Moral education in the United States: an overview

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Education in morality must aid students to develop Christian ethical standards and take responsibility for their own moral lives.

The adult community has always been concerned about passing on its values and ethical standards to the young. In recent years in the United States, however, there has been a heightened concern on the part of parents and educators about this education. Spiralling rates of student vandalism, assaults on teachers, and involvement of youth in capital crimes have aroused some of this concern. In addition, drug use is quite widespread in high school and in recent years has filtered down to children in junior high school (aged twelve to fourteen) and even to those in elementary school. In the last few years the consumption of alcohol by youth has risen alarmingly. The teenage suicide rate took a substantial jump during the decade of the 1970s and continues to be quite high. The same has been true for teenage pregnancy and sexual promiscuity. These are, perhaps, some of the reasons behind the fact that four out of five adults (79%) in the United States responded favorably in both 1975 and 1980 when asked by the Gallop Poll organization, "Are you in favor of the public schools' teaching morals and moral behavior?" Of those respondents who had their own children in public schools, 84% answered in the affirmative. While there are clear symp-

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toms of value confusion and bizarre behavior among the young and strong support from the public for positive action, little has been done to address the situation, particularly in the public schools, where nine out of ten American youths receive their education.

In the last several years in the United States there has been a renewed interest in the private institution, particularly in religiously oriented schools. In 1980, according to the *New York Times*, over 1100 private schools, a great number of them religiously oriented, were opened. That is something on the order of three a day. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects an increase in private school enrollment to continue at least through 1989. There is a good deal of speculation that the major reason for the growing popularity of private and parochial education, even in the teeth of soaring costs for education, is a search on the part of parents for an educational environment that stresses positive, traditional values. Because of this renewed interest in private education and because of the link between religion and moral education, religious educators in the United States are paying close attention to developments in moral education. This essay will discuss four major approaches to moral and values education, commenting on the merits and deficiencies of each approach.

Values clarification

The most widespread approach to values education in our schools is the values-clarification approach. Quite simply, the role of the school and the teacher in this model is to help the child clarify his or her own values. The school does not seek to impose values, nor does it see its role as other than that of a neutral party raising value issues for consideration by the young. The student is given a chance to grapple with issues of personal preference and to discover or clarify what he or she believes or holds dear. The issues presented range from the use of leisure time to attitudes towards certain kinds of crime, such as recreational use of cocaine. Through the values clarification process, the student is able to bring his own values to the surface. Examining these values, he can come to appreciate them more, to reject them or modify them.

The widespread popularity of values clarification can largely be attributed to the fact that it can be conducted through a variety of game-like strategies. Students, for example, might be asked, "What would you do if you were given a surprise gift of

two hundred dollars? Would you spend it on something for yourself? Would you give it to charity? Would you put it in the bank?" Students are then asked to indicate publicly what their decision would be in this situation, although they are not forced to participate. A student may say, "Pass," and let the next student respond. The teacher might keep a tally of the choices on the board. Once the responses were tallied, she might ask the students to interpret the class's choices. She would not, however, criticize the choices of individuals or of the class as a group, nor would she indicate her preference. Her role is to raise the values issues and then remain neutral.

Values-clarification methods are clearly useful. Whether "value" is objective or subjective, the individual will benefit from becoming clear about it. Further, the relatively uncritical stance of the techniques helps to avoid crushing spontaneity and enforcing conformity, which may well be important at certain stages and in some circumstances. Insofar as they stress personal prizing and cherishing, the methods also underline the importance of the affective side of the person, a point often neglected by moral development theories. Advocates of values clarification claim that it cures tendencies toward apathy, flightiness, uncertainty, inconsistency, drifting, over-conformity, over-dissenting and role-playing. Further, advocates see this approach as enabling youth to become positive, purposeful, enthusiastic, proud and consistent. Unfortunately, while a large number of studies have tested these claims, few serious researchers would agree that these claims have been upheld.

