

Judging the Ethics of Ethics Education

To shape a society with a stronger moral foundation, schools must see the need to improve the social ethic, not just individual moral behavior.

"Business!" cried the ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"¹

Last year, while returning to her car after a school visit, one of my colleagues had her purse taken from her by three young men. She was shocked at how casually they assaulted

her. They simply walked up to her, grabbed her purse, walked a short distance away, and stood smiling and joking as they rifled through it. A week or so later, using the keys they found in her purse, the same young men stole her car from the street outside the school.

The specifics of what happened to my colleague and the nature and circumstance of the young men who

assaulted her are, in many respects, unique, as all such situations inevitably are. Yet the event provides a good opportunity to think about just how well our society and our schools teach ethical behavior to the young.

Individual Responsibility by Itself Is Not Enough

Current social and educational thought emphasizes individual re-



Extreme poverty in the midst of extreme wealth can be excused as morally defensible if schools fail to teach children the effect of the social environment on individual moral behavior.

"TIS THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY, MY GOOD MAN! WE WON - DID YOU KNOW THAT? CAPITALISM IS TRIUMPHANT. COMMUNISM LIES IN RUINS. OUR SYSTEM PREVAILS! WE WON! SMILE!"

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sponsibility for moral behavior and the justice of punishment for offending behaviors. No doubt, in my colleague's case, the commonsense judgment would be that the parents of the young men are to blame for not instilling proper values in their offspring, that the schools are to blame for not teaching right from wrong, and that the young men themselves are to blame and must, therefore, accept the consequences of their behavior. Having acted unethically and illegally, they must be punished swiftly and with sufficient harshness to deter them and, by example, others from such behavior in the future.

This view has a lot of popular support. Indeed, it has considerable validity. But, unfortunately, it is also dangerously incomplete: it contains no suggestion of a collective social responsibility to encourage and support the ethical behavior of individuals. Society's role in the social contract, from this perspective, is limited largely to the punishment of bad behavior; the school's role is confined to teaching lists of moral aphorisms by rote.

When moral instruction portrays society as a collection of individuals, each responsible for him or herself, it fails to take into account the morality of our social environment and the

collective responsibility of all of us for each of us.

In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the error of the policeman Javert, who relentlessly and with a rigid view of moral correctness pursues the starving thief Jean Valjean, is precisely the error current ethics instruction may encourage. As Hugo asserts, "Probity, sincerity, candor, conviction, the idea of duty are things that, when in error, can turn hideous . . . what might be called the evil of good."²

The evil of this approach to being good is that it can, for example, provide the basis for excusing and rationalizing the ill effects brought on by the extremes of wealth and poverty prevalent today in the United States. The plight of the homeless can be seen as the result of their individual actions: moral deficiency, bad decision making, or laziness. In other words, since the poor are responsible for their plight, extreme poverty in the midst of extreme wealth is morally defensible, and can therefore be ignored.

Henry Lawson was angry at this sort of ethical sophistry when, almost a century ago, he wrote in the poem "Faces in the Street":

They lie, the men who tell us in a loud
decisive tone,
That what is here a stranger, and that
misery's unknown, . . .
I wonder would the apathy of wealthy men
endure
Were all their windows level with the faces
of the poor?³

The wealthy often subscribe to a materialist moral philosophy that would make a Marxist proud. And they are supported in their indifference by countless middle- and working-class Americans who stride past the gathering signs of our social decay with the firm tread and elevated gaze of those who truly believe that the suffering millions in the United States are each individually responsible for having chosen their fate. All too often, too many Americans accept the idea that there is little to be done for the downtrodden except to try to uplift their morals so that they will want to improve themselves. As Scrooge's friend Jacob Marley

learned too late, this is self-deluding and destructive folly.

Collective Action Shapes Society

If schools are to help children learn to avoid the mistakes of Javert and Marley, they must provide a program of moral education that helps children think through issues such as those posed by the theft of my colleague's purse and automobile. Moral education that focuses on only one side of the social contract is, at best, irrelevant to the experience of millions of children. At worst, it runs the risk of promoting cynicism instead of ethical behavior. The young men who assaulted my colleague would, no doubt, laugh at a lecture about the importance of honesty and respect for private property in a society in which their lives are so disrespected. Their social environment teaches other lessons about respect for others—that there is precious little of it.

In the end, society's members must judge it worthy of the demands it places on them. When people decide, as millions in the U.S. seem to have, that our society is at its heart immoral and fraudulent, a crisis is at hand. In 1990 it is especially important for schools to help children learn individual moral behaviors and also to see the need to improve the social ethic. Since schools can help shape a society with a stronger moral foundation, any proposed moral education program should be judged by the extent to which it takes both individual and social responsibility for ethical behavior into account. □

¹ C. Dickens, (1961), *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd.), p.23.

² V. Hugo, (1987), *Les Misérables*, Translation by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee, (New York: New American Library), p. 291.

³ H. Lawson, (1982), "Faces in the Street," in *The Essential Henry Lawson*, (Australia: Curry O'Neil).

Alex Molnar is Professor of Education, The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201. He is Contemporary Issues consultant to *Educational Leadership*.

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