

The Unspeakable Curriculum: Moral Education from a Non-Aristotelian Standpoint

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Au cours du Premier Congrès de l'Éducation Canadienne, on a proposé de repartir les écoles selon leurs différentes conceptions éthiques; il s'agirait de distinguer entre celles qui s'orientent soit vers une morale absolue, soit vers une morale relative. L'auteur conteste cette proposition à partir d'une analyse du concept même de valeur. Il soutient aussi qu'on peut échapper au dilemme d'Aristote par une logique de valeur plus subtile et plus complexe. Il en conclut que, non seulement on ne peut exclure de l'enseignement un système de valeur, mais encore que l'on doit réserver une certaine place au statu quo. De plus une formation morale que se poursuit toute une vie s'adresse à une élite. Étant donné que peu d'individus atteignent jamais une véritable autonomie, la polémique de la formation morale dans les écoles est à vrai dire trompeuse: la formation morale dans le sens le plus large du terme s'acquiert *ultra vires* du système scolaire. L'article examine aussi quel est et quel devrait être le rôle de l'école quant aux valeurs morales.

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.

Wittgenstein (last aphorism of the
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus)

In the discourse about values and moral education we expose ourselves to one of the sharpest, most painful, and most dangerous of conceptual dilemmas; one which can be cast, in the agonizing mould of Aristotelian logic, as follows. Either there are some values (some moral imperatives) which are absolute, or there are not. This way of putting the case is brutal in its rigorous simplicity, and much of values education dialogue and polemic is devoted to avoiding it, evading it, or slurring over the distinction between absolute and relative. It is brutal not so much because it forces all men into two camps (each one of which could in earlier times have cheerfully burned the other at the stake) but because it forces us as individuals to face the root question: How are our values to be grounded? Are they to be in the last analysis mere functions of cultural and personal relativism, or not? Is there a more ultimate ground, or is there not? Brutal questions we would rather avoid through such characteristic philosophical shiftiness as "Let us look at the language of moral discourse and see how these value terms are being employed," "What language games are being played?" "How were the words learned?" "What is the whole context of use?" and so on.¹ While linguistic philosophy may provide us

with some sophisticated avenues of retreat, the problem in its brute form persists and appears and reappears throughout the politics of values education.

For example, the radical problem appeared quite strikingly in a recent paper by Professor Gow (1978) of York University. Here it took the following form. Since values clarification techniques (Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1972) can always be used to show that there are no absolute moral values or imperatives (e.g., stealing is not necessarily wrong, it depends on the circumstances, it is a matter of degree . . .), and since it is but a step from this to sophistry and skill in the art of moral justification, then it follows that this sort of values education is untenable and unacceptable for those teachers, parents, and educators who are committed to the opposing strong position, i.e., those who wish to entertain the possibility of absolutes: God, gods, categorical imperatives, and, in general, human actions which are universally wrong and human evil which is not subject to salvation by mere excuses, rationalizations, apologia, or sophistry. This seemed to suggest, following the Aristotelian logic, that school boards should identify those schools within their aegis which were prescriptive/absolutist and those which were permissive/relativist. Each type of values school would be staffed by teachers subscribing to the respective commitments, and parents, in the strictest consonance with the canons of contemporary democratic pluralism, could choose which school their children would attend.

But this position, together with its underlying logic, is oversimplistic and would create more difficulties than it would resolve. To begin with, Gow's suggestion, logical and well-intentioned though it may be, is impractical. At the level of political reality such a policy could not be implemented. Teachers or parents would either resist such labelling or be in too short supply to merit the allocation of facilities. Where through historical evolution something like this has come to pass, e.g., in the Catholic and "Protestant" (i.e., non-Catholic) schools of Quebec, different values and moral curricula are indeed specified (*L'Enseignement*, 1977), but a careful reading of these specifications and even a superficial examination of the practice will prove the point of impracticality. Moreover, the times being what they are, the mass of electors would opt for the relativist position.

