the best moment in which to intervene in a classroom discussion –and so lets
the moment pass by – that she is a good questioner. But could the same teacher possess the
requisite ability, the general inclination *and* the specific motivation to ask good questions in a
particular situation, and yet not be context-sensitive or aware *in that situation*? In any case,
Ritchhart himself comes close to conceding the redundancy when he notes that “There is an
*ability*-like component to sensitivity – the *ability* to recognize occasions for a particular behavior
across various occasions with minimal cues.” (49, emphasis added).

Tishman, Jay and Perkins, “Teaching Thinking Dispositions”, 1992. Needless to say, both
questions are distinct from “Is he (currently) swimming?”

Turning the “only if” condition into the stronger “if and only if” requires the addition of one more
component, which I shall summarize as “background conditions” in what follows. In this case, no
amount of ability, inclination and motivation can make up for the absence of a swimming venue,
permission to proceed, etc.
Ritchhart and others writing in the educational rather than philosophical domain, are rather quick to dismiss philosophical treatments of dispositions as either irrelevant or mistaken. He remarks: “Inert ability, ability that lies dormant and must be specifically provoked, is not a very useful barometer of intelligence. Instead, we need to look at ability in action”. Ritchhart, *Intellectual Character*, 37, emphasis added. Ritchhart rejects a counter-factual view of dispositions (which he regards as coming out of philosophy), whereby they “… can exist as tendencies that need never be realized. This nonvolitional, nonacquired quality is clearly not what I wish to convey. In contrast, from the psychological perspective, dispositions tend to be seen as voluntary elicitors rather than automatic emitters of behavior” (20-21). My response is that the counter-factual or conditional component applies to abilities, generally – including human abilities – but not to (personal) dispositions.

Mumford, *Dispositions*, 43.

These problems are largely irrelevant to the concerns of this paper. The underlying conditionals would, at the very least, need to be counterfactual in nature.

As Mumford explains (Mumford, *Dispositions*, 197) there are many other examples of everyday concepts that are functional, therefore, dispositional, in nature, including: “thermostat”, “computer”, book case”, door handle”, and, we could add, organ-terms such as “kidney”. Elizabeth W. Prior, *Dispositions*, (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1985) and Elizabeth W. Prior, Robert Pargetter and Frank Jackson, “Three Theses about Dispositions”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1982): 251-57 are well known proponents of functionalism.

For present purposes, (A) may also be formulated as “(C&T)→B”. See Mumford, *Dispositions*, 58ff. for further discussion. In these purely physical situations, unmuddied by anything intrinsically subjective or psychological, such conditionals may be read at both token and type levels. It is true both that (a) were I to drop this particular vase at time t, it would shatter shortly thereafter (in certain conditions), and that (b) were I to drop all appropriately similar objects (i.e. made from similar materials), they would shatter. We know this because we know that tokens of a certain substance-type will behave in the same way, again, *ceteris paribus*. Several issues are involved here, including the question of “where” the underlying causal relationships actually reside,
keeping in mind that properties such as fragility are *multiply-realized* by quite different physical scenarios. When we switch to the psychological domain, the thesis of AM rules out any (token-level) causality that does not occur between and among physical events.

\[ i \] Strawson, *Individuals*. This account is somewhat simplistic; as remarked earlier, rarely is a given psychological disposition associated with just one mode of behavior.

\[ iii \] The elaboration of C and its implications for classroom practice, pedagogy and curriculum are, of course, among the issues of most practical concern to educators. Notice that the *dispositions* of teachers and peers count as conditions here. I note also that Freeman’s analysis of dispositions identifies ability as part of the *context* (= background conditions) appropriate for the manifestation of particular dispositions. He follows John Searle in holding that in the absence of relevant ability, it makes no sense even to speak about having certain dispositions/intentions: “we have no idea how to understand someone who says ‘that I intend to become a coffee cup’.” Freeman, “Teacher Dispositions in Context”, 131. But isn’t it the very idea of becoming a coffee cup that makes no sense? One difficulty with locating abilities as part of the background context is that it obscures their conditional nature.

\[ iv \] Some personal abilities, if never exercised, may well disappear or remain hidden for a life-time. In the former situation, even the presence of conditions C and T will not trigger B because the required conditional no longer holds.