Indeed, critics have raised a number of objections to the values-clarification approach. Although recent proponents of the position have mentioned actions which are "personally satisfying" and "socially productive," these actions are identified with whatever the particular individuals in question happen to prefer, and this reveals an underlying relativism which is insufficient as a basis for moral education. It tends to result in the subtle insertion of tacit values which are unexamined. Even if such built-in values are made explicit and acknowledged, it remains to deal with the question of why *these* values (e.g., democracy, self-actualization, authenticity) are chosen, whether others should also be respected, and how these values are grounded or determined (since the clarification process does not provide any justification at all for the acceptance of a value). If one fails to go beyond the clarification methods, it is impossible to criticize or change one's valuings rationally and systematically, since the methods do not clearly distinguish

actual valuings from what one *ought* to value. In addition, the emphasis on a private and individual choice of what is valued, when coupled with the humanistic psychologist's ethic of self-fulfillment, can suggest a purely self-interested moral view (although it does not *necessarily* do so, as its defenders have emphasized).

The fundamental problem in the values clarification theory, then, is its lack of standards for value judgment independent of the individual's pre-existing values: it is not clear what is supposed to be left free to operate "naturally" once the field of one's valuings has been cleared and inhibitions removed, unless a pure, groundless existentialist choice is to be invoked. If one granted the existence of something really and independently valuable, such strategies might allow these things to "appear" in undistorted fashion, but proponents of the theory tend to shy away from this further step. Because there is no independent basis on which values can be criticized, it seems impossible, with the values clarification model, to resolve some conflicts in moral views, whether among persons or within a single person's considerations, when these conflicts are *not* merely results of confusions or unclarities. If I find that when utmost clarity is attained values A and B are incompatible, how can I decide which of them to give up or which is to be subordinated to the other?

This weakness suggests that no *systematic* changes in values accepted are to be expected from the application of clarification techniques. Changes may occur, but they are not likely to proceed in any particular direction (for example, toward greater tolerance or respect for persons) if the agent has no more to go on than the demand for consistency among his various preferences. Yet, unless one embraces a relativism of values, one would expect a *progressive* sort of change to occur as the growing person gropes his way toward more adequate valuings. However, values clarification theory has neither criteria for such change nor strategies to assist it.

A secondary difficulty is that, although values clarification insists that personal values must be publicly proclaimed and acted upon, little attention is given to possible difficulties in doing so—to moral weakness or the lack of self-discipline. The strategies are devoted to clarification rather than activation.

Thus, many find values clarification extremely superficial, often involving students in heady issues without careful use of the head. As a result, they come to see moral issues as matters of personal opinion, not matters for hard thought or difficult commitment. The idea of subjecting moral issues to

careful analysis, of weighing evidence, of looking at the testimony of history, or of seeking out expert opinion is lost. Following from this is the criticism that values clarification unwittingly promotes value relativity in that it assumes an antirational approach to very essential human questions.

Cognitive-developmental moral education

During the 1970s, the dominance of values clarification was sharply challenged by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues. Kohlberg's approach to moral education, called cognitive-developmental, is built on the earlier work of the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget. At the heart of Kohlberg's approach is the theory that individuals go through certain stages of moral thinking. Each one of these stages represents a different way to think about moral issues. At each stage the structure of thought is different from that of the previous stage. These stages are somewhat concomitant with cognitive growth. In essence, then, this approach is not concerned with what we think or what we do so much as *how* we think, with the structure of thought.

In Kohlberg's view, each of us, beginning at age three, is able to go through fixed distinct stages of moral thinking. The first two are at the preconventional level, the next two at the conventional level, and the final two at what Kohlberg calls the postconventional level of moral reasoning. The research indicates, however, that at present most adults are fixated at stages three or four, solidly in the conventional level of moral thinking. Since the United States Constitution and the other founding documents are written at the high postconventional stages of moral thinking, Kohlberg sees justification for having the public schools attempt to educate children so that they progress to the higher stages of thinking.

In addition to the theory of how people process moral information, Kohlberg has developed intervention strategies, which include the use of moral dilemmas, in the school curriculum. Kohlberg's research suggests that having young people grapple with moral dilemmas has a positive effect on their moral development. For example, if a child at the second stage is regularly presented with moral dilemmas and has the opportunity to hear moral reasoning at stage three, he will gradually abandon his stage-two reasoning and move toward stage three. On the other hand, if a stage-three child is engaged in discussions of dilemmas and hears a great deal of stage two argumentation, he does not move toward the lower stage because any

movement is always upward. Also, once someone attains a particular stage of reasoning he or she does not retreat, unless subjected to traumatic experiences such as life in a concentration camp.

