

Moral Education and the Community of Commitment

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The paper examines the relationship of moral education and the community of commitment on which programs of moral education depend. The community of commitment is explicated in terms of agreements of concept, judgment, and practice. This complex and dynamic agreement of meaning is recognized as the "given" in moral education, as the substantial social space within which moral autonomy is possible. The relationship of this intersubjective agreement and moral autonomy enables clarification of several aspects of the conduct of moral education in schools, specifically: the role of the family, the school as community, cultural pluralism, and program development. Alternative schooling is examined as a means of moral education.

L'article considère l'éducation morale en relation avec la communauté d'engagement dont dépendent les programmes d'éducation morale. La communauté d'engagement est définie en termes d'accords au niveau des concepts, des jugements et des pratiques. Cette harmonie complexe et dynamique portant sur les significations est considérée comme un "donné" en éducation morale, comme un espace social substantiel au sein duquel l'autonomie morale est possible. La mise en relation de cet accord intersubjectif avec l'autonomie morale permet de clarifier plusieurs points importants pour la poursuite de l'éducation morale dans les écoles: le rôle de la famille, l'école comme communauté, le pluralisme culturel et l'élaboration de programmes. Egalement on étudie l'école alternative comme moyen d'éducation morale.

Much of our recent professional interest in moral education has taken the direction of examining the relationship of moral language and moral reasoning to education. One of its major assumptions is that the logic of moral thinking is either universal or universally prescriptive, an assumption which of course is not unchallenged. Relativism and subjectivism regarding moral thinking are familiar alternatives. Because of my reluctance to take either universality or relativism as conclusive, and because I feel that moral education can only be conducted within a value community, I want to explore the relationship of community and moral education beginning with the nature of a value community (the community of commitment). The exploration, though determined, is much more preliminary than thorough, and has more or less the character of "groping [in the black cave of unknowing] for the contours of the rock and the slope of the floor, tossing a pebble and listening for its fall ..." (Judson, 1980, p. 114). I will first look for the "contour" and "slope" of this relationship, and then I will try the pebble-toss.

THE COMMUNITY OF COMMITMENT

Wittgenstein saw that because of the social character of our concepts thought cannot be logically independent of social context. He argued that meaning something depends upon common conceptual criteria by which we organize our reality and upon rules for the use of words. Our conceptual criteria must be agreed upon because otherwise we could not communicate; without agreement of rules we are mired in subjectivity. Meaning is necessarily intersubjective for communication. And according to Strawson's (1966) explication of Wittgenstein, agreement on conceptual criteria, and on rules for the use of words (i.e., on practice) "demands the existence of general agreement in *judgments*" (p. 39). Strawson points out here the three elements of Wittgenstein's notion of *forms of life*.

The forms of life are in effect human communities formed by agreements of meaning, judgment, and practice. According to Christopher Olsen (1978)

Wittgenstein intended the term "form of life" to encapsulate the notion of very broad types of human activities and practices which have a certain purpose, regularity, and internal coherence, and which have a history. As such, forms of life constitute the tacitly agreed upon ways of doing things within a social community ... (p. 110).

Olsen recognizes the importance of practices to community. A practice as he defines it is "something that would have a history of occurrence within a community", such as "speaking a language, wearing clothes, raising a family, educating children, and worshipping ..." (p. 111). A practice may have origins deep in the cultural heritage of a community as part of the fabric of the community. By this account, Olsen takes us well beyond Wittgenstein's explicit comments on forms of life to the characterization of a form of life as community activity, and his characterization more adequately expresses forms of life as related practices. It must also be recognized, however, that inter-subjectivity depends on more than the tradition of common practice. It depends as well on the maintenance of a practice, or in other words, it depends on commitment to a practice. It is at this point that education is seen as central to forms of life. Community depends upon commitment to agreed practices; such commitment entails agreements of meaning and judgment. Forms of life as shared, complex ways of doing things, of conducting life, constitute communities and are the given of objective thought – "the background against which all objective understanding of the world must be reflected" (p. 111). The multiple practices into which we are initiated from pre-birth become the "natural" order and structure of social reality and propriety. Family relationship, self-concept, community life, economic rules, social distinctions, and political structures are unselfconsciously learned as "givens" of