More importantly there are philosophical difficulties attaching to any kind of conception of the absolute (nature, God, ground-of-being, history, the unconscious, change itself) which reinforce the trend of the *Zeitgeist* to the relativist position. The ethos is such that it is not at all easy to conceive this absolute, however formulated or however hidden in metaphor, as intruding into men's choices and value behavior so as to override initial impulses or reasoned preferences. That is to say, the times being what they are, the Kantian row is not the easiest one to hoe. Not everyone will admit to wonder at "the moral law within" nor feel obliged to

subscribe to any categorical imperatives (Kant, 1909). And yet, unless we are the purest of psychopaths or logical positivists, we cannot entirely rid ourselves of the Kantian ghost. What we really wish is to have our cake (absolutely) and eat it (relatively). Thus, we would hold, let us say, dishonesty to be wrong and we would wish it to be wrong regardless of whatever mitigating circumstances surround dishonest acts, the wrongness being grounded not merely in some kind of rational utilitarian calculus from which it can be adduced that social benefit and hence individual interest is maximized through subscription to its tenets, but wrong because the wrongness is grounded more profoundly. *De profundis*, in fact; somewhere in the realms of intuitive moral insight and metaphysical space. Given this sort of absolutism then, we would be prepared to treat cases and treat them relatively.

Could we do this, children could be led to understand that lying is wrong at a number of different levels and for a number of different reasons, one of which can be construed as an absolute. Thus one can be both relatively and absolutely wrong at the same time and the unpleasant dichotomy postulated at the outset of this essay could be avoided.

But this position does not square with the proposal of moral entrepreneurship suggested by Gow as a pluralistic resolution of the problem. And in any event, can one logically reconcile absolutist and relativist orientations in this way? Is not the very character of the absolutist moral position such that it cannot concede dilution in this pluralist way, nor risk contamination through coexistence? This is the dilemma of theologians everywhere and it is resolved by them in a variety of interesting ways (the notions, for example, of grace, salvation, absolution, penance, redemption, atonement). And not just theologians. Psychologists have a like problem in trying to reconcile the domains and the dominions of the unconscious and the conscious. For either the content of the unconscious is unconscious and therefore irrecoverable and inaccessible, or it is not and therefore the content is really conscious in some sense (consciously accessible). Again, with values education itself, the argument rages between the competing methodologies of values clarification and moral reasoning, the former highly relativist in orientation and the latter more amenable to absolutist argument.²

These difficulties are bothersome enough, and they might be used to argue for a dichotomized form of schooling and values education, but the difficulties stem from conceptual puzzlement and this perplexity is rooted in the grammar of our value language (Pitkin, 1972). Is there then an alternative way of conceptualizing which can lead us through or around the horns of this dilemma? Is there a way out of the fly-bottle?

A first requisite would surely be to recognize the deep ambiguity within the value concept itself. Value is often and indeed most conveniently defined as "a concept of the desirable" (Kluckhohn, 1962), but there is at once a radical ambiguity for desirable which can be interpreted in two

ways: as indicating what is good or as indicating what is right. This distinction Dewey (1939) refers to as the difference between the desirable and the desired, or, most plainly, the difference between what we want to do and what we ought to do.

How are we to ground these two modalities of value? This in turn leads to logically distinct sets of answers. Thus, the ground for what I want to do, what I desire, what is good for me, is easily established. I simply know it directly. It is existentially given at any time. It is a matter of mere preference, perhaps no more than affective or emotive preference: I prefer hard liquor to wine, tea to coffee, Norman Rockwell to Vincent van Gogh, and in the end *de gustibus non est disputandum*. Who can call me wrong in any of this? No one, the essential reason being that no one else has access to my immediate introspection before the fact of my making this type of value judgment. After the fact, of course, others could criticize my judgment and seek to change my grounds vis-à-vis future occasions. And let me rush to say that everyone can and may try to manipulate my preferences in advance, this being the whole effort of Madison Avenue, the media, my peers, the culture, and the whole form of life in which I find myself and of which I am a part. This type of constant and pervasive effort at persuasion, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, can be considered basic values education, and its curriculum is largely beyond the school's control. The sort of values emerging from this effort are relative to culture and a function of history and geography, space and time. This does not exclude the possibility of innate predispositions and primitive or universal value orientations. For reasons which should become apparent later, let us call these kinds of values Type III values in contrast with two other types to be explained below.

