

Moral Education in the Schools

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Depuis la publication du rapport du Comité MacKay, on a introduit peu à peu l'enseignement de la morale dans le programme scolaire de la province d'Ontario. Il s'est écoulé maintenant suffisamment de temps pour pouvoir évaluer ce qui s'est passé, et c'est ce qu'on propose de faire dans cet article. On fait un examen critique des réglementations du Ministère de l'Education en Ontario concernant l'enseignement de la morale et on arrive à la conclusion que ni d'un point de vue théorique, ni d'un point de vue pratique la base fournie au programme d'enseignement de la morale n'est suffisante. Du fait que les réglementations du Ministère de l'Education en Ontario s'écartent sur certains points importants des recommandations du Comité MacKay — je continue avec une évaluation de la proposition MacKay, qui suggère que l'enseignement du raisonnement moral soit la base de l'enseignement et de la morale en Ontario. Cette proposition contient elle aussi des erreurs importantes. Dans la troisième partie de l'article je conclus en soumettant les raisons — dont la source se trouve dans les deux premières parties — pour lesquelles un enseignement officiel de la morale ne devrait pas continuer à faire partie du programme de l'école publique.

Many educational jurisdictions in the English-speaking world are feeling the force of a wave of support among educators in particular for the introduction of formal moral or values education in state-financed schools.

In Ontario, this trend is not surprising. "Character development" has been regarded an important educational objective in Ontario since the days of Egerton Ryerson. Up to the 1960s this objective was pursued as a formal objective through religious instruction. In 1966, however, a committee was formed by the Ontario government with a view to examining the place both of religious and moral instruction in the public school system. It was the report of this Committee which opened the doors of Ontario schools to formal moral education.

The MacKay report, entitled *Religious Information and Moral Development* (1969), offered two basic recommendations. First, it advised the government to remove religious instruction from the curriculum. Second, it recommended that a formal program of moral education be introduced.

The MacKay Committee's major recommendations were endorsed, and while change has been gradual, it is now possible to evaluate the practical outcome. It is desirable to do so because it gives considerable cause for concern. The following evaluation will be in three parts. Part A examines ministry policy on moral education. Part B investigates the proposal of the MacKay Committee that instruction in moral reasoning provide the

foundation for the Ontario moral education program. Finally, Part C suggests reasons for thinking that formal moral education should not continue to be part of the public school program.

PART A: THE ONTARIO SCENE

The Ministry of Education in Ontario has pronounced itself in favour of the introduction of formal moral education in the public school curriculum. This stance is explicit only in curriculum-policy statements for primary grades. However, there is good reason to believe that this stance will be adopted using similar terminology for the intermediate and senior levels as well. The crucial directive reads as follows:

The Child in the Primary and Junior Divisions will be given opportunities to:

- begin to develop a personal value system within a context that reflects the priorities of a concerned society and at the same time recognizes the integrity of the individual;
- become aware of the values that Canadians regard as essential to the well-being and continuing development of their society — namely, respect for the individual, concern for others, social responsibility, compassion, honesty, and the acceptance of work, thought and leisure as valid pursuits for human beings;
- begin to develop a personal set of values by identifying value alternatives and their consequences, selecting personal values from the alternatives, internalizing the values selected, and acting in accordance with the values selected;
- identify and analyse public value issues. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1969, p. 12)

As it stands, the objectives stated seem to ring true. Nevertheless, whatever its superficial attractiveness the ministry's statement is subject to serious objections. First, exactly what opportunity is to be offered to the student? Is the teacher being asked simply to make the student aware of the "priorities of a concerned society"? If so, is the teacher to intervene if a student or students select "personal values from the alternatives" which are incompatible with "the priorities of a concerned society" or "the integrity of the individual"? Or is the student to be "given opportunities to internalize the values selected and act in accordance with them whether or not those values "recognize the integrity of the individual" or are compatible with "the priorities of a concerned society" or consistent with "the values that Canadians regard as essential to the well-being and continuing development of their society"?¹ On these points the ministry's statement is totally silent. Indeed it might well be regarded as systematically ambiguous, thus having the virtue of being politically defensible from a variety of incompatible points of view.

Second, what exactly are the priorities of a concerned society? On this question, too, the ministry is understandably silent. For the moment one

begins to search for an answer to the question one finds oneself in the middle of virtually every major political or moral controversy currently being debated. For example, a concerned Canadian society today is a society concerned about pollution. What then are the values of a concerned society with respect to pollution or, to be more specific, with respect to drilling in the Beaufort Sea, or with respect to Grassy Narrows, to use but two pressing examples?