the world. Music, technology, schooling, dress and habitation, authority and deference, for example, are “taken” as experienced, to be the conditions of life, and later as the proper and/or superior conditions of life. Most of the *practices* of our lives continue mainly unchanged and unexamined. They are so fundamentally constitutive of what is and what ought to be that we “cannot” see order and structure otherwise, and have great difficulty understanding how those who differ significantly in their practices can do so except for ignorance, degradation, or malformation. To the extent that we recognise the social nature of our constructions of reality we recognize the plurality of views and practices. However, even the most insightful among us are bound to the “given” as the context within which and by which focus of inquiry is achieved. As a rule, for most of us the conditions of social reality continue unchanged. What we learn early in life to be the ways and conditions of relationship, of procedure, and of expression, continue throughout life. This is shown by our tendency to see change largely as deviation or deterioration or progress – all of which entail constancy of criteria and judgments. Only as we see change in terms of a choice of criteria and judgments, as a choice of practices, do we acknowledge the social formation of consciousness. Having made this acknowledgment we are able to understand our sense of autonomy as a possibility of choice and not necessarily as the exercise of choice. The difficulty in changing our commitments to criteria and judgments is that the social construction which we have inherited as the given is still felt as the given within which we share the possibility of comprehending *every* thing, and without which we face the terror of comprehending nothing. It is not just a psychological fact that we cannot exercise absolute autonomy, however. As Jane Roland Martin (1978) points out, original thought and research is never totally independent for it rests upon one’s training and education. We are logically dependent on information supplied by others “about the field under study, experimental methods and research design, the tools being used” (p. 177).

The continuity of our *practices* does not mean that they are static and inflexible. Clearly, we do strive to improve; we do adjust our expectations; we do adapt to circumstance and to task; we do accommodate within practices differences of ability, effort, style, and expectation. In general, we work at maintaining our agreed practices by exercising judgment in their conduct. Change occurs within the bounds of agreement regarding what kind and quality of judgment we can make. Necessary to judgment is agreement on the rules by which we ascertain what is true, correct, right, and so on. And implicit in this agreement of judgment is agreement of concept. We must share a set of concepts in order to have a common understanding of the conditions of directing and evaluating our shared practices. We are committed to these agreements because without them we can make nothing much of our intersubjectivity. Like Golding’s (1963) Neanderthals, the pictures in our heads may come and go like

firelight meaning nothing, giving way to the sand in one's brain, until one finds "words for his tongue." Our community is our identity, and continuation of personality demands the maintenance of concepts, judgments, and practices by commitment to agreed meaning. Of course commitment itself is an outcome of community and reflects the fact that we may hold to some other set of agreements of meaning and practice.

Our commitments to criteria and rules may be more or less adequate to maintain community. In settled, tightly woven communities the commitment necessary to maintain community, and consequently personal identity, may be much less than that necessary for mobile, pluralistic societies in which one's community is usually more abstract and complex. Maintaining community in the latter case is, not surprisingly, a conscious and consuming enterprise. In contemporary western societies, the development of community is very often accepted as a major challenge of life, and even as the point of life. So dependent are we on intersubjectivity that it becomes itself the goal. It is at this point that our persuasion and conviction may be easily replaced by privation and conditioning in developing commitment to forms of life. However, the strength of conscious commitment required to maintain structures and meaning in practice in our society can only be achieved through an intelligent and vigilant educational program. The strength of commitment in a pluralistic society is not a closed-mindedness which is practically self-defeating, but in the intelligence and confidence of our agreements of concept, judgment, and practice. Even so, strong community built on intelligent and confident commitment depends on a kind of privacy that may be mistaken as closed-mindedness in the pluralistic society. The public demand for explanation and defence of one's judgments and lifestyle within a pluralism of such creates a need for privacy understood as a space within which one does not need to account or defend his commitments. Privacy in this sense is possible only within a community of commitment, and only within those relationships of understanding and trust where the fundamental values are *known*. Privacy is defence against the assault of reason on our foundational values and beliefs. It is defence of our agreements of concept and judgment which themselves are "given", i.e., indefensible by reason and maintained by intersubjective commitment alone. Our need for confident and mutual affirmation of what we *know* by recognition, intuition, and experience (based on our unselfconscious and conscious agreements) is well known. And parents and students strive to set the limits of intrusion on acceptance of those beliefs and practices which fundamentally constitute the family as a community and as part of a larger identifiable community. Privacy then is the sanctuary of intersubjective agreement, and insistence on privacy is a condition of moral education in public, pluralistic schooling.

