

What is Moral Education?

By

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Our children need ethical skills as much as they need any others, and if we wish our children to grow up to be good people and good citizens, we must allow for our institutions of education to help them along their way. The recent focus on school-based moral education is justified. However, contemporary debate about moral education is dishonest in two fundamental ways.

The first is that the dominant model is essentially a conversion tool for Christianity. Abstinence education, prayer in school, and the call for teaching creationism in the place of real biology are all ideological benchmarks. They pressure students to subscribe or act as if they subscribe to a moral code in exchange for a good grade, thereby demanding that non-Christians accept – without any reflection or opportunity to defend their beliefs – that their own moral systems are inferior to those endorsed by the curriculum. Even if students do not actually convert to Christianity, when they act, choose, and believe as if they do, those who want to impose their religious views on others are mollified. Why pluralism is important is a different, albeit related, conversation that I won't address here. Suffice it to say, those people who revert to calling the United States a Christian country in defense of engineering a homogeneous society understand neither justice nor history.

The second way in which the contemporary debate is dishonest is that it lies about how morality works. Its proponents like to pretend that moral behavior comes from following discrete rules, and as a result they teach our children platitudes. In doing so, they reduce complex human behavior to after-the-fact constructs that describe ideal actions independent of context. They also ignore the fact that character is the consequence of numerous factors, including desire, rationality, habit, and accident. Ethical principles are similar to scientific laws: they describe how things operate in a well-functioning system, and they overlap. All ethical prescriptions are interrelated.

Any model of moral education that prescribes teaching specific moral rules is problematic, and not just because the rules are bound to be controversial. As a learning tool, teaching specific moral rules fails because this type of curriculum confuses knowledge

and wisdom, and substitutes regurgitation for judgment. It presumes, for example, that if we can repeat the Ten Commandments, we will obey them, and if we can recite the Golden Rule, we will treat people by its precepts. It assumes that morality is limited only to the content of particular prescriptions: rules are meant to be followed; they are not meant to be interpreted. Yet, no rule can be followed without interpretation. There is no moral action without moral judgment, and there can be no moral judgment without understanding. For example, it may be the case that children should respect their elders, but what does respect mean? Are there not such instances when a child should ignore this command, particularly when an elder does not reciprocate respect? A child who understands respect as obedience – as many households suggest – combined with an adult who steps over his or her own moral limits is a recipe for sexual abuse.

This is not to suggest that there isn't a time and place for rule following. Sometimes children are too young to decide how to act and simply have to do what they are told. Sometimes adults are too excited, too stubborn, or simply too self-involved to do what is right. And, of course, there are circumstances that are too urgent for debate, when obedience to authority must take precedence over moral choice. But these are not moments of moral education. They are instances of social engineering, and are exceptions to the rule. No pedagogy or curriculum should be built on the assumption that every decision is a moral or political crisis. Every moment of our lives is not a litmus test for our soul.

To illustrate, there are few more graphic examples of wrong-headed pedagogy than abstinence education. Its fundamental assumption is that if a student is exposed to calls for abstinence enough times, he or she will not have sex. However, as has been shown repeatedly, these programs fail. The vast majority of students who take abstinence pledges have sex before marriage (many within a year of the pledge), and abstinence education has proven no more effective than any other sex education programs in minimizing promiscuity. Furthermore, students who are taught abstinence are at higher risk for unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, because the student who has taken the pledge is convinced that sex is not

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about to happen, even when it is imminent. Sexual decision making becomes imbedded in denial. In such a circumstance, there is no recourse for the student to revise his or her decision on the basis of new choices. The proposition “I wasn’t planning on having sex, but since I am, I ought to do it in a moral and responsible way by using a condom and being clear about my limits” has no place in abstinence education. This brand of education destroys an individual’s capacity for rational and moderate decision making.

My own students illustrate another way in which abstinence education has failed. I teach undergraduates in the conservative and predominantly Christian state of North Dakota. In my ethics courses, during units on sexual ethics, I ask why people should get married. The students offer the same answer at first: to have moral sex. I push the question, and eventually someone mentions having children. It is usually five or six answers before someone brings up the concept of love or soul-mates. Yet, to this date, none of my students have ever suggested that marriage is a joint project for making a better life and for developing one’s character and capacities. The main purpose for marriage, my students have been told time and time again, is to have moral sex. This is an empty and narrow picture of an adult relationship. Homosexuality is not destroying the “time honored” tradition of marriage, abstinence education is.

We are witnessing how current moral education fails students. Abstinence education and other curricula built on the same model, teach obedience without thought. They ignore that most education up through college ought to be primarily concerned with teaching students how to learn. Moral education must therefore focus on developing students’ capacities, not their individual choices. Proper actions change based on age, circumstance, context, and prevailing social and political conditions. A good moral education allows students to balance all relevant factors and come to a reasonable and defensible decision that incorporates self-knowledge and political awareness.

Aristotle tells us that there are two sets of virtues, moral and intellectual. The former refers to our behavior and is acquired through habit. The latter

describes our judgment and understanding; it is imparted through teaching. For Aristotle, doing the right thing is not the same as knowing the right thing. We need intellectual virtue to identify moral virtue in ourselves and others, and we cultivate moral virtue to be of good character and act accordingly. Two thousand years later, David Hume reminded us of this division with his famous observation that “reason is and ought to be the slave to the passions.” In other words, we can tell our children what they should do until we are blue in the face, but until they are motivated to act as they ought to, what we tell them is just background information: you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.

We therefore have to develop curricula that motivate students to both want to do the right thing and be able to determine what that thing is, particularly in circumstances they neither expected nor experienced before. This involves not only determining the proper act in any circumstance, but also knowing what it means to be a good person, to have good friends, and to contribute to a good society. The virtue of Aristotle’s (far from perfect) system is its holism: moral education ought to be concerned with cultivating the excellent human being and the excellent society one person, and one classroom, at a time. We must aim to create circumstances in which both individual and collective decision making are rational, honest, informed, and experimental. Any ethical system that assumes all moral decisions to be instances of an already determined template of right and wrong will be neither defensible nor compelling. Students want a hand in their own life choices. Why shouldn’t they? We all do.

In short, we must redirect contemporary debate away from the partisan squabbling over whose moral rules ought to be taught in the classroom, and figure out the best means to educate students to be able to make their own decisions, discover and pledge allegiance to their own moral rules, and reflect on their own capacities, limitations, and moral commitments. The religious right is wrong. Moral education should not tell students how to act. Instead, it should teach them how to figure things out for themselves.

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