Now let us add to our list emission controls, seat-belt legislation, public transport, capital punishment, unemployment insurance, wage-and-price controls (contrast the position of organized labor — e.g., the teachers — with that of the government), land use, housing, and so on and on. These, after all, are the issues of a concerned society in the Seventies. And the answers we give will reveal our priorities as Canadians. At the same time, what the answers will turn out to be we do not really know. We have not as a society come to a consensus.

If we now turn our attention to the second element in the general statement, namely reference to recognizing the integrity of the individual, we are equally at sea. "Integrity of the individual" is a catch phrase. It is more likely to be heard in political speeches than anywhere else. And in so far as it has a history as a concept, it is within the tradition of political philosophy.

What kind of context is it which really reflects a recognition of the integrity of the individual? And how is the teacher to ensure that each student is given an opportunity to develop a personal value system in such a context? There is a myriad of problems here. To begin with, it is not at all clear what kind of context best reflects a concern for the integrity of the individual. Second, whatever that context is, who is responsible for ensuring its existence? The teacher? But the teacher has only a limited control over the context in which he teaches. The principal? The school board? It could even be argued that only the government can create through social and economic policies a "context" which "recognizes" the integrity of the individual.

Thus, a conscientious teacher must find himself in a quandary. First, the directive he is to follow is systematically ambiguous. Second, the values which are to provide the context for the program and which the teacher is expected to communicate to the students are not set out. On examination, the moral education component of the ministry statement puts the teacher in the position of someone who has been given chequing privileges on an account whose contents are never divulged. Such a position is not enviable, and for those seriously concerned with moral issues, to place teachers in such a position is highly undesirable.

PART B: THE MAC KAY REPORT REVISITED

What conclusions, if any, should be drawn from this analysis of Ministry of Education policy? One possibility is that the ministry has gone astray

just because it has ignored a secondary but central recommendation of the MacKay report. The Ministry of Education has emphasized what the report refers to as "moral posture" rather than "moral reasoning." As the MacKay report puts it, "It is not the conclusion arrived at which should concern us; it is the method of reasoning that leads to it" (1969, p. 67).

As a way around the kind of difficulty raised above, this approach appears quite appealing. Indeed, it is the favored approach among those theorists currently most influential on the Ontario educational scene. Despite its appeal, however, this approach to formal moral education deserves careful scrutiny.

To found a moral education program on moral reasoning requires a clear description of the nature of moral reasoning. On examining the literature most relevant to the Ontario context, one finds two major theories in play. Both might be said loosely to include a description of moral reasoning. The first such account rests heavily on the work of Laurence Kohlberg, whose description derives from an empirical investigation of patterns of moral reasoning using the tools of cognitive psychology in the tradition of Piaget. The alternative theory of moral reasoning (in the Ontario context) is that of Clive Beck.

It is not the purpose of this analysis to provide a critique of the accounts of moral reasoning of either of these two theorists. Such critiques are available elsewhere. And in any event the space available here is insufficient. But it can be shown why neither account (whatever its individual merits) can at this time provide the basis for a moral education program.

According to Kohlberg there is not just one but rather there are three types of moral reasoning. Each type is typically but not exclusively associated with a particular stage in moral development. The first type of moral reasoning occurs at the first and earliest stage of moral development. Kohlberg calls it the "preconventional level." The reasoning which predominates at this level is self-centered and self-interested. As moral development occurs the individual progresses to the second or "conventional" level. Here the pattern of moral reasoning which predominates involves the application of conventional values as reflected in the individual's social situation. If development continues, the individual will progress to the third and final "post conventional, autonomous or principle orientation" level.

The Kohlberg model of moral reasoning has attracted moral educators on the Ontario scene for a number of reasons of which what follows is a sample:

1. The sequence set out is described by Kohlberg as invariant. If moral development occurs (and the theory does not claim that it inevitably does occur) it must pass through the stages as described. Thus, this model appears to provide the teacher with a clear and scientific basis for engaging in moral education; for by "careful diagnosis and expo-

sure of pupils at a given stage to the reasoning required at the next higher stage, the whole process of moral development may be stimulated to move forward" (MacKay, 1969, p. 46).

