

# Tests in Life and Learning: A deathly dialogue

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## Abstract

*This article is an imaginary Socratic dialogue between J. S. Mill and Michel Foucault, principally concerning educational assessment.*

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## α. Introduction

Heaven, n.: A place where the wicked cease from troubling you with talk of their personal affairs, and the good listen with attention while you expound your own. (Beirce, 2001, p. 162)

One day, Michel Foucault and John Stuart Mill chance to sit together in a corner of Heaven, where they explore what they can agree upon, and where they differ. We happen to eavesdrop on their conversation, already well underway.



Foucault: It seems, then, that we both agree. Aristotle was right to argue that the highest good for any individual is happiness. But in our society individual happiness is impossible; we are oppressed by the institutions of society, and one of the most evil of these is the test. It is a method

of control and oppression, and this is an argument you, yourself, made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Mill: Yes, and I fear that this tendency has an even broader scope. In 1859 in the *Applications On Liberty*, I wrote: ‘A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.’

Foucault: Precisely! This is exactly what I mean when I say that tests are a ‘mechanism of discipline’. Testing is the method by which the powerful remain in power and decide what knowledge is to be valued. The test takers are mere objects that have no choice but to comply with the demands of the powerful. The purpose is to establish domination through endless testing, thereby placing value on what is cherished by the powerful, thus maintaining society’s status quo.

Mill: There is always the danger that tests will be misused by the powerful, this I can easily admit. But your view of the role of tests in society is misleading, or perhaps my understanding of it is somewhat underdeveloped. My dear fellow, we lived in different centuries and the functions of tests were—as well—different in radical ways. Our agreement is not about the thing—in this case a test—but about the principled manner in which society depends upon it and upon other tools so easily subject to abuse. In 1776 Thomas Jefferson substituted ‘happiness’ for ‘property’ when adapting Locke’s trinity for use in the Declaration of American Independence. The preamble imagines a society where domination does not come with power, in which the individual must be free to pursue his or her own vision of happiness unhindered. I am sure that you have read this [handing a manuscript to Foucault], and tell me something: If the purpose of a government is to ensure the happiness of the people, and happiness is knowledge (as Socrates claimed), is it not possible for tests to play some positive role?

WE hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Foucault: Of course I've read this. But isn't it the nature of every elite to act in the interests of its own preservation? I don't think that America has lived up to its own national preamble.

Mill: Yes, any elite tries to act in its own interest, and it tries to impose its own values to the extent that it would crush our individuality.

Foucault: Then tests of all kind should be abolished, in our fight against 'hierarchical surveillance and normalizing judgment'. In my lifetime I saw the number and frequency of tests increase rapidly. Each person is an object to be measured, the measures documented, so individuals can be compared with others; the whole point, as I've said before, is that the deviants can be 'trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded ...'.

Mill: I am just as worried as you are about the power of the State. We are in agreement. But your solution to the problem would merely play into the hands of the powerful, be they the conservative elites or the revolutionaries who impose a new order. Let us return to the kind of society envisioned by Jefferson. Doesn't this view coincide with the more enlightened view expressed by Wordsworth in the Ninth Book of the *Prelude*:

And finally, as sum and crown of all,  
Should see the people having a strong hand  
In framing their own laws; whence better days  
To all mankind.

Wordsworth's words bring us to two premises that put your rather morbid views of society in their place. The first is that individual freedoms are paramount and to be protected at all cost; the second is that in order to maintain individual freedoms the role of the State must be limited. The purpose of the State is to preserve a framework that protects individual freedoms and makes possible the individual pursuit of happiness. And in order to do this, it is inevitable that some should exercise power; but that the power be exercised on behalf of the people. Edmund Burke understood this just as much as Jefferson when, in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* (para. 13), he wrote:

The effect of liberty to individuals is that they may do what they please: we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints. Prudence would dictate this in the case of separate, insulated, private men; but liberty, when men act in bodies, is *power*.

And Burke knew only too well that your kind of revolutionary zeal usually ends in disaster. So, let us extend our thesis to education, and the institution of the test, to see what conclusions we may draw, and in order to dispose of your abolitionist nonsense once and for all.

Foucault: I am not convinced; but I will listen to your argument. I shall ponder your points and meet you again here later so that we might take up these interesting matters once again.

