Response to “Reclaiming the Progressivist Agenda” by Martin Barlosky

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God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.  

*Reinhold Niebuhr*

It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph.  

*Attributed to Edmund Burke*

Let me first express my appreciation and delight for the honor of being included in such distinguished company as Michael Apple and Richard Rorty and for the opportunity to take part in this dialogue. I also want to thank Doctor Barlosky for the fair and careful reading he has, for the most part, given my book.

The reservation I have about his reading has to do with his apparent surprise at some of what I have to say in my book:

Although he cannot be faulted for his earnestness, it seems *odd* [my emphasis] that Purpel finds the contradiction in his mixture of progressivist ideas and religious sentiments so vexing. The seemingly inherent incompatibility of these two traditions is marked in the secularism central to Rorty’s ‘this worldly’ progressivism and in Apple’s . . . suspicion of religious movements as ready allies of the authoritarian populism he denigrates and dreads. As his comments make clear, Purpel is not unaware that the problem of spiritual disorientation is itself one of the logical outcomes of the progressivist cause, which, in no small measure, is responsible for the thoroughgoing secularism dominant in contemporary public schooling (Barlosky, 2001)

I must admit that I remain baffled as to why my orientation would seem “odd” to Doctor Barlosky. I do indeed take pains in the book to affirm, as
well critique, educational orientations that are probably consonant with what Doctor Barlosky calls “progressivist ideas.” Part of my critique has to do with the reluctance of many progressive educational theorists to ground their ideas in normative principles and to acknowledge the power and insight to be found in many religious and spiritual traditions. I have argued that an educational program directed at issues of personal meaning, cultural diversity, and social justice are not only compatible with some religious traditions, they are in fact rooted in them. I do not challenge Doctor Barlosky’s reading of the tone of my critique but why should it be “odd” for me to express my vexation? There is an implication here that there is some kind of contradiction or anomaly in many of the links I try to forge, e.g., between critical pedagogy and the prophetic tradition. My reading of Doctor Barlosky’s review is that what he sees as odd is actually a function of the conflict between my views and those of a straw man he has created on his own.

Doctor Barlosky prefaces his review of the three books by critically examining some important “presuppositions” that he believes, in some degree or another, characterize all of them. Among these prior assumptions posited by Doctor Barlosky are “confidence in progress”; “an optimism founded on the belief that change and improvement are one and the same”; and a belief in the necessity and possibility of “mastery” of the processes of social change.

Generally, I think his analyses of these general issues are acute and reasonable, as he certainly raises a number of very important issues. My sense, however, is that he views my positions as “odd” because they do not neatly fit these presuppositions. The difficulty with his more specific criticisms of my book is that, whatever prior assumptions or shortcomings my book may have, it bears very little resemblance to the contours of these “presuppositions.” (I also believe that the same is true for the Rorty and Apple books, but I shall limit my comments to what is relevant to my own work.)

It is quite ironic for me to be accused of over-optimism and of pushing for reliance on “new technologies” rather than engaging in “troublesome debates about the purposes of education.” This is a first for me since I’m usually criticized for being overly negative and pessimistic, especially about so-called educational innovations and reforms. Moreover, this pessimism and criticality over the state of education is more than a reflection of my own temperament but are sensibilities that typically represent the very ideology that Doctor Barlosky seems to have identified as mine. Indeed, much of my work and that of many of my colleagues has been devoted to finding ways of accepting the very real limitations on the possibilities for social transformation without being paralyzed by them.

It is this search for finding a balance between affirmation and criticality and between pessimism and faith that has led me to ground my work in the writings of the Biblical prophets. The prophets excoriated their communities for their boundless capacity for greed, oppression, and sin and yet continued to implore the people to affirm their inherent capacity to create
a just and loving community. They did not shirk from confronting the harsh realities of life nor did they ever cease to invoke the equally real aspirations for human transcendence. Reinhold Niebuhr has captured this consciousness with extraordinary eloquence and succinctness in this characterization of prophetic faith:

[The Prophets had] . . . confidence that life is good in spite of its evil and that it is evil in spite of good. In such faith both sentimentality and despair are avoided (Niebuhr, 1935, p. 127)

It is not naive and mindless optimism that has energized many of us to continue to work for a better world, but rather the resolve to avoid those twin dangers of sentimentality and despair. It is this resolve that has helped so many people sustain the human struggle for justice. Doctor Barlosky strongly (and properly) urges that those who seek to improve the lot of others to do so humbly and cautiously with full awareness of how such efforts can have counterproductive and even tragic results. Therefore, I find it odd that he indicates that I say otherwise in Moral Outrage in Education, when, in fact, I say such things as:

I must necessarily begin with a confession that I take the tragic view of life, that is, I see our lives as fated to involve heroic and virtuous struggles that ultimately end in failure. I resonate with the Sisyphean experience of meaning and dignity deriving from continuous and never-ending engagement in the task of creating a better world in the face of an awareness of its futility. This is based not only on my own perhaps impoverished inner spirit but also on the analysis of the effects of various social movements for reform and political struggles for genuine revolution and transformation. The story of such efforts certainly contains many truly inspiring sagas of courage and determination as well as solid and enduring successes. Yet, many of the gains are short-lived and even if some problems are resolved, new even more difficult ones appear. (Purpel, 1999, p. 137)