The other modality of value, ought-type values, must be grounded differently. How? After many years of search I have been able to discover only three ways. The first is that they can be grounded in some form of consensus. A majority, by custom, by law, by mores, or by some form of social pressure (including the whim of fashion) establishes a standard or evaluative norm. It is wrong, or illegal, to abort human babies, to commit adultery, or to give English language schooling to newcomers to Quebec. Why? Because of consensus. It has been the custom of the tribe since time immemorial, it is common law, it is socially taboo, it is the statute law. The majority wish it so. Surely values of this kind are relative and we hardly need the findings of anthropology to prove the point.

Next, values can be based naturalistically upon experience, perhaps by teaching in advance of experience, or simply upon rational considerations about the consequences of our acts. If I commit murder (or, in contravention of Bill 101, educate my child in English in Quebec), it is not only wrong or illegal by consensus but because, if caught, the consequences for me would be undesirable (and both the offences quoted are seen to undermine the desired social order). Conversely, murder (or English educa-

tion) is wrong because non-murder (and French hegemony in Quebec education) is conducive to the common weal in which I share. This would be the argument of the utilitarians.³ Values of this type can be said to be grounded in consequences, or the consideration of the consequences of adopting the value. Implicit in this type of value judgment is the use of reason and the cognitive faculty to examine present potentialities and future possibilities. It is because of the extrapolative quality of this type of value that it must also be considered relative in its nature. The future is ineffably imponderable and hence renders value judgments of this kind relativistic to history if not to geography. Still, because values of this type as well as those of simple consensus rely for their grounding upon the cognitive or rational faculty rather than mere affect or emotion, let us call them Type II values. (More precisely, Type II(a) for consequence-based and Type II(b) for consensus-based values.)

Let us note too that Type II values are relative and, according to some philosophers,⁴ can be reduced upon analysis to emotive or preferential Type III values. (Thus Type II(b) values are mere aggregates or averages of preferences and Type II(a) values are mere postulations of future preferential states individual or aggregate.)

Lastly, and this exhausts the possibilities of value grounding, values can be "absolutely" chosen by an act of will. Absolute in the sense that at least the absolute presumption is made that free choice is or can be an aspect of the nature of man, of individual minds, of the human condition. A man or a child may be programmed almost to the hilt with Type II and Type III values but never, because of the absolute presumption, entirely to the hilt. The possibility of free, unprogrammed choice remains, and insofar as it does obtain the individual is free to indulge in what we can call Type I value behavior and to assume the responsibilities and commitment that go with moral autonomy. The grounding for such values is not the reason though it may well be the will acting upon the data of reason. More likely it is the will acting upon the basis of faith — in a god, in a metaphysical belief system, in a condition of existential opportunity or *Dasein*,⁵ in a political theory or ideology⁶ — to be honest or kind for the sake of being honest or kind, for the moral law within, for the love of God or man, or because, though it be absurd in the universe in which I find myself, yet, in defiance of whatever gods or devils or dominions or power there may be, I so choose to do. All this has an absolute ring about it as would, for example, a commitment to deny English education to English-speaking children in the province of Quebec on the basis of an absolute right to defend the French language and culture, if the value grounding were elevated to that level. Let us designate such types of value as Type I.

And it is a corollary that it is possible for a man to live his life long without engaging in Type I value behavior.

This threefold analysis of value helps us not merely to be more sophisticated about the value concept itself, but to avoid the difficulties and dangers inherent in the strict absolutist-relativist controversy with which we began. It can lead us away from the pitfalls of either-or logic without becoming unauthentic or muddle-headed, and perhaps it can shed some light upon the tortured question of the moral education curriculum.

Given these distinctions then, surely, for example, it can be argued that the school has really very little to do with Type I valuation, the absolutist-existential kind, this kind being the prerogative of that rarest of individuals, the morally autonomous man. Such a man is an adult, after all, if he exists. And the school could at best talk of him, not teach him. Type I value behavior (level 6 and upwards in Kohlberg's (1975) scheme) is, of course, within the province of the school in the limited sense that it may constitute an ultimate aim of the educational process. But that process is lifelong and the aim, even if adopted, is ultimate not proximate. It is only common sense to consider the life experience of children inadequate for the formation of complex individual Type I value orientations and structures.