[In the words of Dylan Thomas, 'time passes', so much as time may exist at all in Heaven and if it exists so much as it may be perceived to pass. Our script is but a metaphor, in any case.]

## β. Education and Tests in Society

Mill: I hold that individual happiness is possible through knowledge, which Socrates advocated despite the fact that the State managed to silence him. At the heart of this is the right of the individual to think freely, and to grow as an individual. This is also the centre of Dewey's philosophy of education: growth is at the heart of happiness, as Putnam would put it, and the only way to grow is through the freedom to question and investigate. Education is about problem solving, and democracy is about including all in discovering solutions through experimental enquiry with free discussion. The role of education is to create citizens who can take part in this process.

Educational systems should be inclusive. Individuals are unique parts of a society in which those in power cannot control. In Education this is most obviously the case in the University, where the students are encouraged to become part of the scholarly questioning community, a community that values fallibilism. This is the legacy of Charles Sanders Peirce and other pragmatists both here and on Earth. Richard Rorty is a classic example. The purpose of University teachers is to stir students up, on the grounds that self-creating individuals grow in a questioning environment, and go on to change the world in their own small (or sometimes large) ways. This echoes Emerson, who argued 'People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them'.

The true role of education is to liberate, not to control. Your argument, Foucault, rests on the assumption that individuals are easily led, easily fed, easily subdued. But history is not on your side, and neither (I think) is the fundamental structure of a University.

What of tests?

In the fifth section of my book *On Liberty*, I treat this subject in some depth. But here I will expand upon it. If happiness is increased through personal growth, the State has an obligation to *require* the provision of education that produces citizens who have the skills and abilities to participate in society, and solve problems for themselves. As I have argued, 'The instrument for enforcing the law could be no other than public examinations, extending to all children, and beginning at an early age.' You will recollect that I went on to discuss how the power of

the State was to be limited with regard to tests: ‘To prevent the State from exercising, through these arrangements, an improper influence over opinion, the knowledge required for passing an examination (beyond the merely instrumental parts of knowledge, such as languages and their use) should, even in the higher classes of examinations, be confined to facts and positive science exclusively. The examinations on religion, politics, or other disputed topics, should not turn on the truth or falsehood of opinions, but on the matter of fact that such and such an opinion is held, on such grounds, by such authors, or schools, or churches.’

Further, the State should have no control over higher tests, such as degrees, even where these grant access to the professions. The value and rights attached to certificates gained through examination are merely those granted them by public opinion and the demands of society to be well served by professionals in each field. In this, Wilhelm von Humboldt and I are in complete agreement. And we would both support Emerson’s view in his *Essay on Politics* of 1844, where he offers a conclusion that we may adopt for our own argument: ‘Hence, the less government we have, the better,—the fewer laws, and the less confided power ... . To educate the wise man, the State exists; and with the appearance of the wise man, the State expires. The appearance of character makes the State unnecessary’.

Foucault: Your view of the State as a potential threat is what I saw in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and we can still see it in the world today. How can you therefore defend it so easily?

Mill: But I do not defend it. We can never rid the world of the potential threat to liberty from the State.

Foucault: And you believe that tests can actually play a role in checking the power of the State and increasing happiness?

Mill: Modern tests were invented for a purpose. The first competitive examinations were introduced to China, where for 1300 years the Imperial Examinations were open to all adult males. The tests were standardized and blind marked to ensure fairness to all, opening positions of rank in the civil service to anyone who showed merit. Of course, the content of the Chinese Imperial Examinations ensured that those who were successful would contribute toward governmental functioning and cultural unity, rather than becoming questioning individuals. But those Chinese tests established the principle of meritocratic access to power; no longer can the powerful remain insulated in their own watertight caste. Since then, of course, we have learned to value creativity, new ideas, challenging established thinking. While it is necessary to be part of a community of thinkers, the community recognizes and encourages originality. As we have already

noticed this is the argument of Peirce, and at the heart of his understanding of truth. So tests, used correctly, have the power to grant access to opportunities and goods that were previously unavailable to the ordinary people.