The cognitive-developmental approach would have teachers confronting children on a regular basis with a diet of moral dilemmas drawn from the children's own experience, from history and from literature. The role of the teacher is largely neutral. He or she does not suggest "what is the right thing to do." Other than introducing the dilemmas and making sure that the discussion proceeds in an orderly way, the teacher tries to insure that the students confront the moral issue in the dilemma and particularly that they attend to the higher moral reasoning. Such regular grappling with moral dilemmas has a therapeutic effect. That is, students move toward higher levels of moral development, although this is a gradual process extending over a period of several years.

Kohlberg and his colleagues have also advocated the establishment of "just-community schools" or schools within schools. The purpose of these schools is to bring the issues of fairness and justice, which are often hidden from view or handled by adults, to the forefront of the student's consciousness as a part of the institutional structure itself. Kohlberg believes that a sense of justice is the keystone of the moral life. Therefore, students should not be isolated from issues of justice, but these should be a regular part of their academic and social experience in school. The just-community school places the issues of governance and rules, reward and punishment in the province of the students. They and the teachers form a community, and together they must deal with rule-making and violations of those rules. As one can see, in the just-community school the dilemmas are no longer artificial ones, but the real ones of everyday life.

While Kohlberg is receiving a good deal of positive attention in the United States, his theory is also being challenged on several fronts. One whole body of criticism has attacked the empirical basis of the theory. Over the years Kohlberg has modified his stage theory and the instruments by which he has measured these stages in the population, in response to researchers who have found fault with the work on psychometric grounds. Kohlberg's revisions, however, have left the stage structure itself somewhat unclear, for the basic theory behind the system has not yet been reoriented to include these revisions.

There are also significant philosophical problems with the ethical theory taken for granted by cognitive-developmentalism. At the highest moral stage, it would seem that, if moral reasoning is to direct action adequately, it should tend to lead to some definite judgment about an action's rightness or wrongness. Yet it is not clear that that level of reasoning alone can produce this, as Kohlberg himself seems to have agreed in finally acknowledging some sort of need for teaching of content. In fact, it can be argued that without assuming some basic valuations, or some rule of procedure other than those included in the forms of reasoning described, many conflicts of interests cannot be resolved at all. Without comparative evaluation of the content of individuals' conflicting claims, there is no way of assigning the claims priority once universalization has placed them on an equal basis. For example, if one person considers health care the most important value and wishes to commit societal resources to extensive provision of medical care, while another scorns this preoccupation and prefers using such resources to provide luxurious cities or lush national parks in which to "burn the candle at both ends," there is no way for either to evaluate the decision objectively. (Asking each to apply formal stage-six reasoning by putting himself in the other's place may merely cause both to reiterate their present preferences in the name of everyone, rather than to examine them critically.) Like values clarification, then, cognitive development cannot stand as a *complete* account of moral growth, at least not without some investigation into content of the sort which has only recently been admitted by Kohlberg and his followers to be a proper field for moral education.

It can also be argued that the Kohlbergian view (without some modifications still to be developed) cannot answer basic motivational questions concerning moral behavior, the reason why moral action should be undertaken in the first place, unless something like a notion of good or value is admitted. This may be related to the fact that, as has often been remarked, the theory pays too little attention to noncognitive factors. Certainly the emotions, the will or power of choice, and perhaps character or habit play some part in the execution of moral action, if not in decision-making as well.

The research of cognitive-developmentalists has established essential points about moral reasoning which must be taken into account. Nonetheless, this theory, too, seems inadequate in its present form. Possibly the emphasis on method rather than content which it shares with values clarification is to

some extent responsible for this.

Cognitive-analytic approach

The third approach also stresses moral reasoning, but without the developmental structure of Kohlberg's theory. Instead, the work of John Wilson and others is geared toward teaching children methods of proper ethical thinking according to the work of the analytic movement in contemporary philosophy. For this reason we may describe it as "cognitive-analytic."

