

AN ADMINISTRATOR LOOKS AT MORAL EDUCATION:

And if I ask these things, will ye still call me friend?

THOMAS SOBOL

Moral education has always been a purpose of the schools. None of our traditions pursued knowledge without wisdom: indeed, for most of history there was no such distinction. American society too, from the days of *The New England Primer* through the *McGuffey Readers* to the *Seven Cardinal Principles*, has been concerned with making children good as well as competent. The law-and-order cry of the contemporary back-to-basics advocate may seem very different from the question "What is justice?" in Plato's academy; but both are concerned with leading thought and action into desired moral courses.

Furthermore, we know that the school as an institution helps shape values whether its agents wish it to or not. It sanctions and rewards some behavior, while discouraging or punishing other behavior; its authority and organizational structures teach how decisions are to be made and who is to make them; its curriculum choices, instructional methods, grouping practices, scheduling arrangements, and grading systems transmit a set of values which is not lost upon the young.

The issue, therefore, is not whether we shall engage in moral education. Rather, the issue is what kind of moral education shall we engage in? What do we mean by "moral," and how is such education to be accomplished?

One can imagine a world in which the aims of private and social life are so generally shared that the nature of morality would seem self-evident and there would be no need to differenti-

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ate "moral education" from the total education of the young. But in our pluralistic situation serious proponents of moral education had better be clear about their purposes and well prepared in the means of achieving them.

Unhappily, school administrators reap few rewards these days for thinking about such matters. Declining enrollment, mounting inflation, and the apparent fact that too many pupils fail to learn the fundamental skills of intellectual operation have set the agenda for us. Planning/budgeting systems, competency testing, accreditation requirements, school closings, the fight for adequate funding—this is where the action is, and if public school superintendents would like to keep their jobs, they'd better tend to the action and not run the risk of public outcry over moral education ventures that few may want and none can measure. Announce a program, and the response will be: Who asked you to teach values to our children? What values are you teaching? Whose are they? How in a pluralistic society can you defend indoctrination? You're *not* indoctrinating? Then you're guilty of secular moral relativism. How much is this program costing us, anyway? No wonder so little gets done, except inadvertently or surreptitiously.

And yet the need remains. Anyone who thinks about the problems which we face in our society or in our individual lives knows that cognitive knowledge alone is not enough for their solution. Accordingly, allow me as a practicing school administrator sympathetic to the broad aims of moral education to ask certain questions of you, my friends the teachers and theoreticians in the field. Only if you can help me answer such questions can I help you to accomplish your purpose in the schools.

1 What is your goal? What is it that you want to do? Is it to help pupils become more aware of the values by which they currently live, à la "values clarification"? If so, are you willing to accept any values they may have as equally moral? If you think you are willing, what do you plan to do about the student who tells you it's all right to steal from department stores because the stores have more money than individual people do? And if you *really* are willing to accept any and all values, aren't you suggesting that you have no moral standards at all, that your program is really sanctioning amorality?

Perhaps it is not values clarification you are after but the development of moral reasoning. Perhaps you wish to help students progress toward higher stages of moral development, as in Kohlberg's theory. But once again, what if students "reason" their way toward conclusions which violate society's norms? Will you accept any and all conclusions? How do you know that in teaching students to be more articulate about their moral decisions, you are not simply teaching them to be more glib? To what extent does moral action follow moral reasoning? And are you sure that moral behavior consists of a series of moral choices? May it not consist instead of unconscious patterns of behavior learned through modeling and through osmotic interaction with the culture?

Perhaps neither values clarification nor moral reasoning is your goal; perhaps you wish to inculcate "the basic human virtues" in the young. Do we not all, after all, believe in honesty, and respect for life, and love of one's neighbor, and liberty and justice for all? Well, maybe. But who, for example, is one's neighbor? The person across the street? The people with different skin color and speech patterns across town? How wide does the circle extend—to boat people? to the P.L.O.? to Russians, for that matter? And just what do liberty and justice require of us regarding these people? I submit that what begins by seeming obvious does not continue so, once you think about it. What kind of indoctrination, if any, is appropriate in a pluralistic society? And if the answer is "none," how do you avoid it?