Foucault: Very well. I concede that tests may play such a role; especially as you appear to be aware of the dangerous uses of tests that most concern me. My project has always been to uncover the dubious claims of authority within specific disciplines that support hierarchical observation. My genealogy of the ‘scientific-legal complex’ of discipline and punishment was written to make mankind aware of the very threats that you have also identified, by uncovering the historically contingent basis of these intolerable power structures. But even if tests can fulfil the role you claim, don’t these tests and examinations assert a pernicious influence on the classroom?

Mill: Ah—that is a nexus of particular interest, I think. Let us, once again, part company and return later to take up that thorny question.

[Time again ‘passes’]

### **γ. Classroom Assessment**

Mill: My dear fellow, I have been pondering the particulars of classroom testing, for certainly, that kind of examination is one we have all shared since schooling began. Let’s take the example of language testing. Today there are large-scale tests, like the ones I recommended in Chapter 5 of *On Liberty*. These test the ‘instrumental parts of knowledge, such as languages and their use.’ They are used as an index of proficiency; and they give learners the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery in a range of skills and abilities that will gain them access to further education, and open up employment opportunities. Teachers who prepare learners for these tests are developing their students’ knowledge for success; opening doors for them to succeed. Now, curiously, language testing and educational measurement, particularly validity theory, were born and became mature within large-scale assessment. The concern in modern testing—whether of language or any other content material as I see it—is for standardization and equality of opportunity. In that sense, modern testing is concerned with the very same problems that plagued the Chinese a millennium ago.

Foucault: Language testers seem, then, concerned with the right things. Do their concerns apply to the classroom as they must also apply to all of society?

Mill: No; the place of standardized tests is not in the classroom. When alive, Einstein is reported to have said:

One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year.

We should take this to heart.

Foucault: At least Einstein did not give up under the pressure of the relentless control of the tests. I've also heard he said 'it's a miracle that curiosity survives formal education'.

Mill: You are right, as you were in *Discipline and Punish*. Only the gifted and determined can survive such treatment. But remember what the classroom is for in our pragmatic, democratic world. Let us quote Dewey, from *Democracy in Education*, Section 8: Aims in Education:

For it [is] assumed that the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education—or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth. Now this idea cannot be applied to all the members of a society except where intercourse of man with man is mutual, and except where there is adequate provision for the reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests. And this means a democratic society.

In the classroom the role of the teacher is to challenge learners to grow through directed problem solving activities. Thus, any assessment that takes place in the classroom is fundamentally different from the standardized test that has to be fair to whoever wishes to take it. The purpose of assessment in the classroom is to make decisions about learning and teaching that result in further growth. The classroom is the place where *consequences* are the most important facet of validity.

Foucault: My ultimate concern has always been with those who are marginalized in society and have no way of interacting with the dominant values and power structures that are forced upon them. You are articulating a signal distinction between large-scale standardized tests versus those a teacher might build in the classroom. Perhaps this view of education provides a bridge between marginalization and creating the conditions in which individuals can problematize fundamental issues and choices for themselves. I can see that education and testing, without the control of the State, may help us break free from the horror of existing in an identity created by those in power. But how should teachers be convinced that this is the case?

Mill: The standardized test requires a clinical environment, in which items and tasks are delivered in the shortest time possible within a controlled

environment. The classroom, on the other hand, is primarily a social environment, where there is time for the acquisition of language and knowledge. Group and pair work is encouraged; participation, interaction, and the development of collegial relationships valued. Collaboration in a standardized test is labelled 'cheating', while in the classroom it is valued and praised. One context fulfils social needs in assessment; the other is a social context that fulfils learning needs. It is a vexing tension.

*Tasks* are also very different. In a standardized test, it is necessary to deliver the maximum number of items possible in the shortest period of time. Responses to each item must be independent in order to maximize the pieces of information collected for aggregate scoring. The maximum amount of reliable information needs to be collected in the shortest period possible. But this is not the same in a learning environment, where such time limitations do not apply. And surely, one of the criteria we use to judge suitable learning activities is how they are interlinked, so that we may build upon what has been learnt before and lay the foundation for what is to be achieved next?