Like the two types already described, this approach shares in an old and honored tradition. It is based on the belief that teachers should instruct children in the process of solving moral problems. They are trying to give children not answers, but a way of proceeding when confronted with ethical issues. Teachers attempt to equip students with logical-thinking skills so that when confronted with a moral problem, they do not simply rely on emotional responses or prejudices. Proponents of this approach insist that children should be able to reason through (for instance) the issue of whether or not recreational drug use should be permitted. They should also be able to determine under what circumstances a particular act of stealing might or might not be justified and to engage intellectually such questions as, "Is there such a thing as a just war, and if so, under what conditions?"

Advocates of this approach believe that citizens in a democracy must be able to solve problems rationally and to establish laws based on ethical principles. Further, they must be able to understand and interpret the country's Constitution and other founding documents. While values clarification and the cognitive-developmental approach support these same themes, the cognitive-analytics suggest a more direct approach. They believe that the school should teach reasoning skills for analyzing ethical decisions, rather than set up situations (discussions of dilmemas, for instance) and hope that some positive change will take place. The cognitive-analytics see such approaches as both too arbitrary and too passive.

The advocates of the cognitive-analytic approach propose to teach moral reasoning, by which they mean a particular intellectual process of working through moral problems. In the same way as children are taught to apply a set of skills to certain problems in mathematics or biology, children are given skills to work through moral and ethical issues. The students are given not only the skills, but also practice opportunities and

simulated situations in which to gain proficiency with the moral reasoning strategies. Once the skills are acquired, teachers are encouraged to give the students practice in solving moral problems as they come up in literature, history, science and other curricular areas.

This third approach has a long history in education, particularly at the college level, and many educators are now attempting to devise courses in ethics for students not only in secondary school but also in elementary school. At this point, however, this approach is not widely practiced. One obvious reason is that relatively few teachers have taken courses in ethics, and they are not conversant with its methods. Further, there is little solid evidence to indicate that once having learned these skills, students are able to apply them in their own lives. The same criticism made of the cognitive-developmental approach, of being too abstract and remote from the flesh and blood of the moral life, is made of moral reasoning. Although Wilson's books mention non-cognitive factors, little is said about their training or development, and in fact this is declared to be something other than "education" properly speaking. This, coupled with the lack of available curricular materials and empirical evidence supporting it, leaves the cognitive-analytic approach vulnerable to attack. Good methods of moral reasoning are not so uncontroversially accepted among philosophers that they can be directly adopted as Wilson's approach suggests, and more work would have to be done on the non-cognitive factors to make this view complete.

Teaching a set of values

The final approach is the most traditional of all those suggested here. At its core is the view that a school ought to teach a particular set of values, such as courage, respect for property, hard work, and fairness in dealing with others. Certainly, one of the motivations for instituting schools, particularly in the United States, has been to aid in the process of developing in the young the kinds of personal and social values that support both the individual and the society.

Up until shortly after World War II in the United States, this view was widely accepted. The school supported the family and the church in the transmission of positive values. Values which were widely accepted included love of learning, respect for hard work and achievement, the desirability of certain personal habits, such as courage, kindness, and self-

respect, and certain social attributes, such as respect for property and the settling of personal differences in a non-violent manner. The school curriculum, the school environment and the teachers themselves were all expected to contribute to the transmission of these and other positive values.

These values were taught in a variety of ways, with what might be called "the four E's approach": exhortation, example, expectations, and experience. Children are exhorted to certain desirable ways of thinking and behaving. Undesirable behavior, whether encountered in literature or in life, is discouraged. On the other hand, virtuous behavior is encouraged. Second, teachers are expected to be good examples or good role models. There is a clear recognition that in the teaching role one is not just another individual, free to behave as he wishes. There is a responsibility to set an example of the best in moral thought and action for students. Third, the expectations of the school for the child are that he or she will behave well. What good behavior means is clear to the students and is publicly acknowledged. On the other hand, bad behavior is also clearly recognized and responded to. In effect, the environment draws out from the student a desirable way of thinking and behaving. Fourth, the school tries to provide the student with opportunities to be involved in activities that are morally enhancing. Specifically, it provides the students with service experiences, such as reading to the blind, working with handicapped children, and providing services to elderly people. Currently, some schools—in particular, a network of Jesuit high schools—have extensive programs of service, with service a requirement for graduation.

