

The Right to Individual Judgment

Elizabeth Léonie Simpson

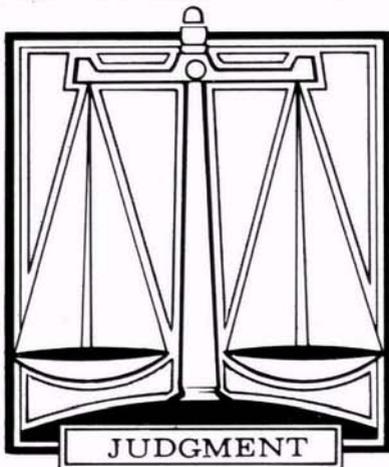
"The right to be unique in decision or judgment making is a complicated one, and the ability to be unique in performing these processes depends on many factors, including developmental ones as well as the social environment of the person involved."

"Every place, everything, and everyone can be unique in some way." So commented Roger Tory Peterson once about a friend who was believed to be the only person in the world to have performed mouth-to-beak resuscitation on a rock-hopper penguin.¹ But the right to be unique in decision or judgment making is a complicated one, and the ability to be unique in performing these processes depends upon many factors, including developmental ones as well as the social environment of the person involved. Diversity is inevitable; there is no infallibility and no universality (in the strict sense of that word), although there may be age and social class-related trends.

Control of human variation in decision making has been a matter of continuing concern. To many, Don Quixote's "Más vale algo que nada" ("Something is worth more than nothing") applies to the authoritarianism of religious limitations on individual judgment and choice. A church, for example, and not a person, defined suicide as a mortal sin and decreed the necessity of leaving the choice of living or dying to a higher power. Not everyone accepts the forced guidance of others willingly, especially if he or she knows that the obligation to follow it is implicit. In *Paradise Lost*, the great poet John Milton described Satan as deciding for himself that it was:

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."

Quite apart from religious groups, many



adults and children do not make judgments based on their own observations of happenings, but rather on external sources of information—the authorities that supply the facts. Authorities support, even guarantee, each other. Ready acceptance of them can be a willing flight from personal responsibility. Doubt or denial can be the frightening, limiting product of skepticism that directs authority back to the self.

Accepting and utilizing authority is not a simple process at any age, and our schools are not structured to make it easier. Teachers are fundamentally concerned with getting children to make correct judgments about what is the case in various forms of knowledge.² Wake and MacKenzie have suggested that, correctly understood, this statement means teachers believe that making proper judgments can *only* be done by accepting the opinions of legitimate authorities.³ In schools where this is true, there is no recognition that the individuals affected by outcomes must be involved in the decisions that produce them. The non-descript, single-item person is not seen as legitimate and authoritative, even over himself/herself.

¹ G. G. Simpson. *Concession to the Improbable*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. p. 242.

² J. Gribble. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1970.

³ A. Wake and J. MacKenzie. "Judgment and Curriculum." *Jour. of Educational Theory*, 25(4): 359-61, February 1975. Citation from p. 361.

Factors That Affect Judgment

Valid personal judgment is dependent on a number of factors: (a) honest self-exploration; (b) for many, membership in a supportive group and the opportunity to practice independence; (c) acceptance of the responsibility for the consequences of the decisions made; and (d) an informed understanding of unique situational variables that must affect the judgment being made. The first of these—honest self-exploration—does not end there. It implies the avoidance of self-deception and a crippling withdrawal from external reality. The interior person must come to terms with the world beyond; the internal vision be fused with the actual view from the window. A combination of both the personal and the larger reality takes place. Valid judgment requires a balanced relationship between the tangible and specific world, and the intuitions of the private spirit.

To suggest that such judgment depends on membership in a group supporting independence sounds contradictory, but it is not. Such a group functions as an appropriate environment for the self-exploration already begun. At adolescence, this becomes the search for identity that Erikson has described so well, and the person's awareness of self becomes the basis of his or her capability to judge actions or situations and their effect on the quality of human life.⁴ Ideally, explorations in judgment at adolescence mean seeking the chance to decide freely, without doubting oneself, being ridiculed by others, or being pressured into the unthinking acceptance of external authority. Under optimal conditions, these trials would take place in an ethicogenic environment⁵—a society or smaller social group in which the person can enlarge that stirring identity, the power to reason and to value positively, and is not an unidentifiable member of the group. Not the society but:

The "crowd" is the untruth by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction.⁶

For the person, membership in a society is needed where the individual can retain and further develop his or her singularity of judgment. Submersion in a crowd is a different matter.

The third determinant of valid personal

decision making is the acceptance of responsibility for consequences. A single judgment may not be wise or even useful. Or it may be valid and still provoke responses that the decision-maker would gladly avoid or share. It may indeed be *wrong*—as well as unconventional—wrong in the sense of adversely affecting the lives of others. The individual has the right to be wrong. That is a basic social freedom. It is accompanied, however, by real limitations on the jeopardy placed on *others* through individual decision making. Usually this is done by defining an effective range of operations where the judgments of one person are applied.

According to Leakey and Lewin, the hunting-gathering way of life lasted several million years during which both physical and cultural evolution occurred. Some 12,000 years ago, systematic agriculture began; the city and urbanism were initially invented only 9,000 years ago.⁷ The opportunity for meaningful personal choice—based on a range of real and available alternatives for the many, not just the ruling few—is far more recent than that. Its existence is still fragile, dependent on values of independence and freedom, as well as on economic prosperity.