In struggling with the problematics of this rather dark view, I have come to see that possibilities for a better world do not reside in the optimism of positivistic materialism but rather in the faith and hope of religious and spiritual traditions:

The kind of hope and faith I am referring to is not to be confused with romanticism or even optimism; indeed, it is what we need in the face of the empirical necessity to reject optimism. In other words, we must face the problem of how to proceed when we know we should but are not clear on direction and pretty sure that if we did know where we should be headed, we wouldn’t be able to get there. This is a time when our knowledge tells us the battle is lost, when it seems senseless to continue, and when, alas, optimism is a delusion. In such despairing times what is urgently required is the kind of hope and energy that is so often powerfully exemplified in our religious traditions. (Purpel, 1999, p. 225)

Beyond the questions regarding what my personal guiding assumptions are or are not lie the broader and much more important issues of the propriety and wisdom contained in various proposals for social and edu-
cational change. What is involved here is less a matter of misreading and more about important differences of opinion on basic social and educational goals as well as on what constitute the limitations and possibilities of change.

Doctor Barlosky sums up his interpretation of the ideological perspectives of the three reviewed books as follows:

The purposes that inform the various prescriptions for social amelioration in the three books under review fall within the objectives and the programs associated with the political Left. They include a pervasive emphasis upon egalitarianism, empowerment, social justice, and liberation, coupled with a reformist activism and a trust in the efficacy of political interventions on behalf of the deprived and the neglected. (Barlosky, 2001)

Although I might have described my orientation somewhat differently (e.g., I would have said that I had faith in the possibility of the incredibly complex task of creating a more just society, etc.), Doctor Barlosky has characterized my general social goals reasonably enough. When I first read that section, I assumed that he was being more descriptive than critical of that position for I honestly find it difficult to believe that anyone would disagree with such a list of broad and general social goals.

Although I am still not completely clear on this, Prof. Barlosky seems to reflect a less than uncritical regard for these goals as he contrasts them with:

the assemblage of values popularly associated with the Right, for example, self-reliance, deference to markets over regulation, a libertarian preference for the private over the public, esteem for tradition, and a wariness toward the new, constitute something of an evil empire. (Barlosky, 2001)

It is quite possible that Doctor Barlosky meant only to report on what is “popularly associated with the Right” rather than present his own personal views. However, whatever the source, this list represents a remarkably anemic and pitifully thin ideology. Does this list represent the core of the Right’s moral and social commitments? Are we to seriously consider that we should be passionate about “self-reliance and deference to the market” to the point of fighting and perhaps even dying for them? Are we to reify “tradition” itself as an icon? Should we esteem all traditions? Or are we to esteem only certain traditions? Which ones? Is not the Right also committed to the traditions that strongly affirm equality, social justice, and empowerment? Does not the Right also wish to act on behalf of the “deprived and the neglected,” the central ethic of our religious and moral traditions? I would have thought that those on the Right differ from those on the Left not so much on general goals but more on the processes for reaching those goals, e.g., whether or not we are more likely to achieve social justice with a minimum of governmental intervention.

It is not altogether clear to me, however, if Doctor Barlosky is reflecting a sharp difference of opinion on what broad social goals ought to be or
whether he is expressing pessimism about our capacity to specify and achieve them:

As compelling as Rorty’s, Apple’s, and Purpel’s arguments may be for the active pursuit of a better society, we must question whether we possess or can possess the wisdom to know first, what constitutes social improvement and, second, the means best suited to secure it. (Barlosky, 2001)

He goes on to invoke Nietzsche, Foucault, and Thoreau to support his fears of the counterproductive effects of efforts at social betterment.

Taken together, Nietzsche and Foucault pose the possibility that our definition of the good may be little more than temporary and flawed constructions that when acted upon lead us to commit one humanly costly error after another . . . It is this very potential that led Henry David Thoreau to suggest that although attractive to the popular mind, knowing and doing good are so problematic that each enterprise is best ignored both by man and God. (Barlosky, 2001)

The notion that figuring out what the good things are that need to be done is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, seems somewhat disingenuous to me. I accept the truism that we must be humble in the face of life’s complexities and that we must guard against self-righteous arrogance. But there surely are some matters that are not all that morally problematic. There is an enormous amount of unnecessary human suffering in the world—hunger, poverty, violence, and disease—much of it caused by human greed and cruelty aided and abetted by indifference and denial. Is the notion that all people should have enough to eat and have ready access to adequate housing and medical care really a “flawed and temporary construction”? There are cultural plagues like bigotry, racism, and homophobia that spread hatred and pain and poison our lives. How wise does one have to be to figure out that it would be a good thing if we were all a lot more tolerant, accepting, and caring?