One's community is identified by the commitments one makes, and it is likely then to be highly complex. It is ordinarily inclusive of one's family,

usually of one's neighbourhood, religious and/or political affiliates, of peer, vocational, or professional associates. With great variability it is inclusive of less formal and more optional associations: community service; economic social and psychological enhancement and care; artistic expression; and recreation. The complexity and range of association is limited for the same reasons that change is – we are bound to agreements of concept, judgment, and practice which have at least minimal qualifications, and which maintain the possibility of full comprehension. We avoid inconsistency and incompatibility in our agreements, and we establish the priority of commitments within our complex community usually in terms of the security of personality and sometimes in terms of the hierarchy of principle. (In either case the other will normally be understood as thereby fulfilled. If I put my family or religious values ahead of my professional or peer values because I cannot “face” the disapproval of parents or the wrath of God, I will normally understand myself as fulfilling the “higher” principles of loyalty to parents or obedience to divine will. If, on the other hand, I act in accord with the priority of non-violence over family honour and loyalty to the state then I will normally understand myself as maintaining self-integrity.)

The complexity and abstractness of one's community of commitment has practical consequences for understanding moral education. The simpler and singular community of commitment “spatially” isolated or distant from other communities (e.g., the Israeli Kibbutz, the Hutterite colony, the Jonestown cultic settlement of Guyana) is unlikely to distinguish moral education from moral training. The nature of moral thinking is unlikely to be conceptualized by those who live only in that community or that type of community, except in terms of the community's religious and social claims, rules and relationships. This is not unlike understanding the nature of geometry only in terms of the axioms and postulates of Euclidian geometry (so that the conceptualization of parallel lines meeting is taken to be irrational). In such communities, learning to think morally is learning the moral ideas, rules and practices of the community. The more complex and abstract the community of commitment, the more likely are its members to distinguish between moral thinking and moral practice, and consequently between moral education and moral training. The complex community of commitment has to account for the fact of a pluralism of moral beliefs and practices not only within the spatial community (e.g., the neighbourhood, the city, the country), but also, because of the complexity of moral ideas and forms of judgment, within one's community of commitment itself. An example is that of pro-lifers and pro-abortionists who argue from a commitment of Christian obedience and love, even within the same Christian tradition; as well, persons may agree on a practice though on the basis of quite different judgments, from the sanctity of human life, from obedience to the will of God, or from self-interest.

COMMUNITY AS A CONDITION OF MORAL EDUCATION

It is within the pluralistic society that the ideas of moral belief and moral reasoning are distinguished and expressed in the distinction of moral training and moral education. Persons may be recognized as rational and concerned, though differing in judgments and practices. The recognition here is not that all such persons are morally correct but that they are morally committed and rationally competent. The possibility of recognizing conditions of moral reasoning independent of conditions of being morally correct, and thereby independent of differing moral beliefs and practices, accounts for the somewhat popular belief that persons may be taught the conditions and skills of moral reasoning without favouring or compelling some competing values over others. However, the nature of public agreement of concept, judgment, and practice in the area of morality means that instruction in moral reasoning necessarily requires the acquisition of substantial values. Moral reasoning is not independent of the agreements of concept, judgment, and practice by which we structure morality. Four arguments are made in support of this claim.

1 / Moral values and principles are taken as givens in our social reality so that some consider the interests of others only as a condition of the fulfilment of self-interests, and some consider the interest of others over self-interest as the obligation of morality. Some understand this moral obligation as the definitive condition of morality. Others understand it as the condition of love, willed by God. Some consider the interests of the group as their interests; and so on. Ultimate value differs depending on our commitments – self-fulfilment, service, duty or justice, love or salvation, happiness of the greatest number, etc. Second, the nature of moral judgment differs as a consequence of these “givens.” How one ought to behave may be determined by an enlightened consideration of self-interests, by self-denial or deference to the expectations of others, by application of a categorical imperative, by submission to God’s will (as written, as revealed, or as intuited), or by conformity. Sometimes, of course, we will determine our moral imperative in different ways so that sometimes we reason from a consideration of fairness, at other times calculating social acceptance of the pursuit of self-interest. At times duty seems independent of consequence, and at other times reason and intuition bow down to authority. However, two things seem obvious. The first is that different persons hold incompatible views of moral value. The second is that persons differ in the kind of judgment they acknowledge to be a moral judgment and which they characteristically make. The differences reflect the practice of one’s community of commitment, usually that in which one was raised. The variability of judgments a person may make in determining how he ought morally to behave may reflect the difficulty of maintaining sameness of judgment within a complex and abstract community of commitment. On the other hand, it