This traditional approach is criticized by some as indoctrinary. Supporters acknowledge a certain sort of "indoctrination," countering, on the one hand, that it is impossible not to have some aspects of a school program that are indoctrinary and, on the other hand, that it is the responsibility of the educators to make sure that the indoctrinary aspects are positive ones.

A second criticism is that the approach is not well formulated. There is no set curriculum that has been developed and tested. This, of course, is a criticism that has been levelled against many of these programs. Another criticism which emerges, particularly in the context of public school education, is the issue of whose values comprise the set of values that are taught. Some suggest that in a pluralistic society a school should not be advocating a particular set of values, but rather should be value-neutral. To be otherwise would be to exclude the values of

some and intrude on the values of others. Advocates of the traditional approach point out that to be pluralistic does not mean to be value-neutral and indeed that the United States as a nation officially stands for a certain set of values.

Conclusion

A few final comments on the state of moral education in the United States seem to be in order. First, it is clear that the importance of this subject has not been translated into clear school programs. The reaction of educators, in spite of public interest, has been rather slight and somewhat muted. A part of the inactivity or confusion of the schools in the area of moral education might possibly be explained by the general value confusion in the society following World War II. In the United States, the moral confusion surrounding America's involvement in the Vietnam War and other events, such as Watergate, deepened confusion about values in general. School teachers have not been unaffected by this value confusion.

At the same time, specialists in the area of moral and values education have tended to gravitate around particular approaches. Their answer to the problem, "what should be done?" is to advocate one particular system or approach. Often, much of the debate surrounding moral education is whether or not to select values clarification or the cognitive-developmental approach. It would seem to us that instead of arguing about which is superior, teachers ought to combine the best aspects of these methods. The result would be to soften the weaknesses in each system. For instance, a combined approach might overcome the relativity of values clarification and supplement the cognitive-developmental approach with a clear set of values. In addition, values clarification and the cognitive-developmental approach may soften the sometimes overly indoctrinary quality of the traditional teaching of the set-of-values approach, with the result that the student realizes that ultimately he must internalize his values and take responsibility for his own moral life.

But perhaps the most telling criticism that could be levelled against the current approaches, particularly the first three, values clarification, the cognitive-developmental approach, and cognitive analysis, is their lack of attention to moral behavior. These systems tend to confine both their definition of the moral person and their programmatic emphasis to the verbal level. The criticism that moral education is a word game is quite telling. Scholars such as James Coleman and Urie Bronfenbren-

ner have for some time talked about the inadequate socialization of the young in American society. Students and youth are the focus of a child-centered view that makes no demands on them. They are isolated from the world of work and real responsibility and increasingly confined to youth ghettos, whether in their school or with their peer group. There is little opportunity for the young to make a contribution and to identify themselves as persons having social worth. What this criticism suggests is that much more needs to be done in the area of moral action.

As indicated earlier, there is growing support for religiously oriented private education in the United States. It is our impression, however, that Catholic religious educators are dealing with moral education in a fragmented, compartmentalized fashion. In particular, they have embraced first the values-clarification approach and, second, Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental approach. In this they are fulfilling sociologist-novelist Father Andrew Greeley's second law: when the Church abandons an idea, the world picks it up. When the world abandons an idea, the Church picks it up. In fact, our survey indicates that none of these currently popular approaches to moral education is sufficiently valid to be accepted as a model for secular moral education. *A fortiori*, none is sufficiently valid to be accepted uncritically as a model for religious education. And though we have not directly engaged the question in this paper, we nonetheless think that some of the underlying assumptions of these approaches, if not qualified, may be inconsistent with Catholic moral theology. For this reason Catholic educators should, in drawing upon the many good points of existing moral education curricula, exercise caution to insure that these points are integrated into the larger religious world-view. □

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