What specifically constitutes a sufficient diet and adequate housing and medical care is certainly not obvious and is surely subject to honest differences of opinion but these problems are not commensurate with trying to figure out how to square a circle or deciding what the meaning of life is. Indeed, a great deal of effort has already gone into dealing with such issues and ongoing, continuous debate and reflection are constantly required. We already know with certainty that for the starving, one loaf of bread is better than no bread at all, that for the poor, prenatal care is better than no prenatal care, and that it is better for the homeless to have a roof over their heads than to sleep in cardboard boxes.

I realize that the problems of determining what is good cannot all be reduced to such basic moral assertions, but such baseline commitments are very far from being trivial. Moreover, I do believe that there is, in fact, a very high degree of consensus on what should constitute our moral framework, i.e., a broad commitment to freedom, equality, peace, justice, and compassion. The difficulty, of course, is that in the every day world these
values conflict with each other, thereby producing any number of troubling and complex moral dilemmas and conundrums. In this sense, Doctor Barlosky is absolutely right to point out the utter necessity for caution, humility, and reflection lest our self-righteousness blind us to the awesome nature of the task of adjudicating these conflicting claims.

However, we must also remember that caution is not to be confused with inertia, that humility is not a justification for paralysis, and that reflection is an integral aspect of action, not a substitute for it. In other words, the answer to the question of what happens after the caution, humility, and reflection can be fudged, but ultimately cannot be avoided.

I have greater sympathy with Doctor Barlosky’s reservations about the efficacy of a great deal of social action and his implicit reminder about just how the paths to Hell are paved. He is quite right to point out the unforeseen and unintended, but nonetheless tragic, consequences of any number of well-meaning initiatives and programs. The phenomenon of iatrogenics (diseases that originate in cures) continues to thrive and will continue to do so as long as humans remain human, i.e., not gods. Hence, the caution and humility that Doctor Barlosky urges, even if it may seem gratuitous, is clearly appropriate to the pursuit of social improvement and we must avoid the temptation to be annoyed by reminders of this importance.

My difficulty with his response to the risk of the possibility of making things worse is his seeming embrace not of a social policy of less intervention but one of minimal intervention or of none at all. This noninterventionist orientation seems to extend even to the very effort to define what is good or, at least, what is better. I find it, first of all, impossible to conceive of a situation when there are no hoped for or intended effects of action or inaction. It is obviously quite reasonable to claim in certain situations that inaction will have a more positive effect than a particular action, but that assumes the presence of a more desirous outcome. In that sense, we are talking about differing tactics (action vs. inaction) of arriving at a desired goal, i.e., reflecting a decision on what is good. It is also hard for me to imagine a situation when inaction, however minimal, whether intended or not, would not have some impact. Inevitably, and perhaps paradoxically, indecision represents a decision that has real consequences; abstentions have, for better or worse, genuine effects. The refusal to choose represents a particular choice.

Moreover, the option of putting programs for social change on hold is hardly neutral since more often than not it privileges some at the expense of others. It is like the victorious general who calls on his vanquished opponents to pursue peace or the owners of gas-guzzling cars who urge that more (i.e., other) people should use mass transportation. To do next to nothing freezes the status quo, maintains the existing power structure, and effectively puts an end to the hopes and aspirations of the less powerful. I remain unclear about Doctor Barlosky’s rationale for a policy of minimal intervention: Is it that the status quo is as close to the ideal as we can get or is that that we as a people are too stupid and inept to know how to create a better world?
The debate about social goals cannot be reduced to one of choosing between agency and nonagency or between change and stasis since the impulse for change has proven to be irresistible. In this regard, I certainly agree with the proposition that change is not always for the good, but I also believe that the impulse for change is inevitable. Indeed, the conservative educational agenda that Doctor Barlosky cites (vouchers, school choice, accountability, etc.) itself represents a policy that entails considerable change; one that demands increased governmental intervention in educational practice in order to bring about significant social change. Hence, we come back to the genuinely pressing questions about which changes should be made, about which strategies are likely to be effective, and about what the consequences of these changes are likely to be.

Neither the difficulty nor the complexity of the task is sufficient justification for disengagement from the inherent and demanding requirements of communal and social responsibilities. The risks of taking action are matched only by the risks of inaction; the fear of making things worse is as real as the hope that we can make things better. We must always remember that action sometimes makes things worse, just as we must always remember that action has sometimes made things better. Most of all, we must remain mindful of the ways we contribute to the enormous amount of unnecessary human suffering that permeates our community, nation, and world. In this way, we can recommit ourselves to our responsibility for the amelioration, if not elimination, of this suffering. The Talmud teaches us that: “The task is not yours to finish, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

The dilemmas and tensions over what can and should be done to make a better world are by no means new, for such issues have (miraculously enough) haunted us over the centuries and I dare say (and hope) that they will continue to do so. It is clear that this responsibility is relentlessly complex, requiring us to extend our intellect, our imagination, and our sagacity to the utmost. Perhaps the greatest barrier to our capacity to meet these responsibilities, however, is the loss of a sense of hope and possibility. Indeed, one of our greatest challenges in this era of cynicism and pessimism is to find the energy that can inspire and renew our faith in our ability to meet our moral responsibilities. As educators we not only have the indispensable responsibility of being critical and cautious, we also have the opportunity and responsibility to blunt the highly destructive contagion of defeatism and despair.

REFERENCES