may simply reflect the remarkable complexity of moral judgment in such communities.

Further, changing one's community of commitment is a matter of correcting one's assumption of the "given" concepts, judgments, and practices. This change of commitment is often taken to be radical because it alters the ultimate ground of our community of commitment. The change in judgment from considering the interest of others so that one's own interests will be considered, to loving others in service because God loves us, represents a profoundly different moral judgment, and illustrates a sufficient condition of deep disturbance within a community of commitment (e.g., a family, a peer group, a professional group, and even, ironically, a religious congregation). In any case the nature of moral judgment is taken as a given of social reality so that even when differences are tolerated we continue to judge in character with our community of commitment.

2 / Those ethical principles often taken by philosophers as presuppositions of rational moral judgment, e.g., respect for persons, freedom, truth-telling, equality, are substantial presuppositions of a community of moral thinking. Respect for persons means, for some, acceptance of the dignity of human life; for others it means regard for rational opinion. For still others it means regard for the right opinion. The difference is recognizable in agreed-upon practices. Religious and political traditions often illustrate the limit of respect for persons according to right opinion or association. Our own first-world tradition of treatment of children illustrates respect for persons as regard for rational opinion. The proclamation of the International Year of the Child signalled the slowly developing change in our attitude toward children as persons. What the principles of respect for persons, equality, and freedom mean depends upon our substantial concepts. As Crittenden (1972) said "distinctively moral terms are learned in a context of behavior for which adults ... express praise or blame, admiration or contempt They [i.e. moral terms] express approval of what (it is thought) deserves to be approved" (p. 38). It is only when we are committed to practices of truth telling and promise keeping that honesty and promising are moral concepts for us. And honesty and promising, and being free and fair, etc. mean what is approved by judgment and practice.

3 / The principle of universalizability which is understood as a formal criterion of moral reasoning, and posited as itself a test of the adequacy of moral principles, must also be acquired as a condition of moral judgment on the basis of community approval. One may know what universalizability means and not be committed to its use as a test of moral principle because it contradicts a personal or a community sense of special status (e.g. "God's elect," "God's chosen", the aristocracy, the owner class, party members). Universalizability is like the metaphysical or ideological grounds of special status in being itself a high order substantial agreement

of meaning. It constitutes in part the character of a community's morality. The same is true of a role-exchange as a test for moral principles. One may be able to empathize with others without taking it as a test of the adequacy of principles within a community of commitment. Appreciating the effects of a principle or rule on others may be treated as irrelevant to the consideration of how they ought to be treated. The issues of abortion, possession of marijuana, capital punishment, and the imprisonment of first-offenders provide good examples of moral judgments often made in spite of understanding the adverse consequences for particular others. Judges, doctors, and legislators must accept consideration of consequence for particular others as subordinate to primary moral considerations, as do the rest of us when the judgment of consequences is a judgment of what it is right to do to others. Empathy with others is as much a substantial issue in moral judgment making as is loyalty or honesty, and one has to learn to approve and practice it. On these grounds, i.e. that moral principles and judgments are substantive conditions of moral practice, that they are more or less specific to distinguishable communities of commitment, and that what we take to be tests of moral reasons are themselves matters of agreement and moral commitment, we cannot avoid the impossibility of teaching persons formal conditions and skills of moral reasoning without value prejudice. To teach moral reasoning is to teach agreements of concept, judgment, and practice – it is to initiate persons into a community of commitment. The teaching of moral thinking may or may not be (and may be more or less) educational. This may be evaluated in terms of the achievement of individual autonomy in communities of commitment. *Autonomy*, like *education*, is itself a normative concept and must be examined in relation to the community of commitment. This examination provides my fourth argument for the impossibility of content-free moral education.