2 Is the morality in which you're interested a purely individual matter, or are you concerned with the morality of social groups? Granted that morality, like charity, begins at home; I may be eminently moral in my personal dealings, but participate in a society which kills other people to protect its interests and squanders the finite resources of the planet to promote the comforts of the present generation. Do you intend to deal with social issues of this kind? And if so, from what moral or ethical perspective do you intend to view them?

3 How do you intend to achieve your purposes? Will you add time and activity to the school program? Or will you work within the existing schedule? If the latter, something has to go; what would you suggest? Will you be engaged in activities separate from the academic curriculum, as with the Raths-Simon exercises or Kohlberg's moral dilemmas? Or will you weave your discussions into the regular program in social studies or literature or science? If your activities are separate, won't they soon come to seem artificial? If they are integrated, won't they take time away from, or even risk subverting the purpose of, cognitive studies?

Recently Professor Lawrence Kohlberg described using the concept of moral stages to analyze a passage from *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck explores his motives in not turning Jim over to the authorities, and the pupil, under the teacher's guidance, discovers that "from the author's point of view, the book is dealing with something else entirely—the arbitrariness of traditional American morality." Perhaps. But is this the proper use of literature—to serve as springboard for abstract discussion of moral issues?

4 Perhaps you intend to achieve your aims not through such discussion, but by involving students in group action. Perhaps you intend to change the governance structure of your school in order to involve students more fully in decision making and to have them consider the ethical implications of decisions which they make. How much

adult guidance will you provide your students? Which ethical standards will you use to guide them? What limits will you set on their authority? How will you reconcile the need for students to make free choices and accept their consequences with the need for the institution to assert its own authority—a need which seems urgent at this moment of our history?

5 How will you prepare yourselves to conduct these activities well? A license to teach science or music or writing requires extensive preparation accomplished under qualified supervision. Shall we assume that a license to teach morality requires none?

What kind of education or training shall we require? An after-school in-service course in Kohlberg's theory? A graduate course in moral philosophy? A lifetime spent in reading, self-examination, and empathy with others?

I especially urge your attention to this question. My guess is that if you treat it honestly, you will be required to think clearly about your purposes and activities and will avoid superficiality in what you do.

6 Where is the money for your program to come from? Do not assume that you can add it; the schools even more than other public institutions are in straitened circumstances, and money for new ventures must usually be diverted from programs already in place. What goes, in order to make room for you?

7 How will you evaluate your program? How will we know what you have accomplished? I acknowledge that your purposes are cosmic and your intended effects long range, but surely you must be able to show something for the time and money and possible political risk you are requiring. Remember, if our program does not go well, you who teach will still have tenure and you who research will still have your positions, but the administrator may be in trouble. I am not unwilling to take a chance in a good cause. But how do you intend to help me show the public that the cause is not in vain?

In my own working situation, I have been blessed with capable and dedicated teachers, brilliant consultants, an enlightened community, and funding outside the local tax base. I am proud of what my colleagues have achieved and continue to wish them well. But even under these ideal conditions, I have been called upon from time to time to answer questions such as those I've posed. How much more pertinent they may be elsewhere!

8 Meanwhile, even here there is another set of questions waiting to be raised. For the time being, given our hyper-rationalized society and schools, our narrowly scientific definition of knowledge, and our lack of a shared sense of the purpose and meaning of life, the questions posed here are those which advocates of moral education must answer if they expect to be effective in the schools. Morality has come to mean something separate from knowledge and wisdom, and it probably has to be pursued through separate activities in separate programs under the sway of separate theories.

But in the long run, I hope, such will not be the case. There are signs—in the upheavals of the 1960s, in "third force" psychology, in philosophy's tentative return to metaphysics—that our belief may be ending that only knowledge gained through scientific method is worth knowing. If so, other domains of knowledge drawing on other kinds of human experience may again become accepted, and moral education will again be as inseparable from all of education as it was for most of our ancestors. What is the nature of humanity and of the world? This is education's basic question, and the answers to it as surely engage the moral as they do the purely cognitive.

In my future school, therefore, there will be no need for "moral education" programs. Knowledge will not be considered apart from questions of its meaning and its use. Values will be an intrinsic aspect of all studies. And literature will no longer need to serve as a springboard for the discussion of moral dilemmas; it will stand on its own—a direct, intuitive expression of truth about the race.

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