Because the *context* is different and the *tasks* fulfil a different purpose, it is not surprising we should consider the *roles* of participants to vary also. In a standardized test the professionals would prefer to avoid the use of human beings altogether if possible. Machine scoring became hugely popular during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, if humans are used to make decisions about the quality of answers, they must not know the person they are judging personally, and are trained rigorously to apply criteria set down by the test developers. Similarly, interlocutors are rarely given the freedom to interact as they please with candidates for fear that they may influence performance and hence the score awarded. But in the social context of the classroom, variety of interaction is both valued and encouraged. Achieving shared goals through collaboration is vital; joint products lead to learning from the other. Evaluation is done by oneself and one's peers. And the teacher is involved in the partnership of learning, assessing progress all the while in order to further growth.

The standardized test is to some extent still imposed from outside. The test is written and *designed* by those with specialist knowledge in test design, because there is a need to rank order the individuals who take the test. Measurement properties must be stable. Test forms must be comparable. But in the classroom, what would be the purpose of rank ordering learners, or assigning grades? The only value of assessment is if it diagnoses blockages to growth and points the way forward for the individual. Tasks therefore grow out of the current state of learning, negotiated by participants, judged on the basis of success. Ideally, the learner must be a participant in the agenda-setting that is intrinsic to classroom testing, a point that Mats Oscarson made in a



famous paper in 1989, where he said that all testing (from the eyes of a student) is of one of two types: that which matches the learner's goals, and that which does not.

Foucault: I could not agree more.

Mill: The reason for these differences, I am told, lies in the principle of *generalizability*. In a standardized test, the score users are concerned with how meaningful the score is beyond the specific context that generated that score. For this, reliability of the scores is particularly important, and its estimate depends upon consistency of measurement, discrimination between test takers, the length of the test, and the homogeneity of what is tested. But what would *generalizability* mean in a learning environment? Often, we value divergent and conflicting opinion, encouraged by dialogue and debate. Process is just as important as product. The only meaning we could ascribe to 'reliability' would be the extent to which the decisions we make for future growth are more appropriate than inappropriate.

## 8. Conclusion

Foucault: What you describe, if it could be applied, would seem to remove much of the sting from my critique. The system would encourage individuals to grow and to arrive at their own conclusions, rather than be socialized into some system imposed by the State or those in positions of power. Perhaps Socrates was right when he said 'the unexamined life is not worth living.' And perhaps my concept of problematization is not dissimilar from the view that critical self-reflection and self-realization can lead to freedom, even if this freedom is historically contingent?

Mill: We appear to have arrived at the same conclusion. This is why the concept of validity in language testing has been found so important. It is of great consequence in standardized testing and classroom assessment, but for different reasons. Valid classroom assessment is to be judged on the grounds of successful diagnostics, planning and setting appropriate learning goals in a democratic manner, the selection of suitable materials and methods, and bringing knowledge to bear on resourcing at both the local and national levels. The key question is: do our decisions lead to the growth of the individual? This is what pragmatists mean when they insist that the nature of a thing is its impact, and in the classroom, that impact is growth and improvement of the individual.

Foucault: So, in your system, teachers and learners would not be dominated by formal tests and examinations that turn them into objects. It would create free, questioning individuals who would be given the opportunity to participate in shaping their own society?

Mill: Precisely. Formal testing performs a useful function within society and requires experts to design and administer the tests. But it should be kept in its place. The role of the teacher is to make growth possible. This is not a role for the large-scale, standardized test, and so teachers should be taught to keep these two paradigms separate.

Foucault: And the State suitably excluded from both?

Mill: It is our common dim view of power and the potential tyranny of the State that forces us to agree. The only thing that keeps you from writing my prose and me from writing yours on the matter of examinations, is temperament. You are the world's greatest pessimist. Your reworking of Marxist dialectic without an 'other' against which to revolt has led you to the despair of relativism with no exit, as Fulcher and Davidson (2007, p. 144) have observed elsewhere. Whereas I have faith in the individual to create systems that maintain individual rights in a world that ever tends to encroach upon them. That is why we are also worlds apart, despite our harmony on this matter. So let us end here. As you know, I have a fondness for epigraphs, and my argument today can equally well be summed up by von Humboldt, when he says '... if there is one thing more than another which absolutely requires free activity on the part of the individual, it is precisely education, whose object it is to develop the individual.'

[Tired of their mental exertions, Mill and Foucault stretch out and engage in a collective sigh. They pause, as if their thoughts were moving away from testing and on to other concerns of life, liberty and happiness.]

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