4 / Being moral is being actively committed to the community. That is, it is being committed to share principles, rules, and practices together constitutive of morality. In this sense, morality is unity with others – the achievement of a harmony of judgment and of expectation. Its rational component is determined by commitment to public or shared forms of moral thinking. Its affective component is determined by the weave of moral thought, feeling, and action. We depend on this unity as a condition both of initiation and of autonomy. As noted earlier, acquiring moral judgment entails the acquisition of substantive moral values and of an active obligation. These constitute a form of life, the initiate's community of commitment. Consequently, being moral at any time means being in community. Being morally autonomous then cannot mean being independent of (without) community, i.e. independent of (without) commitment.

Three comments will help clarify this point. First, it is clear that one may change his commitments. Such a change, slight or radical, constitutes a

re-formation of community. Our commitments are shared and are harmonizing. The fact that such change isolates or alienates us from others with whom we previously shared commitments is not denied. Isolation and alienation however cannot be complete except where there is a total breakdown of moral commitment. Change of community may be awkward, and painful, but it succeeds because of at least minimal overlap of communities. (The overlap may be initially either just intellectual or affective; but in any case it enables change of commitment whether by conversion, persuasion, or reflection.) Second, there may be disagreement within a community of commitment. Judgment and practice will reflect the changing conditions and the intelligent reflection of a moral community. Its members maintain the intersubjectivity of agreement on the basis of personal consciousness and commitment. Agreement of judgment and practice is a working out of differences of subjective inclination, opinion, and expectation. Third, many persons manage to maintain a sense of harmony only on the basis of an agreement – a covenant – with a supernatural reality or “person.” When value differences result in isolation or alienation some persons who seem to be without community support maintain integrity in the confidence of a spiritual unity and harmony. For many persons, however, a spiritual reality is part of the community agreement, and not a partner to it. They cannot stand alone, it seems, but must join or form a new moral community.

PUBLIC SCHOOLING AND THE COMMITMENT TO AUTONOMY

Moral autonomy occurs within community and is itself a moral concept subject to agreement. One obvious possibility for moral communities is commitment of the membership to unquestioning obedience to acknowledged authorities. Another is the agreement to forego independent judgment in some areas of practice in order to assure the social and political autonomy of the group as a whole. Our own social history reflects the restriction of autonomy to only the most rational – thus excluding women, children, and native peoples! Autonomy is rational self-government regarding judgments and action; it is acquired and achievable, and thus an educational outcome (Martin, 1978, p. 176 fn.). That a community pursues autonomy and that it intends autonomy for all is a matter of agreement. The agreement cannot be for absolute autonomy – for that requires independence of all agreements and all shared meaning. And the social nature of meaning precludes this. Personal autonomy of judgment and practice – rational self-government – is attainable within community because, as Jane Roland Martin (1978) puts it, “it is not the source of a person’s beliefs or actions that makes him or her self-directed but rather the fact that the person adopts them on the basis of reflection and choice” (p. 177). Moral autonomy then is consistent with

the maintenance of the community of commitment and is conditional on the maintenance of shared meaning, judgment, and practice.

Autonomy is the expression of our subjectivity and our community. It is individual freedom to imagine, explore, and critically appraise all possibilities on the basis of shared disciplines of thought, i.e. agreed upon (public) criteria of meaning. Without public agreement, autonomy is inconceivable, and yet it is the conception of the self freely choosing. One is free "to think and be oneself in thinking, one chooses which problems one will deal with, *and in which terms* One would demand that the question be put some other way, a way which *offered a possible solution, a solution valid in terms of the totality*" (Poole, 1977, p. 147).¹ The point of autonomous thinking is not that one may free himself of community, but that *one* may rationally commit himself to community. By autonomous thinking subjectivity fully participates in community, and the community reaffirms its intersubjectivity and reforms its meaning (i.e. its agreements of concept, judgment, and practice).