2. The pattern of development described is set out as culturally universal. This aspect of the Kohlberg model is particularly attractive. Most moral educators and many teachers interested in moral education appear to accept the view that in a pluralistic society, moral education should not be based on the moral beliefs of a particular social group. However, if Kohlberg is correct, the teacher has available an approach to moral education based on culturally universal patterns of moral development. One may proceed by emphasizing those patterns and by stimulating progress to higher stages. And one can do so while maintaining a stance of impartiality in one's pluralistic setting. That impartiality is possible is demonstrated by the findings of Kohlberg and company, namely that what is being emphasized is common to all moral traditions.
3. The third and last feature of this model which will be discussed is its rejection of value neutrality and moral relativism. That is to say, while a teacher who has adopted a Kohlberg approach to moral education will focus on moral reasoning, he can do so secure in the knowledge that his method if effective will lead the student toward a moral stance based on culturally universal principles. Further, the concept of justice will come to play a crucial role in his moral judgments as he progresses from stage to stage.

The attractiveness of this feature of the model is well reflected in the enthusiasm with which it was adopted by the MacKay Committee (1969). Thus:

the teacher ought to be more concerned with the quality of thinking that produces a particular moral judgement or decision than with the behaviour which is its consequence. (p. 47)

However,

...we point out that socially desirable behaviour patterns are a natural consequence of a successful program which is aimed at the development of the ability to reason morally. (p. 47)

As is clear, the Kohlberg model of moral reasoning exhibits a number of features which are bound to attract those wishing to introduce formal moral education into the schools. However, there are two major problems with it. Neither problem derives directly from a critique of the research or findings of cognitive psychologists.

First, the model is not value-neutral. As pointed out, this, together with its emphasis on justice, is why it is so attractive. By using this model, the

teacher engages in an exercise designed to teach the student how to reason justly and, by implication, how to live justly. But can empirical research, focusing as it does on what is the case, demonstrate what ought to be the case? Can empirical research based on a study of how people live and reason demonstrate how they ought to live and how they ought to reason? Or, to put the matter more formally, can science bridge the logical gap between 'is' and 'ought'?

This question touches on one of the major disputes in moral philosophy. Kohlberg appears to come down on one side of the dispute. But in doing so, he separates himself from a philosophical tradition having its roots in David Hume and, more recently, G. E. Moore. If the followers of Hume are correct, no amount of research can show that a life in pursuit of justice is inherently more desirable from a moral point of view than a life bent on self-interest or pleasure. To put the matter another way, if there is a logically unbridgeable gap between 'is' and 'ought,' then to appeal to science for the purpose of justifying a moral education program which proposes to teach students how they ought to reason and (by implication) live is illegitimate.

The teacher is now faced with a dilemma. One school of thought argues that the Kohlberg model is soundly based. Further, because it is based on the impartial findings of science, the teacher is justified in basing a moral education program on it. On the other hand, the teacher is faced with a school of thought founded on the important western philosophical tradition that teaching students how they ought to reason morally can never be justified by empirical research; surely research can never do more than show how people in the past have reasoned morally.

How is the teacher to decide which view is valid? If he chooses to use the Kohlberg model, will he not do so because the system of values embedded in it is acceptable or desirable as he sees it? But if this is the case the moment the choice is made, the teacher's impartiality, required as it is by his pluralistic context, is lost.

This dilemma is deepened by the fact that scientists themselves are sharply divided on the correct model for describing the nature of moral values. This fact is dramatically illustrated by contrasting the views of Kohlberg with those of B. F. Skinner.

The fundamental postulates of cognitive psychology (Piaget & Kohlberg) are incompatible with those of S-R theorists, of which Skinner is the foremost contemporary example. And the view of values which emerges is fundamentally different as well. For Kohlberg, the ultimate stage in moral development is one in which the individual becomes autonomous, able to reason from culturally universal principles independently of the conventional values of his milieu. Skinner quite explicitly rejects this view. He describes any view which bases morality on a concept of autonomy as prescientific. He argues:

As we learn more about the effects of the environment, we have less reason to attribute any part of human behaviour to an autonomous controlling agent. And the second view shows a marked advantage when we begin to do something about behaviour. Autonomous man is not easily changed; in fact, to the extent that he is autonomous, he is by definition not changeable at all. But the environment can be changed, and we are learning how to change it. The measures we use are those of physical and biological technology, but we use them in special ways to affect behaviour. (1971, p. 96)

Thus we have two prominent scientists advocating accounts of human beings and the nature of morality each of which has wide support and each of which is flatly incompatible with the other.