Much more clearly, Type II and Type III values are elements for the school's values education curriculum, the former lending themselves particularly to the moral reasoning type of methodology and the latter to the values clarification type of methodology. Clearly, too, both Types would be amenable to treatment through direct and indirect teaching in courses, modules, and units. Such components would find natural homes in the teaching of history, civics, guidance, literature, social studies and, in the upper reaches of the secondary school, ethics, philosophy, political science, history of ideas, and even, in time, allocated to something called moral education.

This conceptual understanding would also leave the ground free for those parents who would wish to have religious value orientations taught to their children in school or out. And they would be free, if unsatisfied, to militate for this kind of curricular component in school or out. What they would not be free to do would be to demand either of these things upon absolutist premises. The position of the moral educator or, to be less provocative in terminology, the position of the person charged with curriculum building in values education, is this: All values short of Type I are relativistic and culturally determined. The school is an agent of its culture. It will perforce educate in the values of its culture and either consciously or unconsciously program its clientele, either through a covert and hidden curriculum or through an overt and manifest curriculum or through both, into the Type II and Type III values of its historical and geographical location. It can also be argued that the school has a political duty to act to perpetuate its culture although what is viewed as only patriotic by some is regarded by others within the same polity as intolerable conservatism. Nevertheless, this trend to acculturation and cultural

defence, whether conservative or radical, devolves unto the shoulders of the individual values educator as a kind of general charge or duty to make students aware and responsive to social values. A more sophisticated corollary of this charge, following the logic of the above analysis, is to make students aware of their values and raise their level of consciousness about their unexamined value assumptions. We could call this a special duty (as contrasted with the more general obligation). There is then no question of the general task for, as Purpel and Ryan (1976) point out, it "comes with the territory." It remains possible, however, unless some provisions are made, to avoid the special task and so values and moral education can lapse, be perverted, or be left to the workings of change.

The schools need not become engaged — indeed, should not become engaged — with the inculcation of Type I values. In fact, it is not within the grammar of the concept of Type I values that they can be inculcated.⁷ And so the problem, as it were, is dissolved; that is, it vanishes without disappearing.

A further conclusion follows from this type of analysis and this way of thinking about values. It is that schools need not be different about methodology — including "inculcation," indoctrination, and "direct" teaching — in their legitimate domain of Type II values. For the analysis implies a hierarchy of value, as do Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Thus, Type III values, being affective, individual, idiographic, and to some extent impulsive, or compulsive, are subordinate to Type II values, which are group-oriented, socio-rational, traditional (i.e., time-tested), consensual, nomothetic, and subject to change. But in any given window of culture (say, a school year) one can identify a value orientation which is discernible, chaote, capable of being spelled out, examined, explored, and taught. And this can define the limits of the school's responsibility in values education. The human capacity for value-bearing and value-forming at the Type I level — for automomy, that is — is an ineradicable and inextinguishable trait which transcends schooling systems. If, as Socrates claimed, the unexamined life was not worth living then it follows that the unexamined value is not worth holding. And the moral education charge upon the public school need be no more onerous than to sensibly initiate this examination process.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Hare, R. M. *The language of morals*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1952; Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958; and Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and language*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944 as basic texts for this general orientation.

² Cf. Colby, A. Two approaches to moral education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 1975, 45, 134-143; and Scriven, M. Cognitive moral education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1975, 56, 689-694.

³ Mill, J. S. *Utilitarianism*. New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1969; Bentham, J. *The principles of morals and legislation*. New York: Hafner, 1943, p. 3.

- ⁴ The classic statement is made in Ayer, A. J. *Language, truth and logic*. New York: Dover, 1957, pp. 102 ff.
- ⁵ See Heidegger, M. *Being and time*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962 for an explication of this concept.
- ⁶ Marxism, for example, is sometimes categorized as a "secular religion." The metaphysical beliefs here attach to a theory of historical process.
- ⁷ See Pitkin (1972) for an explication of the concept of "grammar."

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