Freedom of thought for all individuals is a value to which communities may or may not be committed. The choice for universal autonomy does not however constitute a suspension of commitment to the characteristic substantial values of the community. It constitutes a confident choice for individual rational commitment to those values. In communities where individual autonomy is valued and successfully pursued, autonomy is clearly not a threat to social cohesion but a condition of it. In such communities the danger to cohesion rests in the social and political conditions of the exercise of the autonomy. The right to autonomy carries with it the right to be heard and to be answered. The social and political conditions of the practice of autonomy are crucial to the maintenance of community. One such condition is that the governments, agencies, and boards of the community are accountable to its members. Autonomous persons recognize their right to participate in the formation of judgment and the conduct of practice. Their opinions are to be heard, their preferences seriously considered, and their values respected. A second such condition is that social and educational authority must be directly accessible to its constituency. Those who conduct the social and educational affairs of the community committed to autonomy cannot be so "distant" from its members as to lose sight of the authority of families and individuals in the determination of moral education. The conduct of schooling, then, depends upon the effective participation of community members as citizens, parents, and students. When autonomous participation is denied, community breaks down – people leave the community and reform with as much independence as can be achieved, and is wanted. This is as true of participation in public schooling as in social and political affairs generally.

The recent development of alternative and private schooling in Alberta reflects the conditions clearly. The establishment of private schools by the

Holdeman Mennonites was based on a perceived lack of regard for their values and their voice. Their concern for the deleterious effect of the predominant secular values and atmosphere of the public schools was apparently unheard and ignored. The ensuing provincial court hearing found in favour of the Mennonites (and against the provincial Department of Education) on the grounds of the right to religious freedom and of the right to be heard by those in authority. (The Mennonites were apparently denied adequate hearings by the local school board and the provincial Department of Education.)

Just as remarkable a confirmation of the social and political conditions of autonomy is the consequent development of alternative schools (within the public school system) and private schools in Alberta. Most of these schools are funded by parents (for three years in the case of alternative schools) in addition to their ordinary tax contributions to the public school system. The right of parents to participate in the formation and conduct of moral education in schools is well-founded in the nature of the community of commitment, and in the educational commitment to autonomy. The family is central to the generation of value commitments and the child's community of commitment, and is first responsible for the initiation of persons in the moral practices of their community. The failure of public schooling to meet the social conditions of autonomy accounts, it seems, for the contemporary interest of parents in private schools. (The argument that the failure of public schooling in this regard is largely a failure of parents, either due to indifference or inability, is too easily made and too easily accepted by professional educators and philosophers. The argument neglects the facts that we do differ in our moral commitments and that, because of the nature of the teacher-student relationship in schooling, the fundamental beliefs and practices of the family are particularly vulnerable to assault. The benefit of compatible, community-related schooling is the security of intersubjective agreement.) Given our commitment to pluralism, it seems that the development of alternative schooling within public school systems is the more integral option for effective moral education. Alternative schooling represents fulfilment of the social and political conditions of autonomy and acceptance of common educational objectives and substantive value differences within society. Alternative schooling constitutes a positive and intended recognition of the community of commitment, and a common acknowledgment of cultural pluralism.

So much for the contours and slope of the relationship of the community and moral education. I want now to test the depth of the relationship with the pebble-toss. It seems that the commitment to autonomy requires that the school be a moral community of a special sort. Those persons immediately related in the school community must be fundamentally engaged in its conduct in two ways. The first has to do with the development of student autonomy. Commitment to autonomy

requires that student members be trained and encouraged to exercise increasing responsibility for the quality of the community. That is, students must come to make autonomous commitment to agreed principles, rules, and practices. The second kind of engagement has to do with the special role of the teacher. Though there is no professional group which can be distinguished as moral experts, teachers, it seems, may be the most crucial participants in school programs in moral education. Insofar as teachers are representative of the community of commitment (and of the commitment to pluralism) within which the school operates, and in that they are central to the moral community of the school, they are likely to exercise most judgment in developing the program of moral education. Teachers are ordinarily autonomous participants in communities constituted by agreements in concept, judgment, and practice. They are also professionally responsible for the development and application of curriculum objectives, plans, and materials. And finally, in the case of moral education, the teacher's autonomous commitment to the school as a moral community and his or her exemplification of the weave of moral thought, feeling and action, are essential to the moral education of children and youth. Programs of moral education are basically programs in community. Moral practice and moral autonomy must be recognizable to the initiate.

NOTE

- ¹ Poole develops the notion of "a genuinely free philosophical space" – philosophical autonomy. He argues that we live in an ethical space which is the interaction between subjectivity and objectivity.

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