The teacher or moral educator is once again faced with a dilemma. There are significantly different schools of thought in psychology and related disciplines on the nature of moral reasoning. A system of moral education justified by one will be flatly incompatible with a system of moral education justified by another. This fact is well captured by the MacKay Committee, whose report advocates the Kohlberg model of moral reasoning. "In the area of moral education, the proponents of a rigid stimulus-response approach to learning are too likely to condone what is in fact brain washing" (p. 50). It should be clear, then, that at the present time there is among empirical researchers no consensus on the nature of morality. Hence the teacher must opt for one school of thought rather than another. What basis does he have for doing so? It would appear once again that the choice, if it is made, will be, indeed must be, determined by the moral preferences of the teacher or those responsible for the decision.

If the preceding arguments are sound, science cannot at this time (and perhaps not ever) provide the foundations justifying the introduction of formal moral education into our public schools. If formal moral education is to be justified, therefore, its justification must be found elsewhere.

Thus far we have looked to empirical research for an appropriately impartial model of moral reasoning. And we have failed to find one. However, philosophers too have been concerned to develop such models. Indeed, the predominant model of moral reasoning against Ontario educators at this time comes from philosophy. The model in question is that offered by Clive Beck and the OISE moral education project. Where science has failed perhaps philosophy can succeed. Certainly the possibility warrants serious examination.

What is it to reason morally? Is there widespread philosophical agreement here of a sort which could provide a secure base for instruction in moral reasoning? The answer once again is negative. This can be illustrated by contrasting the account of moral reasoning offered by Clive Beck with that of Kohlberg. The comparison is important since many educators in Ontario appear to be of the view that the Beck and Kohlberg accounts are fundamentally the same.

Kohlberg, as we have already seen, argues that in its most advanced form moral reasoning deals with universal principles of the categorical imperative variety.²

In contrast to Kohlberg, Clive Beck (1971) claims that:

For the stage 6 person (if any actually exist), the sole purpose of morality is to serve fundamental life goals, such as freedom, love, happiness, survival, self-respect, and so on. He recognizes the importance of rules, processes, contracts, and principles, but treats them as *means* to the maximization of ultimate goals for himself and others. (p. 13)

For our immediate purposes, the important thing to note here is that by changing focus from abstract moral principles to life goals, Beck has shifted from a deontological account of the nature of morality to a teleological one. And a teleological account is (or has been widely thought to be) strikingly different from its deontological alternative.

Let me contrast the two accounts in this way. If Beck's approach is used, then moral reasoning is largely instrumental in character. That is, the function of moral judgments is to guide a person in the achievement of his goals. They are instruments or maps, so to speak. For deontologists, on the other hand, moral judgments are not based on instrumental reasoning. Rather they are based on the application of categorical moral principles. Thus moral reasoning in the Kohlberg system ought to result in the unconditional application of categorical imperatives like "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (The Golden Rule) or "Treat all persons as ends and never as means only" (one formulation of Kant's categorical imperative). Beck's account of moral reasoning will lead to a highly pragmatic approach to the solution of moral problems combined with an invitation to decide in general terms what one's life goals are. But this means that what for Beck is a central stage 6 example of moral thinking for a Kantian will fall outside the realm of morality altogether.

To summarize, for an educator in search of the foundations of a moral education program, an emphasis on moral reasoning is not a way to ensure that one's program is based on objective criteria rather than the moral preferences of those establishing the program. For even among those who appear to be in agreement about moral education, e.g., Beck and Kohlberg, careful examination reveals a fundamental disagreement on the nature of moral reasoning. If one were to continue one's search beyond Kohlberg and Beck to such diverse authors as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Hume, Mill, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, and a variety of twentieth century authors, one would discover that there is simply no single concept of moral reasoning to which moral educators can appeal in developing their program. Indeed the nature of moral reasoning remains a fundamental problem for those concerned with the nature of morality itself. Further, there is some reason to believe that one's concept of moral reasoning will itself be influenced by the moral system one adopts. Thus

we are forced to conclude that an appeal to moral reasoning cannot provide an impartial basis for a moral education program.

PART C: MORAL EDUCATION, A CRITIQUE

In 1967, the MacKay Committee recommended to the Ontario government that the public schools of Ontario cease religious instruction. Their reasons were simple. In a pluralistic society religious instruction must inevitably lead the schools into conflict with the religious convictions of many of the families of their students. At the same time, the Committee acknowledged that a central function of religious education in the public school system was the encouragement of moral development. Because it took the view that the encouragement of moral development was a legitimate aspect of modern education, the Committee felt obliged to propose a program to take the place of religious instruction.