\[ iv \] Freeman recalls Arnstine’s counter-example of someone who is “curious about how a mechanical device works and speculate[s] about it while sitting in [his] sofa staring out the window.” Freeman, “Teacher Dispositions in Context”, 124. But is this really an example of curiosity without action? Laziness or simple inertia may prevent him from going to find out how the device works, but sitting and staring out the window are actions for which his curiosity is an explanation, nevertheless. Curiosity, *qua* disposition, may be almost entirely “pure” with respect to ability; i.e. just about anyone can, without prior learning be curious and exercise curiosity. This means that the underlying conditional (A) is almost bound to hold. It just awaits the fulfillment of background conditions and trigger to result in action. But action there will be, as long as these premises hold.
In real-life situations, it is often difficult for an observer to understand just how various
abilities/skills and dispositions/attitudes figure in the behavior of others (perhaps even in our own
behavior!). Dispositions run deep and are often at odds with one another, as well as with
perceptions (our own or others’) of our abilities. I may want to jump into the pool but fear that I do
not have the requisite ability. Similarly, a student who fails to listen carefully to the teacher, in
apparent breach of the rules, may not be intending to fail – may, in fact, be intending to succeed.
But if she is unable to listen – perhaps because of a physical or learning impairment – her good
intentions will still not result in the desired action. The self-perception of inability is often disguised
or masked by a negative attitude which prevents her from even trying. And, of course, vice versa:
how often does the student who protests “I don’t know” really mean “I don’t care enough to think
about it”?

The use of “scare” quotes in this heading is a reminder that while it is natural to speak about
cultivating, nurturing or developing dispositions, the idea that they might actually be taught is
distinctly odd. We don’t speak of them as being known either, but they can be learned and
acquired.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations.

“Mental kinds point outward, so to speak, to their behavioral manifestations, not inward to the
physical conditions that sustain them. (Semantic concepts, too, … share such answerability to
behavior and heedlessness of the physical substratum; which is unsurprising seeing that [the]
semantic and psychological seamlessly interlock in the interpretation of what a creature does.).”
McGinn and Hopkins, “Mental States, Natural Kinds and Psychophysical Laws”, 216. This
comment, in a paper supporting AM, is in line with what I am proposing here.

See Laurance J. Splitter and Ann M. Sharp, Teaching for Better Thinking: The Classroom
Community of Inquiry (Melbourne: ACER Press, 1995); Laurance J. Splitter, “Authenticity and
the Groups to which I Belong Make Me Me? Reflections on Community and Identity”, Theory and
Research in Education 5, no. 3 (2007): 261-280; “Listen to Them Think: Reflections on
Philosophy, Inquiry and Dialogue”, in M. Robertson and R. Gerber (eds.), Children’s Ways of
Actually, I am rejecting the very idea of a duality here. Assuming that there is no domain of the mental per se, the interdependence in question is conceptual. This means, for example, that when a student declares, in an interview, that she wants, hopes or intends to become a teacher, her fellow participants in that dialogue are, ceteris paribus, justified in believing that she is speaking truthfully. The intention to deceive is not only morally dubious; it is, potentially, semantically devastating.

Splitter, “Authenticity and Constructivism in Education”, 2009. As with inquiry generally, the journey is at least as important as the outcome – even if there is one.

One writer who has always been sensitive to the intricacies of the “caring-character-community” nexus, and the importance of viewing each of these concepts in relational terms, is Nel Noddings. See her Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); also Sockett, “Character, Rules, and Relations”. Noddings maintains that “dialogue is the most fundamental component of the care model.”, 16. I agree with Stooksberry that dispositions should be part of the discourse in teacher education (Lisa M. Stooksberry, “Dispositions as a Dialogue in Teacher Preparation”, in Dispositions in Teacher Education, eds. Diez and Raths, 219-32). But I would extend her conclusions to embrace teachers and students at all levels, including children.

Sockett, “Character, Rules, and Relations”, 21-23; also Hare, “We Teach Who We Are”, 141.

As, of course, do all learners in any learning situation. The key, and divisive, question facing educators is how we should respond to this undeniable empirical truth. My reluctance to include values here stems from my rejection of the “heirloom view”; see fn.xxxv.

“Small-c” conservatism is not a feature of a particular political or religious ideology; rather, it is an inevitable feature of any ideology that cannot critically examine itself. Teachers who view themselves merely as technicians are likely to produce students who are either unable or
unwilling to engage in critical, creative or evaluative thinking. Technicians, in this sense, are not professionals.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Charge of the Light Brigade”, *The Examiner*, December 9, 1854,
http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=1570

Needless to say, we may still *do and die*, particular if those in positions of power insist on Tennyson’s original version.