Absolute freedom of judgment is not possible for the responsible person. What society could allow it when a good or value, held in common by most and not achievable alone, is threatened? Broudy has pointed out that *both pluralism*, with the multiple choices it supports, and *unity*, with its insistence on convergence, have "good" and "bad" aspects.⁸ When pluralism is encouraged, the range of choices that appears may include the

⁴ E. Erikson. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968.

⁵ The concept of the ethicogenic environment is described in: E. L. Simpson. "A Holistic Approach to Moral Development and Behavior." In: T. Lickona, editor. *Moral Development and Behavior: Theory, Research and Social Issues*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

⁶ S. Kierkegaard. *The Point of View for My Work as Author: A Report to History*. Trans.: W. Lowrie, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962. p. 112.

⁷ R. Leakey and R. Lewin. *Origins*. New York: Dutton, 1977.

⁸ H. S. Broudy. "Educational Unity in a Pluralistic Society." *School Review* 86(1): 70-81; November 1977.

bizarre, the negatively idiosyncratic, and novelty for its own sake that reduces, diminishes, and trivializes the process, as well as its result. Not all options are valuable; not all need be taken seriously. "Good" pluralism can avoid these, just as the "bad" use of unity as conformity for its own sake can be rejected.

The last item in the list of factors affecting decision making that was given earlier is no less important than the others. Judgment, to be valid, needs to be informed. Considered seriously, it needs to be based on relevant evidence, not all of which may be accessible to other members of the public. Its form and structure are relevant; if it is vague and broad, it may be effectively pointless. Its usefulness is relative to the needs of the case: too much precision can be even more limiting than too little.

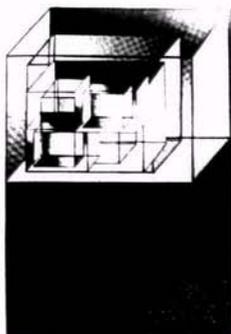
Curricula Reflect Diverse Pressures

Concern for the making of judgments (and especially their ethical aspects) has led to the development of curricula of many types that reflect the diverse pressures of contemporary society. How this should be done and the results desired are no longer as clearly and infallibly defined as they once were. Here is an example of one multimedia program⁹ designed and implemented by the Unitarian-Universalist Association for pre-adolescents (ages nine through twelve) who are awakening to their own individuality, as well as their close relationship with peers and rule-setting adults. (With adaptations this program has been used with participants of a wider age span and even within intergenerational groupings.)

The concepts that underlie the course are *freedom, responsibility* (which includes *love*), *sensitivity, honesty* (creating *trust*), *self-identity* and *self-discipline, independence, and adventurousness*—the capacity to risk. The processes used in the course are meant to be universally

⁹ C. Dodder and B. Dodder. *Decision-Making*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, no date. The materials provided include the *Leader's Guide* (with fifteen sessions and guidance for the use of the teaching aids), photographic essays, an *Ethics Game, Statement Cards, Situation Slides, Comic Books* (that focus on self-deception), and a book to aid the discovery of the need to live with the consequences of judgments.

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applicable to situations of decision making. They include:

1. Becoming aware of the needs and feelings of the people involved in the situation, including one's own;
2. Enlarging one's "we" to include the well-being of as many people in the situation as possible;
3. Evaluating carefully the information one has about the situation;

"One step toward self-knowledge is far more valuable for humankind than Armstrong's first step as he walked on the moon."

4. Trying to avoid self-deception about one's own motivations;
5. Ordering one's values for the situation;
6. Identifying the source of one's values and evaluating their validity;
7. Imagining alternative courses of action and possible consequences; and,
8. Being willing to live with the consequences of one's decisions.

A simplified statement suggests that decisions and judgments vary because (a) values vary between persons; (b) they originate outside of ourselves; (c) they have been influenced by different important others and (d) by the environment, including the social situation.

H. Richard Niebuhr wrote:

Decisions we make . . . in the midst of cultural history are existential as well as relative; that is to say they are decisions that cannot be reached by speculative inquiry but must be made in freedom by a responsible subject acting in the present moment on the basis of what is true for him.

The validity of those decisions rests upon that truth—what is true for the decider and doer—and the extent of self-knowledge already gained. One step toward self-knowledge is far more valuable for humankind than Armstrong's first step as he walked on the moon. As Louis MacNeice described us in his *Explorations*:

For we are unique, a
conscious
Hoping and therefore despairing creature,
the final
Anomaly of the world, we can learn no
method
From whales or birds or worms;
Our end is our own to be won by our own
endeavour
And held on our own terms.

Private, individual, and idiosyncratic as these terms may be, they are never islanded, never isolated from the needs, desires, beliefs, and values of others who share this varied and marvelous world.

The education of judgment for decision making may involve the clarification of individual values and the facilitation of personal development through the practice of skills. However, it must also distinguish and utilize the positive basic social values that now exist and are further appearing in democratic societies. No functional group can survive without a core of mutuality—a belief in commonality and faith shared at the heart. [E]

¹⁰ J. P. Shaver and W. Strong. *Facing Value Decision: Rationale-Building for Teachers*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1976.



Elizabeth Léonie Simpson is Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

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