If the argument of the preceding pages is correct, the fundamental assumption of the Committee is mistaken, namely that a satisfactory system of formal moral education can be found which encourages moral development in students while avoiding the “pitfalls” of religious instruction. Particularly for those who perceive a lack of concern for moral questions developing in our society, or those convinced that the removal of religious instruction from the curriculum has left a moral or spiritual gap in the school program, this conclusion may appear to be a “counsel of despair.” Surely it is not beyond the wit of human beings to devise an acceptable program in formal moral education whether or not it follows the suggestions of the MacKay report.

It is clear that a view of this sort is widely held among educators in Ontario among others. And it is equally clear that such a view is unlikely to be called into question by arguments designed to show the weakness of current policy or current assumptions. That being the case, are there reasons for thinking that we should discourage the development of a formal moral education program in our schools? To this question the correct answer appears to be “yes.” And the reasons are of substantial importance to those committed to the liberal democratic tradition.

It is first necessary to remind oneself that the individual’s values offer the final court of appeal in judging the performance of his or her government or society. How else does a citizen determine how to mark the ballot in exercising the franchise? Of course, it is for this reason, among others, that many argue for formal moral education. However, this crucial point can find its place in a quite different perspective.

Note first that the advocates of formal moral education are proposing that the state play a direct and formal role in devising and inculcating the moral values against which its performance will be assessed. Is this a serious problem? There are at least two reasons for thinking that it is.

Through policy directives, the government of the day does have a direct influence on the content of the educational program. If formal moral instruction is a part of that program the government of the day will become directly involved in determining the content of the moral education program.

This fact would pose no particular problem were it not the case that there are available a variety of competing and conflicting moral systems each of which has its advocates and some of which are almost certain to be more palatable to the government of the day than others. And while current governments are unlikely to want to undermine confidence in certain democratic ideals, we have no guarantee that this will continue indefinitely. In this regard, it is relevant to emphasize to those who have confidence in human rationality (as, for example, the MacKay Committee quite clearly did) that most of the political ideologies of the twentieth century antagonistic to the values of freedom of thought and choice characteristic of liberal democracies have claimed the support of reason. We forget rather easily at times that persons totally committed to the truths of reason have developed systems of thought totally incompatible with democratic ideals.³

There are three final comments which are relevant to the preceding argument which ought to be made. First, the argument I have developed is not implicitly advocating moral relativism. Neither does it depend on adopting a relativistic posture on moral questions. For though many have argued from the existence of a variety of incompatible moral systems to moral relativism, the conclusion does not follow.⁴

Second, though the thought runs contrary to current fashion, it may well be that a state-supported secular system of education should not be expected to educate "the whole man." At any rate, if the preceding argument is sound, the schools should neither attempt to nor be asked to fill the widely perceived vacuum in the moral instruction of the young.

Finally, it is clear that even in the absence of a program of formal moral instruction the schools have a vital but indirect role to play in the moral development of their students. After all, values are an integral part of all the subjects a student will encounter within a school. Making that clear and advancing reasons for respecting those values is and always will be an essential feature of education. Further, the schools themselves are human communities. How those communities are organized, the attitudes displayed, and the rules in play will all have a vital impact on the moral development of students. The importance of this fact should be not underestimated. For moral education through example remains a fundamental tool of moral education.

REFERENCE NOTES

¹ This point is well illustrated in a paper which I received recently from a teacher in the Ontario system for a course I taught in 1976-77 for OISE. The relevant section reads: *Education in the Primary and Junior Division* describes the teacher's task in helping a child develop a clear set of values as follows:

- becoming aware of the existence of values.
- identifying value alternatives and their consequences.
- selecting personal values from the alternatives.
- acting in accordance with the values selected."

On the same page, teachers are instructed not to impose their own views on the children.

The assumption is, of course, that such a process would lead to the selection of values acceptable to our society. Let us suppose the opposite should occur.

- Children become aware of the question, "Ought I to smoke?"
- In class, the choices (to smoke or not) are discussed with their consequences.
- Several children choose to smoke.
- The teacher encourages the choice to become internalized.
- The children begin smoking in accordance with the value selected.

Apart from the fact that such smoking would be illegal, the procedure would not be acceptable. The teacher would be expected to discourage the smoking if he thought the choice was an incorrect one.

² Various attempts have been made to develop a deontological account of moral language. The first to undertake the task in an explicit way was Kant. A more recent deontological account is offered by R. M. Hare in *The Language of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 1952.

³ See for example Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, or A. P. d'Entrève's discussion of Rousseau and Hegel in *Natural Law* (Hutchinson University Library) pp. 142ff.

⁴ See for example d'Entrève's chapter on "The Case for Natural Law Re-examined" (op. cit.) particularly pp. 166 and 167.

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